

Eagles of September

by

R. M. Meluch

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Acknowledgment

Many thanks to Chevalier Jerry Billing
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I won't say rest in peace, Jer
That is so not you.
Fly.
Show the angels how it's done.

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EAGLES OF SEPTEMBER

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*To Jim,
All my yesterdays
To Stevan,
All my tomorrows*

Prolog

BRYAN REMEMBERED BERLIN. Its unearthly order. The titanic blood-red flags with taloned black crosses overwhelming the Olympic rings. The noise of a hundred thousand voices become a single roar, no longer human.

Sieg Heil!

And in between the *heils*, one voice, directly behind him, speaking some sort of English sounded. Whinging.

“What ever happened to anarchy, for God’s sake?”

There were Aussies standing behind him. A pair of them.

“They have the best uniforms, I’ll give them that,” the second Aussie said. “Providing you’re mad keen on uniforms—” And suddenly aware of Bryan just there, rigged-out in RAF blue, he added, “Sorry, mate.”

The first Aussie nodded. “Sorry mate.”

“Not at all,” Bryan said. “I don’t much care for uniforms myself. Comes with the aeroplane is all.”

On the morning before the Olympic opening ceremonies, Pilot Officer Bryan Catrell had passed through a group of German tourists in the Lehrter railway station. Bryan was just arriving in Berlin. The tourist group was leaving.

The group was part of a government-sponsored tourist union that carried one of those titles you could only find in National Socialist Germany: Strength Through Joy.

Couldn’t tell much from a fly-over, except that it was fast.

The tourists were as athletic as any Olympic team. All male. They dressed alike in poorly fitted suits. They had matching haircuts, mown close around the back and sides of their heads, and they carried identical cheap suitcases.

The Olympic games were about to begin right now, right here. And tourists were leaving?

They did seem jolly eager to go wherever they were going.

The Spanish Olympic team left too, but they had a reason.

Spain had erupted into an unholy civil war, and the Spanish men's teams had been called home to fight.

Bryan hadn't been able to get a ticket to the stadium. He stood under a plane tree on the Kurfürstendamm, a half-hearted rain pattering the cobbles. The loudspeaker, fixed somewhere in the branches above him, crackled, then barked at him. "Achtung!" And announced the result of the 200 meter.

Gold and silver for the Yanks—the black men.

Well, that was quite all right. England's team was just not competitive. Good to see the goose steppers come up short.

Bryan locked gazes with the first German he could find, a dark-eyed young cadet, kitted in the uniform of Germany's illegally organized air force. His dark hair was buzzed short like the boys in the tourist group Bryan had seen at Lehrter Station.

Bryan lifted a smug eyebrow. The anthem playing over the speaker now was not Deutschland Über Alles.

The cadet brushed water droplets from his sleeves like some evil feline tending its perfect coat. Could not care less.

And Bryan wasn't in Berlin for the games either. He'd come here to see the public debut of Willy Messerschmitt's new aircraft, the Bf 109.

He'd already seen the debut of Britain's own monoplane interceptor at the RAF Pageant at Hendon. Specification F.37/34. Newly christened Spitfire.

The Spitfire prototype, pale blue, and gleaming, had split the air with a barking roar that imprinted itself on Bryan's soul.

Spitfire was the fastest, nimblest, best fighter in the world.

Bryan came to Berlin to see its competition.

Whatever the Germans trotted out could not possibly be a patch on the Spitfire.

The skies over Berlin were grey and soggy.

At last, the ceiling lifted enough to allow a test pilot to put the new kite through a few paces.

There were no crowds here at Tempelhof Airport. Only a small collection of serious air enthusiasts and a few news reporters, and most of those were here to get a quote from the American flier, Charles Lindbergh. They'd already seen the German aeroplane fly over the Olympic stadium at opening ceremonies.

Bryan had seen that too.

Here the Bf 109 taxied out. It was painted an all-over glossy green-gray colour except for the black letters D-IUDE on her side, and the red, white, and black Nazi flag on her tail.

She was designed on the same concept as Mitchell's Spitfire — a single-seat, all-metal, stressed-skin, low-wing monoplane. But this kite looked vicious — trim, angular, orderly. Absolutely German nose to rudder.

The 109 measured twenty-eight feet and a fraction tip to tail, and spanned thirty-two feet four and a half inches red light to green light, which put it within inches of the same length and span as the Spitfire.

A leaner, harder edged silhouette on the Messerschmitt.

Bryan faulted it for those narrow wings. Spitfire's wings were broad and graceful. Aerobatically ideal. The Messerschmitt's wings were heavily loaded and dependent on a steep ground attitude, along with slottery and flappery, to get it off the ground.

"Gadgets," someone said in English.

The 109 shared one fault with the Spitfire. An ungainly undercart. Worse even than the Spit's.

Bryan just knew something was going to break.

But a short run and Willy Messerschmitt's kite was up smartly. The spindly gear retracted clean, and all awkwardness vanished.

The pilot took the 109 through a few tight turns. The "gadgets" worked, and the aeroplane remained nimble. Then the pilot took it up high, stood it on its wingtip and stalled on purpose.

At the crest, the Jumo engine's carburettor starved and quit.

A moan from the spectators filled the silence left by the engine.

The aeroplane fell gently over its shoulder into a spin, once . . .

The engine caught again, purred.

The spin continued down, four turns, five, six . . .

Bryan held his breath, praying against a flat spin. There was no recovering from that.

Eleven, twelve . . .

Pull up! Pull up! Pull up!

The aircraft tumbled, spiral and spiral. Still it remained nose down.

Eighteen, nineteen . . .

Christ!

Flat spin? It didn't. And Bryan realized at last, It won't! Twenty spins and the 109 pulled out and started its climb back to altitude. It wanted to show off the stunt from its other side.

Christ!

Through all the rolls and stunts, there was no regaining control of the aircraft, because there was no losing control to begin with. The 109 recovered at will.

As long as no one was shooting at you, this bird would bring you home.

But the 109 was built to be shot at. Bryan could see that. Its vee-type engine

was mounted inverted. That left room on top for its reason for being.

There were those two long grooves in the upper cowling, like nostrils in a condor's beak. Those would hold the guns.

The 109 hadn't come into being in the guise of something else, like other aircraft of the new Luftwaffe had. There was no pretending this was a fast mail plane or a passenger plane. This aeroplane was purpose-built. The 109 was, beginning to end, a fighter.

It was agile. It was wickedly fast. The pilot executed a steep dive and leveled out on its narrow wings, steady as on a track. It roared past the spectators on the deck. Bryan's mouth dropped open, and he didn't bother to shut it.

O God.

Spitfire wasn't the only eagle in the sky.

The Messerschmitt climbed again into the bright spot where the sun lurked behind the clouds.

When he looked down he was facing a dark-eyed gaze.

The German cadet held his stare an expressionless moment, maybe waiting for recognition to set in. Then slowly he gave a smug smile and lifted a brow, so elegant the way he did it. It was a perfect replay of Bryan's earlier gloat under the plane tree when the Americans won the footrace.

Bryan laughed.

The German cadet produced a gold cigarette case, opened it. He had American cigarettes. He took one, offered one. Bryan accepted the cigarette he didn't want.

Bryan nodded thanks. "Bryan Catrell."

"Paul Ritter," said the cadet.

Paul Ritter motioned with a kid-gloved hand in the direction of the Olympic stadium, and asked in passable English, "Do you run, Bryan Catrell?"

Bryan shook his head. "No." He missed the point of the question.

The Messerschmitt snarled overhead. Without moving his lips, Paul Ritter appeared to smile. Something about the eyes smiled.

"I fly," Paul Ritter said.

Bryan glanced up. Up there, where superiority mattered, the hard angular shape of the new war machine made a pass over the Olympiad. Bryan marked its lightning progress across the sky. The blot of its shadow preceded it over the gathering of people of all nations.

Bryan lowered his eyes again to meet Paul Ritter's.

"So," Bryan said. "Do I."



PAUL RITTER TURNED his bi-plane to face the attack, both machine guns hammering.

The monoplane banked away.

Ritter had seen the Red first. A rule to live by in the hostile sky—see the enemy first. Ritter knew where to find them. When you were making ground attacks, and the enemy interceptors had more than a kilometer on your ceiling, you knew they were going to strike from above.

So Ritter had seen the enemy first. Now what? He wished to God he was in something other than a Heinkel 51.

He'd already got rid of his damn bombs at least. His Staffel had completed its attack on the Red ground troops at the front. The Heinkels were on their way back to base when they were bounced.

The Heinkels scattered. Not what they were meant to do.

Ritter was suddenly alone in the empty blue except for this persistent stinging fly that had cut him out for its prey.

There wasn't a cloud in the Spanish sky to hide in, and running was a joke. The Soviet Rata was over 100 km/h faster than Ritter's German Heinkel. What jack-off had traded speed for maneuverability when they were designing this crate?

A fighter that can't defend itself.

Ritter was flying a coffin with wings.

The Russian up there was laughing at Germany. The *airplane* was Russian anyway. By now the pilot was more likely Spanish. The Russians themselves had gone home, leaving their lethal equipment to their communist allies.

The Soviet-built Rata up there was a stumpy little monster with low cantilever wings that weren't much more than fat ailerons. There were no struts

or stays anywhere to dirty the Rata's lines. Its fuselage was all smooth underneath. In flight, the Rata tucked its undercarriage inside itself like a bird's legs, so its biggest source of drag was its fat face. A nine-cylinder radial engine gave the Rata its blunt profile. That and the stunted length of its fuselage made it look like a fly, and that's what the Reds called their I-16. *Mushka* in Russian. *Mosca* to the Spanish Reds.

The Spanish Fascists and their German allies called it *Rata*. Rat.

Officially the Rata was designated I-16. *I* for *Istrabetil*. Fighter.

They got that right, Ritter thought, wondering why he couldn't be in something that could actually fight.

The Rata was coming around again, fast. It couldn't go slow. Slow, the Rata's stubby little body would fall out of the sky.

Ritter waited until the Rata was nearly on him to play his only ace – what the bi-plane could do that the fast monoplane couldn't.

Turn!

Ritter's bi-plane wheeled on itself. The Rata overshot, hurtling the other direction, pumping bullets into empty air.

Ritter pushed his throttle to the firewall, and the HE 51 pattered away in haste, all out at a miserable 342 km/h.

The Rata skidded around, its noisy radial snarling.

Ritter jammed the stick forward into a dive.

His stomach jumped into his throat. All the litter from the cockpit floor leapt up into his face. Grit sprayed his goggles.

His engine hesitated in the sudden reverse of gravity. Then it fired again and he dove at full-throttle. The whole machine shuddered. The wire braces burred and strained. His top plane yanked hard on its struts, creaking as if to fly off.

Black smoke of emergency-rich mixture belched from the S-pipes.

Maybe he'll think I'm hit.

Not a chance. The Rata clung to Ritter's tail. And it struck Ritter then, the sheer idiocy of trying to dive away from the Rata. With the HE 51's enormous wing area, a power dive was like trying to push down a giant feather, while the Red crate shot after him like a bullet.

Ritter kicked the rudder pedals. His Heinkel tumbled like an unwinding ball of twine. The ship's wires whistled and twanged. Wood ribs groaned. The wind in the open cockpit grew warmer as he descended, still not fast on Rata terms, but jerky and tough to get a bead on.

And maybe he looked dead.

The ground hurtled up. Ritter pulled back on the stick.

Like pulling a sword from a stone. It didn't want to move. He hauled it back, hard.

Blood drained from his head. Ass pushed into seat. Goggles pressed on his nose. The Heinkel dragged out of its dive. The engine whined.

The Rata was still above him, a compact vulture circling to watch him

crash so he could claim the kill.

Not today, Ivan.

Ritter had been warned that it was death to watch a victim go down like that. Apparently it was only death if *he* tried it.

He'd been told over and over. If you watch your kill go down, someone *will be* on you before you get to see the crash.

Which was what would be happening to that Rata right now if life were fair.

And Ritter couldn't figure out what had happened to the rest of his Staffel. He'd heard of this—how the sky empties in a heartbeat.

When the Ratas first attacked, Ritter tried to stay with the HE 51 next to his, Günter's, and form into a defensive circle as ordered.

In the circle, each airplane could cover the tail of the one in front of it as the formation looped its way home. Too late Ritter had realized that Günter had broken formation and Ritter was being led away by the lost.

The Staffelkapitän, if Ritter lived to see him again, would shred him to chewable bits.

The image of Johann Löwenstamm reaming him out felt oddly homey. Ritter so wanted to feel flecks of Löwe's flying spittle on his face as he roared and called Ritter a dumbhead for breaking formation.

The Heinkel didn't carry a radio for Ritter to tell anyone he was in trouble, and the only aircraft trying to stay on his tail now was the enemy Rata.

Here it came again.

Ritter cocked his guns and wheeled his crate toward the Rata. It came at him with its four ports spitting red.

Did they never run out of ammo?

The Heinkel's two machine guns were synchronized to shoot through its propeller. Made their rate of fire slower.

Ritter fired. Cordite tang filled his nostrils. His Heinkel shivered around him.

His tracers arced down and short. And now he was down to the red stuff. His Waffenwart had loaded colored tracer rounds into the bottom of his load to give him some warning that he was low. Ritter never needed to look at his counter to know when his breechblocks were about to go empty.

The guns held only 500 rounds per gun to begin with.

The Rata swept around for another pass.

Ritter had been told to open fire at an attacker before it came into range. The enemy, he was told, would usually break off at 200 meters.

Someone forgot to brief this Red on proper error-making procedure for an enemy

The Rata kept coming, close enough for Ritter to hear the metallic chatter of its guns over his own engine noise. White tracer streams seemed to be coming at him in straight lines.

Point blank.

Bullets whiffled through the air over Ritter's head. They poked holes in his Heinkel's parasol wing above his head. Ragged perforations appeared in the fabric.

When nothing but Red spinner and gun ports filled the space before his eyes, Ritter squeezed the trigger.

His Heinkel rocked with the guns' recoil—

And abruptly gave out to the chatter of empty breechblocks.

Oh Scheiße!

He pushed the stick again and ducked.

The Rata flashed upward, a flying wall of green. The Republican tricolor bannered on its rudder flashed right *there*, red, yellow, and purple. Then it was gone.

Ritter's Heinkel blundered into the Rata's turbulent wake, then sailed into sudden calm.

He heard only his own engine.

He squinted into the sun. *Did I get him?*

The sky was suddenly empty again.

He nudged his Heinkel into a turning climb. He sighted a high speck.

How had the Rata got that high so fast? That could not be.

From the sun, a hail of bullets whistled through his fabric wings. Pinged and rapped where they hit metal.

Heart jumped into another gear. Blood pulsed. An unreal clarity shielded his mind.

Ritter throttled forward, met with an immediate violent thumping of machinery wrenching itself apart. The bottom stay of his port wing pulled loose, sprung like a whip. It gashed a rent in the lower plane.

He throttled back, his crate still knocking and wobbling all over the place, thumping.

Broken prop.

His riddled portside wings flexed sickly.

He pulled the control column. It flopped back into his lap.

He unclasped his harness, climbed up in his seat, and looked behind him.

Saw his disconnected elevators trailing in the slipstream, nicely balanced, taking him on a level ride despite the broken propeller's heaving. He was an easy target.

He dropped back into his seat. Moved the control column back and forth. Nothing happened. The cables were out.

I am dead.

The Rata was turning around to finish him.

A shadow crossed over it.

Ritter had sighted the third aircraft earlier. That speck high in the sky. He'd thought was the Rata. Closer now he made out its longer lines, an elegant angular shape with narrow tapering wings. It loomed over the ugly little fat fly.

This was a German eagle.

The Rata never saw it. At least it did nothing evasive as the Messerschmitt pumped both guns into it.

Stitched it right up the back.

The squat Red ship sprouted a streamer of black smoke from under its engine cowling. Fire bloomed and swept back into the slipstream. Ailerons ignited.

In the wind-lashed heat, the Rata quickly became a torch. It went down, spinning.

There was no parachute. Ritter hoped the pilot was already dead. Ritter wished death by fire on no one.

He squinted up at the ME 109. Read the numbers off its fuselage. The number 6 was painted fore of the black disk. They were all sixes, the MEs. The number 35 aft of the black disk on this one was the airplane's own signature. The jaunty Top Hat emblem told him that this ME belonged to the fighter group's second Staffel.

The Messerschmitt climbed to join the other two airplanes of its Kette. They sped away like an arrowhead.

"Wait!" Ritter cried out loud.

Damn this thing.

He was talking to wind.



PAUL RITTER BEAT on the sides of his cockpit.

The Messerschmitts were too fast to escort him home. They would run out of fuel if they tried to travel as slow as Ritter's limping crate.

The MEs disappeared over the foothills.

Ritter nudged the throttle, trying to pitch his Heinkel's nose up, but it shook, threatening to rip the engine off its mounts.

He throttled back. His present miserable altitude would have to do.

A piece of the prop was gone. He could see it now. A darkened spot in the blur of its disk. The lopsided churning made his teeth clatter together and shook him to his bones. A loosened strut knocked harder. He thought of baling out.

Thought again.

He'd been told his first day in Spain: Do not, do NOT put down behind the enemy line. A civil war wasn't like other wars. Spain's struggle was an evil slaughter with all the horror and viciousness of violence within a family.

"Remember all the stories you heard of knights of the sky and courtly aerial combat of the Great War? Forget them."

And he'd been told a tale of a Russian pilot who baled out over Madrid. Madrid was Red territory. Should have been friendly. But those Spaniards couldn't tell Russian from German, and the pilot's own allies stomped him to death.

"They'll do worse to you."

Ritter needed to fly home. He noted which way the MEs had gone. The Messerschmitt's base was at Lanaja. Ritter's base at Sariñena lay in the same general direction.

How to get around the foothills was the problem, because he was not getting this crate over them.

He pulled his map out of his boot and spread it on his knee. Dog-eared paper fluttered in the open air. He wiped sooty black glaze from his goggles and studied the landmarks.

There's the mountain. There's the river. There's the other river.

Behind him, the River Cinca branched off to the north. Off his port side, the River Alcandre snaked toward the lowering sun.

The Alcandre river valley would take him home.

He stuffed the map next to his chest, secure under the harness straps.

I know where I am. He turned his crippled Heinkel gently toward the river.

Alone on the wind with his tattered wings, without the Rata sniping at him, the danger and isolation took on a perverse sense of fun. Normally Paul Ritter could fly in his sleep. Now simply staying aloft was a challenge.

It was comical how hurt this poor bird was. The enemy seemed to have hit everything *but* Ritter.

He was feeling more relief than danger now, even as the bucking HE 51 was shaking apart. Pathetic as it was, he had to admire the bi-plane's ability to take abuse.

He still had ailerons. He could steer.

There was the railway. God invented railways for pilots to find their way. And just this side of the railroad tracks lay the airfield, only recently come into Nationalist hands.

As recently as March, Sariñena had been a Red air base. All the bomb craters here, the scrap piles of ruined Red machinery, all the strafing that stitched up the ground, all that was German work. When April came, the front advanced, and now those were German airplanes hiding under the silvery green olive boughs at the field's edge.

The other Heinkels were already down and clear of the landing strip.

I'll need all the room.

Ritter throttled back. Let his altitude slip. Had to estimate this just right. There would be no second chance.

He reached for his Very pistol to fire a warning, but felt something wet on his legs.

Oil?

His felt a sick chill at the thought of sparks. He stowed the Very pistol.

Now, he could see men, running out and pointing at him. No one was shooting. They knew who he was even if he'd failed to circle and flash his recognition markings. They knew who he was.

Everyone was keeping well back from the landing strip.

I must look like the flying dead.

As he descended, a smell reached him. He'd been able to ignore it so long as it was snatched away by the wind. Now he smelled the fumes.

He glanced at his madly jiggling gauges. The engine temperature gauge was stuck as high as it could go.

His boot soles felt slippery on the rudder pedals. He couldn't bring himself to look down. Something hot had drenched his legs.

Great white clouds hissed from his engine. The prop shoved thick billows of it into the cockpit from the port side. Ritter leaned out the starboard to see the field. Caught a mouthful of white vapor as he inhaled. Gagged on the taste of glycol.

He heard a crackle and couldn't see his engine for the black smoke.

Heart turned to ice. Skin to quills. Smelled something burning.

It was far too late to jump.

If there was a fire, he was jumping anyway.

The HE 51 lost stability at low speed. The lurching spinner threw off what balance he had. Ritter had only the broadest control over the ailerons. They tensed and slacked with the wing's flexing. The port wing dipped. He corrected. Was suddenly over-correcting. Swung. Righted. Looked ahead.

Short. He was going to be short, dropping too fast. Olive trees blocked his path. A net of twisted boughs reached up to snare him.

White-knuckled on the throttle, Ritter pushed forward. Wrong choice. A wild, heavy hammering, a dying mechanical squeal.

The airplane bobbed *up*, cleared the olive trees.

Flames shot up from the other side of the firewall, fluttered back at him.

He cut the engine. The HE glided a moment, stalled bare meters from the ground. The tail dropped first, mashed down, thudded forward.

The HE's legs folded with bone-jarring jolt and screech of tearing aluminum. The HE pitched forward, planted its flat nose in the ground.

Ritter pulled his feet off the pedals, jerked his knees up, threw his arms around his head as metal crushed inward.

Momentum carried the HE onward. The heavy engine plowed into the dirt, skidded sideways, tipped, slammed onto its side.

Spars folded with thundercracks. Wings jutted up at the grotesque angles of a squashed dragonfly.

The instant all came to a stop, Ritter unstrapped.

His mechanic appeared miraculously over him, a guardian angel with the rounded shape of a great bear. Otto's heavy paws grasped Ritter's reaching arms hard enough to bruise and hauled him up from the cockpit.

The two of them teetered on the edge of the fuselage, then jumped to earth just as flames lapped over the firewall.

The wood-framed wings caught like tinder. Fabric blackened and shrank off the steel tube skeleton of the fuselage. Curled black crisps floated away on the heated air. Brown and green camouflage paint blistered from the silvery metal cowling and peeled back like withering skin.

Ritter's knees buckled. The ground would not stand still beneath him. He staggered to get up. He was vibrating.

He ripped off his goggles. Still felt them imprinted on his face. He threw his leather helmet on the ground, and screamed at the bi-plane, "Burn, you

obsolete piece of shit!”

His own voice sounded muffled inside his head, as if it were stuffed with cotton.

He pulled at his wet trousers sticking to his legs. He was surprised to see they weren't black. All that wetness was glycol, not oil. The airplane had pissed on him.

Felt tears breaking free. Oh no. No. *I don't cry*. He darted furtive glances to see who was watching.

Everybody.

He turned away from them. Didn't want anyone mistaking why he was crying. Not for fear. Not hurt. He was so *angry* and humiliated. The damned Soviet rat had embarrassed him. It embarrassed Germany.

While Spain watched. While the world watched.

Spain's skies were Germany's proving ground.

Germany was proving to be inadequate.

How could a brand new air force be so outdated?

He roared into the fire, “You were born obsolete!”

Even the Italians had better machines than this. Bi-planes, yes, but they were better bi-planes. The Italian Fiats were faster, heavier than the Heinkels, and their Breda machine guns packed a bigger kick than his MGs. The Italian Fiat could hold its own against a Russian Rata.

The German HE 51s had been sent to Spain to protect the Spanish Nationalist bombers. But even before the arrival of the Messerschmitts, the HE 51s had been reduced to depending on the *bombers* to protect *them*.

And slow? Ritter had been outrun by a Republican transport. A big DC-2, three or four times his weight, had brazenly crossed into Nationalist territory and just walked away from him as he gave chase. He in a German fighter and he couldn't catch a goddamned transport.

The HE 51 was the product of rearward thinking. Some old man thought you needed to feel the wind of an open cockpit to know what you were doing in the sky, and that you needed two planes to maneuver. That way was best.

It probably had been best once upon a time. But a funny thing about the quality of best — Ritter had never known it to sit still in anyone's trophy case.

What Ritter wouldn't give to have the best, for as long as it was ever given to anyone, to be supreme in the sky like an eagle among lesser birds.

Footfalls closed behind him. Ritter knew that step without turning. All pilots walked with variations on a strut. This tread belonged to the Staffelfkapitän, Oberleutnant Johann Löwenstamm.

This man, thought Ritter, was perfect. Löwe was never afraid. Löwe's iron nerve ran solid to the core.

Ritter kept his face toward the fire, afraid what Löwe would think of him. Ritter had obviously been crying. No hiding that.

Löwe came to a halt beside Ritter. Löwe smelled of tobacco and Spanish hair oil. Energy radiated from him, even just standing there with his hands

clasped behind his back. He wasn't a big man. His presence was gigantic.

"Are you hurt, Ritter?"

Ritter shook his head. "No." He wiped his sleeve across his face.

Löwe narrowed his eyes at the burning airplane. "What'd you lose? Elevators?"

Ritter nodded. *Elevators. Prop. Stay. Strut. Glycol. My Staffel. My pride. Lost 'em all.*

The fire popped. The blackmen, shoveling dirt on the flames, all took a step back.

A flare rocketed up from the blaze in a red arc.

Scheiße! My Very pistol.

"Guns?" Löwe asked, wondering if they ought not be taking cover.

"Empty." Ritter sniffled. Another tear escaped, tracked a telltale streak down his dirty face. He was about to insist he wasn't afraid, but you didn't have to explain things to Löwe.

Johann Löwenstamm was the ideal leader, the consummate hunter, ferocious and charming, exuberant, daring. He was always clean-shaven. Wore his dark blond hair combed straight back from his broad brow. He was handsome except for the dimpled scar over one cheekbone where he'd taken a hockey stick. The other guy had lost teeth. Löwe's blue eyes looked straight at you. His skin was always tanned because he was never indoors. A lion was not a domestic animal.

Löwe had transformed the obsolescent HE 51s back into a useful part of the German Condor Legion. The failed fighters now carried bombs and delivered them in low-flying relays called chains. *Cadenas* the Spanish called them. The *cadenas* had become the terror of the Red ground troops.

The Heinkels were so successful in their new close support role that they were now arriving straight from the factory with bomb racks already installed.

To Ritter's mind the bomb racks were a mark of failure. Finding an alternate use for your junk didn't make the junk good.

Löwe nudged him with an elbow. "Come back in." He headed toward operations.

Ritter backed away from the ruins of his aircraft.

Through the wavering curtain of air that shimmered over the fire he could see a face on the other side, frowning, a crease pinched in the brow. It was a Spanish laborer, leaning on his shovel, not moving, just watching. This Spaniard had witnessed the German pilot scuttle out of his airplane like a beetle out of a hearth log. Ritter could see the mind working behind that face, judging, wondering if the Spanish Fascists hadn't chosen the wrong ally.

God damn you.

Ritter turned to follow Löwe. Caught up with him in a few running steps.

The rest of the Staffel had collected outside of operations. They applauded Ritter's approach with slow, ironic claps.

"My God, he walked away from it."

"Capital crash, Ritter."

"Nice landing," Helmut said. He meant it.

Ritter gave a loose throwaway salute to all of them. "Get stuffed."

Löwe's hand landed on the nape of Ritter's neck and pushed him ahead into operations. "Inside. All of you."

Taking his seat, Ritter noticed the Staffel was still one man short.

Günter wasn't here.

Löwe shut the door. To Ritter he said, "Glad you made it." Then lit into all of them for not maintaining the defensive circle.

He bellowed at Ritter, "Where is Günter!"

Ritter had been glued to Günter's tail. Hadn't seen what happened to Günter after he realized that Günter wasn't part of the circle.

Not my fault. He didn't say that. When a group broke down, all were at fault.

Ritter was supposed to have Günter's tail.

In the closed room the reek of glycol was becoming pungent. An aura of it radiated from him in strong waves. It was soaked in his clothes and would *not* air dry.

Wet, stinking, and holding the wrong answer, Ritter said, "I don't know, *Herr Oberleutnant.*"

Löwe exploded. His fair face turned livid. The dimpled scar on his cheekbone stood out white. He had a pencil in his hand, and he stabbed holes in the map as he railed at all of them, telling them where they were supposed to have been and what they were supposed to have done.

He rounded on the telephone operator. "*Do we have a telephone yet!*"

The Nationalist forces were advancing fast. Communications links lagged behind. And there were always saboteurs.

The telephone rang.

So relieved to be able to answer his commander's wrath with something other than *I'm sorry, Herr Oberleutnant*, the operator sang out, "I have it!" And he snatched up the receiver.

It was Lanaja field calling. The Messerschmitts had located Günter. He was dead on the mountainside.



THE PILOTS OF THE THIRD Staffel sat hunched under their Staffelkapitän's almighty wrath. Löwe repeated his expectations, then wound up with a roar, "Questions?"

He broke his pencil on the trestle table. The lead tip snapped off and bounced audibly on the floor in the sudden dreadful quiet.

Into the long pause, Paul Ritter blurted, "Who do I have to kill to get a Messerschmitt?"

A few snorts escaped, but no one dared actually laugh.

Ritter was calm now, dry-eyed, his arms folded.

Löwe opened his mouth and inhaled big to yell. Decided he'd said everything already. He tossed his broken pencil away and said in a normal voice, "When I figure that out I'll organize a raid. Get dressed for dinner. Dismissed. Not you, Ritter. Ritter, report to the IO first."

Heart jumped.

Bullets ripped through his wings.

Airfield came up at him through a cloud of smoke.

Foot moved to push something away. Kicked. . . sheets.

Awake and shaking, Ritter tried to change the memory. But even waking, the images ran the same, over and over.

Ritter rolled to the side, fumbled in the dark for a cigarette on the nightstand. He struck a match, caught the flame with the wavering end of the cigarette. Inhaled smoke.

Now he was afraid. He decided he wasn't going up again, even if the Warte

got another crate patched together for him.

He sat up in the bed, stared into the dark. Had to remember where he was. With the Fascists lightning advance eastward, it was hard to keep track of anything. One night they were living like princes in castles, the next they were camped under tarps on an airfield like infantrymen. Now he was billeted in a farmhouse. He smelled goat's milk and candle wax, his own sweat, and ashes of old cigarette butts piled in the tray on his nightstand.

He took off his nightshirt. It was soaked. He threw it on the floor.

He should have had less to drink. Or more. One or the other.

After dinner the whole squadron had driven into Saragossa. Fritz headed immediately for the brothel. Invited Ritter along. "Ritter! Want to say hello to the señoritas?"

Ritter shook his head. "I want to say goodbye to this bottle."

He'd stayed in the cabaret, drinking.

It hadn't been enough. He couldn't stop shaking.

Everyone else was asleep now.

Ritter watched the cigarette quiver in his hand. The lit end had become a red glowing blur.

If they see me like this, they'll ship me home.

He took another drag, a quick motion. Exhaled sharp. Blinking back tears. Stared upward. He couldn't see the ceiling. Saw darkness.

Fine! I want to go home. Now. Right now.

He lay back on the bed. Bit a fingernail. Dragged on his cigarette.

Tears escaped from the outer corners of his eyes, trickled down into his ears. He wiped them off. Angry.

A rustle sounded from across the black abyss between the beds. A voice in the dark. "Ritter, you all right?"

Ritter forced himself to relax every muscle so he wouldn't sob. "Damn cheap Spanish wine in my gut."

"Well if you're going to be sick don't do it in here."

"I'll aim for your shoes," Ritter promised.

Heard a grunt.

Ritter reached to the nightstand, ground out the cigarette. Pulled the bedcovers up under his chin.

I am not going up again.

He would never see these people again, so who gave a fuck what anyone thought?

He was going home in the morning, and that was the end of that.

Jolted awake at 4.00, Ritter was half-dressed before he remembered that he was going to quit.

He skipped breakfast. He couldn't eat.

He boarded the bus with the others, praying the mechanics couldn't scrape together a replacement aircraft so he wouldn't be forced to admit he

couldn't fly.

The third fighter Staffel, his, had inherited the cast-off HE 51s of the first and second Staffeln when both those units switched over to Messerschmitts. But even the cast-offs were many times repaired from parts cannibalized from other HE 51s that had been eaten alive by Ratas. It was entirely possible for the unit to be short an operational craft today. He could hope.

Ritter arrived at the airfield, stomach quivering. He jumped down from the bus.

Please let there be no plane for me.

He filed into the briefing room with the others, dropped his gear next to a chair. The map on the wall was cratered with pencil holes.

He dragged his chair around backwards and sat astride it, his arms folded across the top of the backrest. He rested his chin on his wrist, and settled in to wait for the reconnaissance report.

Sweet smoke from the Adjutant's pipe drifted under his nose. His stomach churned. Someone offered him coffee. He grunted no.

Any moment someone must bark: Stand down, Ritter, you don't have an airplane.

He heard the blackmen outside starting the engines, running them up, and taxiing the Heinkels into position.

Waves of roars mounted until the whole field bellowed with war machines. Ritter lost count of the overlapping sounds.

He listened hard as each engines cut out.

The last engine growl sputtered to silence. Ritter couldn't tell if that was one or two together.

A Wart stepped into the Ops room with a clumping tread. It was Otto Braun, whom Ritter called Otto the Bear or Meister Braun. Ritter lifted his head, and gripped the backrest, expectant.

Otto growled, jerked a thick thumb over his rounded shoulder, "Try to bring this one back in one piece." He lumbered out.

Ritter pressed his thumb and forefinger to his eyelids.

Goddamned efficient ground crew.

Johann Löwenstamm entered like a gust of wind. He pushed his cap back from his brow with the rim of his coffee cup. His eyes met Ritter's briefly with one of those quick good morning sort of nods, then he was standing in front of the map. "Gentlemen!"

Ritter's resignation sat inside his chest in a great lump. He would need to wait until Löwe was done talking.

Ritter listened to the briefing. Jotted notes on the back of his hand. No one who flew in an open cockpit used paper. Why he was making notes at all, he didn't know. He was not going up.

Reconnaissance reported a Red counterattack underway. So it was back to Balaguer for the third Staffel this morning.

The meeting broke with a skidding of chairs and scuffling of boots. The

pilots pulled on their fleece-lined jackets. Spring had come to Aragon, but it was still winter aloft.

"Ritter."

"*Herr Oberleutnant?*" Ritter snapped to rigid attention.

"How do you feel?"

"I'm good, Johann." The answer was automatic.

Jesus, I am an ass!

Löwe's question meant, of course, had any sprains made themselves felt from yesterday's crash. Löwe was not asking after his nerves.

Ritter should have made up an injured back.

He closed his eyes. *Bullets and vapor. Death and fire. Fire and death.*

Löwe tapped his arm. Paul's eyes opened.

He went out to the field with the others.

Ritter approached the Heinkel that Otto had ready for him. Ritter climbed in mechanically. He let Otto strap him in tight.

Ritter fit his feet on the rudder pedals, moved the rudder left and right. He took the stick. Experienced an instant's waking nightmare, the imagined sensation of severed cables and the control column flopping uselessly. But the cables were there and connected. The elevators responded.

All the control surfaces moved freely. Ritter wondered how he might jam one. But Otto, prince of mechanics, would recognize sabotage and kill him.

And the aircraft itself rebuked him for the thought, like an old lover with whom he had quarreled. Here he was, the dashing knight and his mild-mannered aged mare. Just what he needed in battle, mild manners.

Still it tugged, the battle-worn bi-plane, honorable in its chipped coat of war paint, dutifully enduring its undignified bomb racks. It embraced him. Familiarity surrounded him, smells of petrol, oil, and leather.

He shouted to his Wart, "Free prop!"

Otto gave the white-lacquered wooden blade a spin. Ritter pressed the starter.

The propeller lashed through half an arc and hammered to a stop, like a sleeper's arm thrown against a sudden light in refusal to be roused. Then it caught, roaring. The prop spun into a blur as jets of smoke and flame darted from the S-pipes.

Needles flicked across the black instrument faces.

Ritter lowered his goggles over his eyes. Signaled the chocks away.

The Spanish workmen dragged on the ropes. Otto signaled when Ritter's airplane was clear to taxi.

Along the field the flags were lined up, marking the way. The other machines pointed into the wind, their engines racing, insistent. Ritter ran his engine up. The rev counter leapt. His Heinkel strained at its brakes.

The dispatcher moved his arm up – and *down*.

Ritter released the brake.

The HE began its bumpy run across the scarred field. Brown grasses

flattened away under the prop wash.

Ritter inhaled. A rush of elation. Speed. Slapping air and exhaust smoke. His engine's roar. He glanced across at his squadron rolling with him.

Fine. I'm fine.

The wires sang. Wind gathered under the planes.

Sudden absence of bumps under the wheels told him he was airborne. His ship sailed upwards, swinging a little.

In a moment he moved in to join his Kette. He tucked in behind Max's port wing, opposite Fritz on Max's starboard wing to form a vee.

The hazy disk of his prop disappeared entirely at speed, clearing the view. Air freshened. Colors below muted as the vista expanded.

Serenity and tension balanced. His stomach had stopped fluttering sometime back there. Life was as it should be. He was flying.

He couldn't breathe on the ground. That was the only trouble in the world.

Everything, Ritter thought, gets fucked up on the ground.



4



“TELEPHONE FOR YOU, Bryan. Wish you’d keep your personal business off the official line. I’m not your ruddy PA.”

Bryan Catrell lowered one corner of the newspaper to see Prentice leaning in the crew room doorway.

“I didn’t place the call,” Bryan said. “*You* came to fetch *me*.”

“Well, she was crying —!”

Bryan jumped up, dashed for the door. Prentice kept talking, “I can’t stand it when they do that. I think I’d rather have someone shooting at me. At least one knows what one ought to be doing about it — Bryan, that’s my bicycle —!”

“Jane!”

Bryan couldn’t make out most of the words wailed on the line. Sobs broke up Jane’s sweet voice on the telephone in the Adjutant’s office. “They’ve done it, Bryan! They’ve really done it!”

They would be Jane’s parents. Lord and Lady Fairchild were always perfectly gracious when Bryan called, but Jane had warned him that they did not approve.

“Done what, Jane? What have they done?”

“They’re sending me to Switzerland! I’ll die, Bryan! It’s a girl’s school!”

“When?”

“Now! Please come! Please!”

Bryan could picture her, cradling the receiver with both her hands, the way she curled around his arm and laid her cheek against his biceps when they walked together.

"Where are you, Jane?"

"Our North place."

That would be the estate near Aberdeen, as opposed to "home," in Oxfordshire, or "our city place" in London.

"I'll be right there."

Her teary laugh sparkled over the telephone. Even her sniffles were endearing. "O Bryan, can you? Can you really?"

"Is the grass cut?"

Bryan stalked out of the adj's office. Prentice had already reclaimed his bicycle, so Bryan raced on foot toward the hangars. The hangars were ordinarily closed by teatime, and he wasn't sure if he could convince the tyrannical flight sergeant of the dire necessity to open one for a mere Pilot Officer, lowest form of life in the RAF.

The hangar doors were shut. No one was about. All the Gauntlets were secured inside.

Bryan kicked the corrugated door. It sounded a rippling bang. He turned away, angry in urgency. He'd told Jane he would be there.

He heard an engine.

There, as if placed by angels, on the corner of the field nearest the station commander's office, stood a new mono-wing aeroplane, a Hawker Hurricane, ticking over, its cockpit vacant.

The Merlin engine talked to him in an idling bark. Bryan walked toward it, dreamlike.

The fighter squadron on James Aycock's aerodrome was equipped with Gloster Gauntlet MK Is. The unit was due for conversion, but, to date, only a single Hurricane had been delivered. As there was not a lot to be done with one aeroplane, Wing Commander Aycock decided this Hurricane was meant to be his personal runabout.

James Aycock had never flown a monoplane. The Technical Officer had run the kite up for him, and had just gone inside to collect the station commander, who was just getting into his flying kit, when they both heard the engine song change.

The TO met Aycock's eyes. They turned toward the window in time to see the station commander's personal runabout take a walk.

The Hurricane turned into the wind.

Bryan Catrell had always wanted to fly. His father's death had done nothing to change that. Made it imperative for Bryan to carry on for him.

There was a moment from his childhood, gilded in his memory, visiting grandfather's house in Little Barrington. Bryan and his younger brother Victor and a cousin were catching salamanders in the valley of the Windrush when a strange noise, never before heard in the county, sounded from the sky.

Bryan scrambled up from the streambed into the open field and pointed up.

A Sopwith Camel buzzed Grandfather's little house of honey-colored

Cotswold stone. It made a low pass across the field where the children played.

In the cockpit was Bryan's father, handsome as a storybook knight. A long white scarf trailed behind him. He lifted goggles from his blue eyes, flashed a dazzling smile, waved with a gloved hand, and he shouted.

His voice was wholly lost in the rotary engine's din, but Bryan could make out the words on his lips: "If the grass was cut I could land here!"

The kite lifted skyward, turned a loop and winged away. The whole town was out by then, pointing up.

That's my father. Bryan's heart overflowed with pride.

I want to be that.

Richard "Cat" Catrell spent his last years in pain. He'd flown in the '14 - '18 War in France. He'd pranged there. It left him not quite whole, and he'd walked with a limp since Bryan could remember. Only in an aeroplane did Cat Catrell feel whole.

He died while Bryan was still young. For a long time Bryan denied that the prang could have had anything to do with his father's early death. Bryan was willing to excuse the aeroplane anything.

When at last he could admit the truth, it changed nothing. Bryan wanted to fly.

But his mother was not about to lose him too. Margaret Catrell had two boys. She had enough money to give one of them a leg up in the world. She sent Bryan to public school, and after that she determined he would sit for Oxford.

Before the term even commenced, there was a brawl in town, and Bryan Catrell was delivered from the police into the hands of the bulldogs.

The dean graciously allowed Mister Catrell to withdraw from his college.

How about Cranwell then, Mum?

Margaret was as furious as anyone had ever seen her. Bryan had squandered his chances and she was not sending him to the RAF College. No. Victor was going to public school. That was the last word.

But Victor would not go. Bryan's most ardent fan, Vicky wanted nothing better than for the adored Bryan to have wings. Family legend had it that Vicky's first word had been "Bryan." Apocryphal of course, because Vicky couldn't say his r's until he was five years old, but it captured the spirit if not the fact of the history.

Because she had known Bryan's father rather well, Margaret recognized she couldn't win this battle.

Bryan applied to the RAF College at Cranwell. He was of more limited means than the usual gentlemen who brought their polo ponies, their hunting dogs, their sports cars, and their own aeroplanes to Cranwell. In Bryan's favor were the old school ties and his father's name.

"You want to be like your father," an officer asked at the interview.

"More than anything."

"Without the prang."

"I'd rather not."

"Die?"

"For my country if I must."

"Young men talk easily of dying."

"I assume that's why we're sent to fight the wars."

"You could be right. But there is not going to be another war."

Bryan looked dubious.

"Oxford," the officer said, looking over Bryan's papers. "Got sacked, I see."

"I wasn't. I did not attend."

"Did not attend? And you an exhibitioner. What was the story there?"

"Must there be a story?"

"There had better be one."

"I had a bit of a row with a great lot of townees. Rather a great party that got out of hand."

"And ended in the gaol."

"No, sir. We weren't held."

"You were assisting the inquiry?"

"That's what they call it."

"I see. You were not sent down, you were impelled with some force."

"I hate half-measures," Bryan said. All was lost.

The officer closed the file. "You can fly?"

Bryan brightened. "Yes, sir."

"We shall see."

Bryan broke into a blinding smile.

The officer's face was stern. Bryan's smile faded.

"This is not Spain, Mister Catrell. We do not prove our manhood by getting ourselves thrown into prison."

"I wasn't thrown—"

"Are you physically capable of shutting up for a minute, Mister Catrell?"

Started to say yes, sir. Instead met the officer's eyes and earnestly nodded.

"Thank you. I was saying. We need not prove ourselves in this fashion, and Cranwell does not, any more than does Oxford, want a hooligan in its ranks."

Bryan listened with the sinking feeling that Vicky was going to public school after all.

"*However*, I personally cannot see turning someone down for military service because he's keen to fight. You seem like a good sort. I trust we can make a gentleman of you."

Bryan got on well enough with most folk. He'd lost his West County accent. His pronunciation of the King's English was flawless, though what he chose to pronounce was not always well considered. He had a sweet smile, so said the women. Men allowed it was a cheery smile, what with all those teeth. He wasn't one to try to pull your girl if he knew she was yours, so it was all

right if women thought he was sweet.

He ignored trivial rules – which were not trivial to those who safeguarded them. One such guardian of the rules threatened to send him to Botany Bay.

“But we don’t do that anymore,” Bryan said.

“For you we could make an exception, since you have a predilection for exceptions.”

Bryan also had a penchant for flying below treetops. It was a breach of flying discipline, his usual.

He’d taken a kite on the deck in training to see just how low he could fly it. He made the treetops bow, vaulted over barns, beat up a pasture, and impressed all the livestock.

Bryan had never seen cows run. They took to their heels, their switch tails lashing.

Then he’d heard shots.

Upon his return, he had to explain the shotgun holes in his Gauntlet’s wing.

“What do you have to say for yourself this time, Catrell?”

“I suppose I was slightly lax with my altitude,” Bryan said.

Reprimanded again.

And the evaluation at the end of his stay at Cranwell was a terse, uninformative, “Satisfactory.”

The unofficial word was not so cautious. “Bryan Catrell will either have his own command, or we shall have to shoot him. There is really no other course.”

Bryan had been stationed “in spitting distance of Cranwell.”

“If one be of a nature to spit,” said the station commander, who took an instant dislike to Bryan. It wasn’t personal yet. Aycock simply disliked Pilot Officers on principle.

And James Aycock didn’t think that Bryan was the normal sort to come out of Cranwell. Bryan Catrell may have gone to the best schools, but he did not come from the best family.

Marrying for love seldom did much to improve one’s social position, and Bryan’s family had a history of questionable choices. There was the matter of an Italian grandmother, upon whom blame always settled for Bryan’s lack of restraint, unabashed outbursts, and expressions of pure emotion.

Catrells married wrong. It was a natural law.

So – naturally – Bryan fell in love with the wrong class. He fell up.

Her name was Jane, and Bryan was certain he would die without her. Her parents were too polite to say it to his face, but the verdict Bryan knew: “Lovely boy, not our class.”

A pair of wings was nice to show off for a while, but when the word marriage came up, something had to be done.

Bryan hadn’t expected the balloon to go up so suddenly.

Jane’s parents were sending her to Switzerland. Bryan promised to come.

Didn't know how he was going to make good on that with all the Gauntlets locked up.

Then he saw the Hurricane waiting there, ready.

He was doing a walk-around before he knew what he intended. He picked up the 700 that was snapping in the wind on its clipboard. The ignition test had been done. The mag drops were entirely acceptable. The ship was fine.

Except that it was overheating while waiting for a pilot.

There was nothing else for it. Bryan and the Hurricane must rescue each other.



BRYAN CATRELL TOOK UP the parachute from the wing root. Reached into the cockpit, made sure the brakes were engaged. He climbed down, pulled the chocks away, and untied the tail.

He put his tick on the 700, climbed into the cockpit, strapped in. He tried to open the radiator shutter more. It was already fully open. The coolant temperature was at the point of no return.

He released the brake. The Hurri was nose-heavy, and his first anxious burst of power nearly set it on its spinner. He eased up.

He couldn't see over the massive engine. He undid the harness and stood on the rudder bar so he could peer over the enormous Merlin to taxi out.

He pointed the ship into the wind and set the brake again.

He had checked out in a Hurricane, had expected to have one by now. He knew the drill, where everything was. Just to be certain, he checked the notes which someone had stashed next to the seat. Had to fish for them since the seat attached directly to the Hurri's basketweave tubular airframe without cockpit walls or floor.

He opened the safety gate for the undercarriage, trimmed the elevator to neutral. The rudder trimmer –

Rudder trimmer?

Now that was new. Per the notes, he turned its large knob fully right for TAKE-OFF.

There was plenty of petrol in all three tanks, enough for 400 miles. Bryan

was only going to Scotland and back.

The temperature was creeping dangerously close to boiling over. He cleared the engine, released the brake, opened the throttle steadily to full.

The Hurricane rolled across the field and lifted by itself. Bryan had an impulse to make it climb, but waited until his speed was the advised 140 miles per hour.

It wasn't getting there quickly enough.

The undercart.

He moved the lever to the UP position.

Through the windows in the bottom of the cockpit he could see the wheels rise into their wells at his feet.

The indicators on the instrument panel lit up red. He pushed the lever forward to neutral again.

He hadn't climbed high before he leveled off. It was a low sky and an unfamiliar aeroplane. He wanted to see where he was going.

Below him a haze of red and green buds was beginning to show on the bare gray trees.

He reduced his boost to zero, mixture to weak, revs to 1900, and trimmed for level flight.

Finally he found a moment to unlock the catch on the canopy and slide it forward, reducing the drag and closing him in.

The braced Plexiglas hood made him think of a greenhouse.

The Hurricane had one foot in the new technology and one in the old. Its powerful engine and eight guns were up to the minute. The Hurri was rugged, sure-footed, and fast. But it still had fabric-covered wings, and aft of the cockpit it had a fabric skin over an old-fashioned airframe. It was the most modern fighter in the RAF.

Bryan had yet to see an actual Spitfire since the prototype flew almost two years ago. He had his heart set on flying one—especially after seeing the German Messerschmitt fly—and he wondered what had become of them.

The grey stone manor house stood on a rise above a wide glistening green. The wet grass bowed before the Hurricane's thrashing prop as Bryan set it down and rolled a long way to a stop. He gave a burst of power to clear the engine, then closed the throttle and pulled the slow running cut-out.

He turned everything off, released his Sutton Harness, and climbed out. Collected some rocks to serve as chocks in front of the wheels.

Surprised him that Jane hadn't come running. Or her younger brother. Or a watchman with a shotgun. Or her father with a hunting rifle.

The North House looked deserted. Bryan felt his heart fall out of his chest. No, there it was, throbbing in his throat.

He was too late.

Bryan ran across the field to the great stone house.

Jane's mother greeted him at the door.

Lady Fairchild was agelessly trim. She wore a wool country suit of Oxford gray. Her stockings were silk. Her nails were lacquered pink, her blond hair carefully sculptured. Her composure was unwavering.

"Where's Jane!" Bryan said. Then quickly pushed back his hair and straightened his tunic. Started over. "Hullo, ma'am. Where's Jane?"

"I'm afraid you have missed her." Lady Fairchild's voice always sounded warm. When she spoke, Bryan couldn't believe she disapproved of him so very much. "I have set tea. Come in."

Bryan followed her inside. He could still change her mind about him and Jane. She did seem to like him.

She gazed at him with a trace of a smile. She told him she was charmed by the modern aeroplane landing on the green and the brash young officer come to answer a lady's call of distress.

"Very knightly," she said.

Tea turned out to be a private affair. There were no servants, no one in the house other than the two of them. And Lord Fairchild was not expected back for a while yet.

Bryan wasn't experienced enough to get himself out the situation gracefully, and not jaded enough to want to stay.

Lady Fairchild sat next to Bryan on the divan. She loosened his tie. Her perfume and the light brush of her cheek against his own unsettled him. Her hand was inside his tunic before he let himself believe what was happening.

He jerked away more forcefully than necessary and leapt to his feet. Then, realizing that he was not being murdered and that he'd really overdone it, he turned scarlet.

She, more irritated than angry, asked from the divan, "How old are you?"

Bryan saw nothing left to salvage. Everything was already bloody. He was aroused and it showed. The brush of a woman's cheek did him in every time. Having already blown it, he opted to complete the rout and said only, "Sorry." And ran for the door.

"Mister Catrell." Lady Fairchild's voice stopped him cold. He could never walk out on a woman while she was talking to him. "This is too theatrical. I liked your entrance, but this is childish and not charming anymore."

Bryan put on a manner that was supposed to be dignified. Knew it wasn't, but it was the best he could muster. "Really, ma'am, I only came to see Jane. I know you won't tell me where she's gone, but you must know she'll write to me and tell me herself."

"You ridiculous middle class boy."

Bryan's cheeks burned. He felt the heat against his eyes. *Fine for discreet adultery, but don't let your daughter marry me.*

"You are a military man," Lady Fairchild said. "Do figure the logistics of moving a seventeen year old girl with fifteen pieces of luggage, and then ask yourself why, if she wanted so very badly to see you, could she not stall long

enough to be here when you arrived. I thought you might have something for your pains, but it is a lot more than you deserve."

Bryan backed out, mumbling.

Once outside, he did run.

A small group of gardeners and Lord Fairchild's beagle trainer had come from the outbuildings. They'd gathered around the Hurricane and conferred, shaking their heads.

"Doesn't rightly look like an aeroplane."

"Where's the top wing?"

Bryan enlisted two of them to hold down the tail. "You'd best secure your hats," he warned. "You're in for a bit of a gale."

He told the rest to stand clear of the prop.

He pushed a shell into the cartridge starter, primed six strokes on the Ki-gas pump. He'd never done this. Not with a cartridge starter. It must catch. He pulled the trigger.

The cylinder fired. The rest of the cylinders followed suit. Built up to a roar. The men on the tail huddled against the blast of wind as he did the run up.

All satisfactory, Bryan waved them off. They slid off the tail, cackling at one another. Huge smiles all around.

Mindful of the prop they removed the stones that Bryan had piled against the tyres. Then they all stood back, looking mightily pleased with themselves that the RAF glamour boy needed them to get his modern aeroplane off the ground.

At least someone got something for his pains, Bryan thought.

He could see Lady Fairchild watching from the manor house as he took to the air.

Dusk settled quickly, but at least the clouds were breaking up. They left jagged clear spaces, so Bryan could fly higher on the return trip.

He tried to calm himself as he flew. This was a setback. Not a disaster. Nothing Lady Fairchild said was true. Jane would write to him. They would set everything to rights.

The glare from the Hurricane's exhausts against the closing darkness left him blinking and dazzled. He glanced all around, up, down and back, to keep from staring at the lights.

So it was that he saw the other aircraft approaching. More than one.

He changed his heading and altitude to get out of their way.

The aeroplanes changed with him.

Closer, Bryan recognized them as Hurricanes, three in a vic. Two dropped down behind him and one came alongside, off Bryan's starboard wingtip. The canopy slid back on that one. The oxygen mask came off, and the pilot signaled, not at all friendly, for Bryan to put down. *Now*.

Bryan had taken off without a flying helmet, so he couldn't plug into the R/T. He wasn't accustomed to having a wireless on board. He shrugged in return and pointed forward to where his aerodrome lay farther to the south.

Red flame and white tracer leapt from his escort's wings.

Jesus Christ!

The pilot pointed downward.

Bryan nodded. He thought his eyes must be as round as sovereigns.

The fighter escort brought Bryan Catrell down at a sector airfield, where he was thrown without ceremony, or even words, into detention.

He guessed there might be more to this than the unauthorized borrowing of a station commander's personal aircraft. It was in interrogation that he discovered he had run afoul of England's new early warning system.

The Air Ministry was counting on its Chain Home Radio Direction Finding stations to defend the realm. It was good to know that the system worked.

Ish.

Bryan was brought before a row of frowning officers in a small room. "From where were you coming?"

"Just over the border."

"Germany," one said.

Bryan laughed. "Scotland!"

"Why did a flight from Scotland take you over the Channel?"

Made him blink. "It didn't."

"You came in over the water."

"No."

"What do you mean, no?"

"I mean no, sir."

"You came in on a direct line from Hamburg."

"The hell I did."

"You will mind your tongue. Your fuel tanks were appropriately low."

"My tanks were low because I didn't top the tanks in Aberdeen. Anyway there wasn't time for me to do what you claim I did."

"What time did you leave the coast?"

"I never left the coast. I took off from Digby at nineteen-fifteen."

There was a shuffling of papers, conferring murmurs, a shaking of heads.

"No. No aircraft on record."

"But I put my tick on the seven hundred!"

"On the *RDF* record, Pilot Officer."

Radio Direction Finding.

"How is it that the *RDF* saw me come in and not go out?" Bryan asked.

An exchange of glances, a shift in mood. The inquisitors were alarmed. They threw the question back at him. "How *is* that possible, Pilot Officer? The *RDF* *was* operational at nineteen-fifteen."

"I don't know," Bryan said, angry, because he sensed they *did* know. "Ask

your radio what time I left."

"You will answer the questions, Pilot Officer."

"Very well. Your radio machine doesn't work, that's how you saw me over the Channel.

"So you were over the Channel."

"No, that's not what I said!"

One of the officers noted quietly for the others, "Errors up to twelve degrees are common with our Chain Home stations."

"Twelve degrees!" Bryan cried. "Try one-eighty!"

"You find a one hundred and eighty degree factor of error implausible." The intelligence officer's voice had gone silky. "As do I."

"You have a problem with your radio direction finding," Bryan told him.

"And to whom were you planning to give that spot of information?"

All the blood abandoned Bryan's head. "Not Germany! That's what you mean. No one. I wasn't testing the bloody Radio Direction Finding system. I forgot about it. I didn't think it watched landward anyway."

"You can't get to Germany over land."

"But you can get to bloody Aberdeen!"

"Or to Billingsgate Market. Does this unbecoming behavior stem from our getting too close to the truth?"

"Stems from seeing my career about to prang on an idiot charge!"

"Oh, it's not just your career. If you have given this information to the Hun, I will personally hang you."

An excessive number of soldiers marched Bryan to the guardhouse at rifle point. The whole situation would be laughable, except Bryan couldn't laugh at a gun. These people were frightened.

They'll be arresting seagulls next.

Military developments in Germany had grown so disturbing that the Air Ministry had seen the need to develop an early warning system.

The first experiments explored plans for detecting incoming enemy bombers by sound. But filtering out random ambient noises proved untenable, and, as sound only traveled twice as fast as fast the aeroplanes, the warning wasn't terribly early.

So the Air Ministry placed England's future in radio waves.

Bryan had seen the masts along the coast. The taller ones transmitted radio waves. The shorter ones received the waves as they bounced off any aircraft in their path. An intersecting plot from two receiving stations gave the plotters an aeroplane's distance and direction.

It never occurred to Bryan—or to this lot either—that the masts might not be able to tell their front sides from their ass ends.

They had him at sea! He hadn't been at sea.

But apparently the boffins were.

He paced his cell.

Surprised him to have a mate in detention. An erk in greasy coveralls.

Apparently in for drunkenness because Bryan smelled alcohol as soon as the door shut him in.

The aircraftman appeared as a lump in a cot, whose first sign of life was a belch.

Bryan paced.

The presence of the drunken sod was encouraging. Bryan would be in a solitary cell if he were under serious suspicion of espionage. He told himself that several times.

His cellmate was older. He couldn't have been in here all that long because his shave was still good. His skin was ruddy, weathered, his hair wiry, greying copper-gold.

The eyes opened, one sharp green-gray eye and one ruined eye that didn't look like it worked anymore. The voice ground like river stones, "'ullo, sir. What're *you* 'ere for?"

Bryan sat on the edge of the other cot, elbows on his knees, head in his hands. "I am the biggest prat in Lincolnshire County."

The brambling eyebrows lifted and the good eye widened. "Really? They can nab yer for that?"

"I am to be hanged for visiting a girl in Scotland," Bryan turned his face away. He didn't want to talk.

Time crawled. Night fell. Outside the cell, the guard changed.

Bryan couldn't remember ever being this close to tears without being drunk or someone having died. He sniffled. The erk wasn't drunk enough not to notice, damn him anyway. "There, there, owd bogger. You really think they'd 'ang yer?"

Bryan waved his hand as if he could erase the thought. Dying was not the point. "They think I'm a spy. I can't—" He tried to steady himself. It was the hour, the loss of Jane, the suspicion that he'd been played for a clot. And the looming fate worse than death. A charge of treason.

Physical danger never held any horror for him. He'd declared once that he was afraid of nothing. His grandmother had answered serenely, "One really ought to be afraid of something."

He knew terror now. They thought he was a spy. His honour was in the hands of idiots.

"Poor bleeder," said the erk.

And worse. It just got worse. Bryan was afraid for England. For home.

"Those clots won't admit their RDF doesn't work. Christ, they'll have German bombers plotted coming out of Wales! If they see them at all! They'll be too busy intercepting our own interceptors!"

The radio masts had originally transmitted on 6 megahertz, but accidental or deliberate interference made the scientists switch to 11.5 megahertz until the spring of '36 when the signals were jammed again. Now they operated on 22 megahertz and Bryan wondered if the Germans weren't fouling the

signals again.

Or maybe the bloody system doesn't work, never did, and never will.

The air exercises Bryan had participated in involving the RDF had been half planned affairs.

In the exercises, nobody had been assigned to play the role of friendly aircraft.

Even then Bryan had wondered how they intended to tell the good guys from the bad. Here was the answer: *They can't.*

"Those ogo pogos would fly up their own arses and open fire!" Bryan cried. "Would? *Would?* They have! All I have ever wanted to do is fly and serve my country. It's what I want most in the world. Now it looks like I'll never fly again."

"Then go over to the bleddy 'un, why don't yer?" the erk suggested. "'err 'itler would let you fly for 'im."

Bryan lunged at the erk. "You bloody, bloody bastard!" Hauled him up and smashed a fist into his face. The sharp ridge of cheekbone split the skin on Bryan's knuckles. Too angry to mind the pain, Bryan coiled back to hit him again.

The man seemed to grow. He threw Bryan back onto his cot, not before Bryan landed another punch square on the erk's nose. Bryan scrambled to his feet. The erk pushed him down again with a powerful thrust of his foot.

In the back of Bryan's incensed mind there nagged an inkling that that things here were not as they seemed.

Guards burst in. They took the erk out, blood dripping from his nose. The door clanged shut. The key wrenched around in the lock.

Bryan was alone for the rest of the night.

He didn't sleep.

Bryan was summoned in the early morning. He waited under guard on a bench in the corridor outside the interrogation room.

Jumped to his feet as officers filed past. There were some big guns here this time.

Among them was a wiry-haired, sun-reddened Group Captain with a bruise-purpled cheek and a taped-over nose. He was wearing more fruit salad on his chest than Bryan had ever seen.

And a black eye-patch. The other eye was green-brown.

O Jesus, I bashed a Group Captain.

The Group Captain paused in the corridor when he came to Bryan. Bryan held his breath, saluting.

"Pilot Officer Catrell." The Group Captain's crumbly voice was articulate, if a bit congested. "You have given credible testimony against the treason charge and *for* the breach of discipline charge."

Bryan blinked. "Am I to be cashiered over that?"

"Well, you are not going to hang. We are returning you to your own base. You'll be up before your CO first thing."

Immediately the Group Captain was gone, Bryan sank back to the bench, lifted his hands to his head, and ran his fingers through his sweaty hair. "O God."

Tension released and he was suddenly sleepy. He hadn't slept in thirty-six hours. The strain that had been holding him up let go, and he sagged.

"Sir!"

Group Captain Greyson slowed.

Bryan was free. He ran to catch up the Group Captain in the corridor.

"I'm sorry about your nose, sir."

"I'm not pressing the bloody nose."

"You got me out of this, didn't you."

"Nothing of the sort. You know, Catrell, you might learn that what other people take seriously is to be regarded with a certain gravity. You are not the sole judge of what is and is not important. It was not your aircraft, not your air force, not your blasted world. There are a great many people here trying to organise, and then there's you lashing through like a runaway prop."

"Yes, sir."

"And another thing. Have a care what you say about national security. You don't always know who you're talking to."

"Yes, that point was made, sir."

Greyson touched his swollen nose, sniffed very carefully.

Bryan winced.

"Damned silly cloak and dagger stuff," Greyson growled.

"You *did* get me out of this!"

"Of course I did, you clot."

"Thank you, sir. I'm glad you were there. Really, I don't think I could have been taken for a spy unless they wanted to find one very badly."

"You have been to Germany, Catrell."

"So have a lot of people."

"And you must admit you were a little vague as to the details of your Scottish mission."

"There was a lady involved."

"I gathered."

"I'm glad you remember what it was like."

Greyson's ruddy face darkened. "Remember! Now see here, Catrell, I'm not dead yet!"

"Yes, sir! No, sir!"

Greyson the Group Captain looked younger than he had as the shabby erk. He was maybe forty years old. The uniform made him look striking. The eye-patch made him look like a rogue. Regarding women, this one could probably draw maps of what Bryan still regarded as unknown territory.

In a milder growl, Greyson said, "And don't worry, we know the RDF wants work. What was your altitude on your outbound flight?"

"Rather low. The ceiling was this high and I was under it." Bryan indicated an inch of daylight between his thumb and forefinger. "About a thousand feet."

Greyson nodded, satisfied in a grim way. Said nothing.

"What happened?" Bryan asked. "Did they recalibrate me off the map?"

"No. The Chain Home stations are quite simply blind at that level."

"And we stake the defense of England on that thing?"

"It's a valid system. The Boffins will sort it out in time."

"In *time*?" The threat sounded suddenly definite. As if a palpable *something* were at the gates.

"You may not have heard, with your pressing business North of the Border, but Hitler has annexed Austria."

"But he can't. It's against the Treaty."

"Our fault, that. We let him re-arm. That was against the Treaty also. But there it is." Greyson lit a roll-up. Smoke slithered up before the eye patch. "That's not the end of it. Czechoslovakia is next, and everyone knows it."

"When do we go in?"

"And combat them with what, Catrell? Moral outrage?"

"What of the Spitfire? I know the Ministry placed an order for three hundred and ten of them nearly two years ago."

"Yes, well, there's a snag."

"What snag?"

"Your Spitfires have no wings."

"Why?"

"Three hundred and ten aeroplanes is a large order. Supermarine contracted out part of the job—the wing part of it, if you must know. The aircraft are built. The wings are not."

"Why did they contract out the wings?"

"To save time."

"Is this a joke?"

"I suppose it is. And a very bad one. A bit complicated, those wings. Do you smoke?"

"I think I shall start."

Bryan took a drag on the offered roll-up, coughed, passed it back. "What about the Hurricane?"

"Turning them out as fast as they can. Six a week now. One of its virtues. The Hurricane is easy to build."

That ought to be good news, but the Hurricane just wasn't fast enough.

The German Messerschmitt 109 held the current speed record. Bryan wanted to fly an aircraft that would slap down a 109.

"Please tell me Messerschmitts are hard to build."

"Easy. They're in full production. Easy to build. Easy to repair. And they're in action. We have a picture of them over Guernica. Of course Franco, Hitler,

and the rest of that lot deny that our picture was taken in Spain. But the Germans are in there, and so are their Messerschmitts. Spain is the bloody German air force college."

Bryan had seen the newsreels, pictures of horror from Spain, the dour voice intoning over images of devastation: *This was a city. These were houses like yours.*

"Is the Messerschmitt any good as a fighter?" Bryan could always hope the 109 had some fatal flaw he hadn't seen in prototype in Berlin. "What's it doing in Spain?"

Greyson exhaled a long stream of smoke, like an aeroplane going down. "It's outstanding and it's eating alive everything else in the air."

Bryan remembered Berlin. He and a brooding German cadet watched the Messerschmitt's second prototype fly.

Bryan had asked Paul Ritter what business Germany had building such an aeroplane. "What of the Treaty?"

Smoldering dark eyes hadn't wavered. "The Diktat? What of it?"

"You know you're not supposed to have engines in your aeroplanes."

"Do something about it."

Paul Ritter had him of course. The time for doing something was past. The Germans had been flouting the Treaty of Versailles for years. And no one had tried to stop them.

The prototype of the Messerschmitt 109 had flown with a Rolls Royce Kestrel engine.

"And what would you do, Herr Catrell, if a gang of foreign countries dictated that England must not put engines in airplanes?"

Bryan answered only to himself. *Put an engine in all the aeroplanes, of course.*

And wondered now if Paul Ritter were not one of those monsters making a hell of the Spanish skies.



PAUL RITTER HADN'T BEEN in Spain long. He slid into belonging immediately. There was no blustering to prove himself or to be broken in. He simply assumed a position as one of the aggressive, hard-living pack. Ritter was always old before he was new. He was nineteen.

He was quiet, but it was a dynamic kind of quiet. Like a dangerous pet. He didn't need to speak, but he was someone you wanted around.

"You're too quiet, Ritter," Fritz said. "Makes people think you're disapproving of them."

"Why would I care what they think?"

"They think there's more to you than they can see. Of course I know better."

Fritz von Soden was Ritter's only comrade from what Ritter called his past life. Anything before joining the Luftwaffe didn't exist anymore.

Fritz held Paul Ritter in bald envy of his money, his wardrobe, and his royal drop-dead attitude. Ritter never insisted. He just *was*.

Paul Ritter was the best-dressed man Fritz Soden ever knew. Ritter had smuggled his gold cigarette case to Spain, and he had more silk scarves than a French whore. The silk folded up into nothing and easily fit into the single cheap suitcase the legionnaires had been issued for their trip to Spain.

Fritz von Soden was the only pilot in the Condor Legion who belonged to the Nazi party. Under the Weimar constitution, members of the military were forbidden to join a political party. But the world had changed, and the new

ruling party apparently made exceptions for the new ruling party, because Leutnant Friedrich "Fritz" von Soden was a Nazi.

Everyone thought him an unlikely socialist, him being an aristocrat.

"Funny about that," Fritz would say, and he would look significantly to Ritter, who never indicated that he was even paying attention.

Fritz first saw Paul Ritter astride a chestnut horse, holding a young hawk on his gloved fist—this during the depth of a world depression while Fritz's mother stood in line for bread.

This mounted youth had reined in, looked down with dark eyes utterly opaque, and said, "I am called Ritter."

"I'm sure you are," Fritz said.

Ritter supplied Fritz with a horse and a gun and told him to come shooting with him. Fritz asked if Ritter was immune to poverty.

Ritter said no, the hard times had affected him too. His father had lost one of his factories.

"You don't stand in line for bread," Fritz said.

"Of course not. We send the manservant."

Ritter thought Germans were better than everyone else, but he was no socialist. He'd been born to a bourgeois manufacturer and the disowned daughter of a baron. His mother died of influenza before he knew her.

The land, the horses, belonged to Ritter's maternal grandfather, the baron. The baron found forgiveness for his prodigal daughter only after she was dead.

Her son Paul got anything he wanted.

Paul Ritter moved at all times as if he were being filmed by Leni Riefenstahl. Fritz asked once, "Do you do that on purpose?"

Fritz hadn't said what "that" was, and Ritter didn't need to ask. "Of course I do."

Ritter finished school with no aims, no plans. He went to a music conservatory in Salzburg at his stepmother's suggestion. But music wasn't in his soul. He played with hollow precision and exact dynamics.

The maestro told him he played like a machine and told him to go home.

Ritter then joined the cavalry, but realized soon enough that in the modern world, horseback was the last place he wanted to be in battle.

The Luftwaffe had been Fritz's idea. Best one ever.

On a snowy evening in March 1935, when Ritter was bound for home on leave, he suddenly couldn't bear the thought of stepping inside his father's house.

He'd never done more than exist in that house. His father was afraid of him, though Paul had always done his bidding.

Paul Ritter jumped off the train a station short of his stop and walked to Fritz's flat.

Knocked.

Fritz opened the door. He was in a black uniform.

"What the hell is that?" Ritter cried.

Ritter knew what that was.

"SS," Fritz said, with a sharp heel rap.

"Shit, Fritz! I hate police."

At least Fritz hadn't done something as completely stupid as join the brownshirts. Ritter pushed past him into the flat. "Let me in."

They talked all night, a candle burning down between them alongside a bottle of rather horrible Schnapps, and they got very drunk. Neither one of them was happy with his current lot.

The newly announced German military freedom and re-armament depressed Ritter. Things would be changing fast now. Paul Ritter, the cavalryman, felt antiquated overnight. "There are some beastly weapons coming off the line these days, Fritz. Shells thick as your *Schwanz*."

"That big?" Fritz said.

"Do you know what kind of target a man on a horse makes? Have you ever seen a horse dive for a trench? Have you ever seen a *Panzer*?"

Ritter took a swallow of the vile Schnapps, shuddered at its caustic burn going down.

"You're too pretty to send to the front, Ritter."

"You're right. I shall spend the war here in Berlin, dragging important caskets to the Invaliden Cemetery to lie in the company of the Red Baron. We look superb, our cavalry. Do you want to see my sword?"

"Not ever," Fritz said.

Fritz complained that he wasn't advancing in rank fast enough among that bunch of thugs in the SS, and that he was going to apply to Luft Hansa as a pilot.

"Don't do that," Ritter said. Pilot for Luft Hansa was a choice position, good paying. Thousands of young men wanted in.

"Why not? You think it would be like driving an air taxi?"

"There no *like* about it," Ritter said. "You'd be driving an air taxi."

"Well what the hell do *you* want to do?"

Ritter had no aim before that night, only knew he wanted to be more than he was now.

It was his name that gave them the idea.

Ritter. Knight. Fritz called him the Black Knight.

There had been an Expert in the Great War called the Black Knight for his black Fokker D.VII. "Let's become fighter *Experten*."

Ritter stared into his glass. "Sounds good."

"Red Baron and Black Knight," Fritz said.

The Schnapps stared back from the glass. Ritter set it aside. "I like it."

Before this month there had been no German Luftwaffe to aspire to. Not officially. Hitler had only just unveiled the Luftwaffe on the fourteenth of March.

The idea lost no luster once they were sober.

It didn't daunt Ritter for an instant that thousands of other young men had the same thought, and quite a few had got in early while the Luftwaffe was still a secret.

Ritter met the requirements. He was unmarried, German-blooded, not Jewish. He'd been born Catholic, but he hadn't been to church in years, so screw that.

Freshly shaved and sober, Paul and Fritz readied to present themselves to the recruiter. Fritz tapped the papers in Ritter's hand. "How'd you get your parents' signatures?"

Fritz knew Ritter hadn't gone home. He'd been here with Fritz.

"My mother is dead," Ritter said. "And I don't need Jutta's permission to do anything."

"And Herr Ritter?"

"I forged his name."

"You think he'd refuse you?"

"No. I just don't think I should have to ask him."

"Well then forge these." Fritz presented Ritter with the signature pages of his application.

"What do you want me to do? They already signed."

"Make them like that." Fritz pointed to his own signature. He had inserted a "von" into his name. He thought he ought to have one ever since he'd seen Paul Ritter with a falcon on his gloved fist. "Squeeze some vons in there."

Fritz had brought the pens his parents signed with.

"It's tight," Ritter said. In fact a von wouldn't fit, so Ritter put it in abbreviated. Fritz's father became Ludwig v. Soden. Ritter showed it to Fritz. "Less insistent, I think."

"Outstanding!" It had a nice off-hand touch. "Do Mutti's now."

Fritz had been planning this for a while. As a boy he'd belonged to a glider club. The secret Luftwaffe recruited from sports clubs and from Luft Hansa. Fritz had been too young to apply before now. He expected to be accepted at once for his glider experience. Paul Ritter was just coming along to watch him succeed.

Fritz didn't think that Ritter had the proper concept of just how select a group he was trying to join.

Ritter didn't know. And it wouldn't have mattered if he did. He wasn't applying. He was joining. He walked in like the position was already his.

Both of them had to get past a medical officer who had special trials waiting for the would-be pilots.

The eye exam was first. Screened out a lot of applicants right here.

The technician recited wearily for Ritter, "What's the lowest line you can read on this chart?"

"Printed in Graz 1935."

The technician blinked. Recovered. "You memorized the eye chart."

"Give me something else."

The technician hunched over the chart, wrote something tiny behind a shielding hand, then he backed up across the room. "Read this."

"Fuck me."

The technician sent Ritter on to the next examination station.

Here Ritter was belted into a chair and instructed to bend over and hug his knees.

The chair spun round and round very fast.

It stopped with a jolt. The seat harness released.

"Stand up!"

Up? There was no *up* that Ritter could figure. But a primitive nerve center in his spine responded and his back straightened. One foot then the other found the floor. The wall was swimming.

A voice from somewhere (*up?*) pronounced, "Excellent."

The voice commanded him to walk. Ritter made a cautious advance. The room tilted and he stepped out to catch it. His swirling mind realized his error. Thought, *this is it. I have failed.* He took a few more steps in despair.

The voice, wherever it was, said, "Fit." And passed him on to the next examination.

And at the end of the ordeal, Fritz and Paul were both accepted for pilot's training.

Ritter had never flown. Fritz thought they'd taken Ritter with the idea to make him a tail gunner in a bomber, because Ritter could shoot with either hand and his eyesight was exceptional. But it turned out that Ritter could also fly better than any of them.

The instructors said Ritter was the best natural flier they'd ever seen.

"Falling is natural. Taking a shit is natural —"

"Can one assume that Fritz von Soden is not a natural?"

Fritz had thought he would have an edge with his SS association. But most pilots weren't Nazis. Hardly any of them, in fact. Flyers were a stubborn lot. No one said so, but it seemed that the same thing that made a good fighter pilot made a bad Nazi and vice versa.

But Fritz was only a Nazi when it suited him.

With one hundred flying hours behind them, both Fritz and Paul won their wings. After the first two stages of training, they were sent to a specialized school for fighter pilots.

Fritz warned Paul that he might be too good to become a fighter.

"Bull shit," Ritter said.

Then discovered it was true. It was possible to be too good.

The very best pilots became instructors.

A fighter must manhandle the aircraft, make it do things it was never meant to do.

Ritter had the necessary brutality to avoid the instructor's rating by the narrowest of margins. He owed Fritz for that wave off.

After a year, his training was over and Paul Ritter was assigned as an

Oberfähnrich, officer cadet, to I./JG 134 at Werl.

Jagdgeschwader 134 was christened "Horst Wessel" for the brownshirt martyr. The cowlings of all its aircraft were painted brown. The aircraft of I. Gruppe were Arado 68F-1s, replacing the older HE 51s. The Arado was just another bi-plane with the same BMW engine, same speed, same guns. A little sweeter temper than the HE 51, but that was all. Not much of an improvement.

The Messerschmitt 109 was a revelation.

In 1936 Ritter had arranged to be in Berlin for the Olympics to see the new fighter's debut.

There he'd met an Englishman. His name was Bryan Catrell.

Bryan Catrell was exactly the way Paul pictured the RAF boys. Cocky and handsome in his blue uniform, his hair slicked back, a smile full of big crowded teeth. Catrell was slightly taller, slightly older than Ritter, and already a commissioned officer. Bryan Catrell was the picture of everything Ritter wanted to be, everything he had to be better than.

Ritter pictured himself in a Messerschmitt and this man in a Spitfire. He knew Bryan Catrell was bound for Spitfires. An inevitability surrounded that image.

I need to get a Messerschmitt.

A friend told him, "I know where you can get one."

Georg had gone through training with Ritter and Fritz. Georg was a Doberitz now in I./JG 137 "Richthofen" where the cowlings of the airplanes were painted red, and the airplanes were Messerschmitts. The barracks for JG 137 were in the former Olympic Village on the outskirts of Berlin. Georg told Ritter he thought he'd got the assignment because he was such a brilliant pilot. Actual fact was there were a lot of openings at Doberitz because half the unit resigned.

"Resigned?" Ritter said, not believing it. "Why would anyone resign?"

"No, no, Ritter. You need to say that with goosefeet around it. 'Resigned.' Once you 'resign' you're put on the reserve list and you disappear for three months to a year. When you resurface, they give you your commission back but you've got a higher rank, and a nice bank account, and a wonderful tan. And I know there are Messerschmitts out there because mechanics who know how to put Messerschmitts together keep draining out of *here*."

Ritter's Gruppe in Jagdgeschwader Horst Wessel were supposed to get Messerschmitts right after II. Gruppe, but their shipment had been detoured, and Ritter was stuck piloting his Arado bi-plane in Dobritz. All the new airplanes kept going elsewhere.

"Where?" Ritter demanded. "Where are they going!"

"It's a secret," Georg said.

"Where?" Ritter roared. Someone else had Ritter's Messerschmitt.

"Spain."

Paul Ritter no sooner received his officer's commission when he "resigned" it.

He reported to the Luftwaffe facility at Gatow outside Berlin where he was given civilian clothing. He was sworn to secrecy, told that he could receive mail but that he had to give his name and address as "Max Winkler, Berlin SW 68."

Ritter didn't give the address to anyone.

He and the other volunteers took the night bus to Hamburg, there to board a launch in the dark, which ferried them to a freighter anchored in a remote part of the harbor.

The freighter was an old vessel, smelling of fresh paint. The name on its hull was newly stenciled. One of its smoke stacks never smoked.

In the ship's hold were immense crates labeled, "furniture," but Ritter could see the bomb fins sticking out of the packing straw.

The ship weighed anchor at night, and steamed from the harbor, bound for where the volunteers wouldn't be told outright until they were at sea, but they already knew.

Once they were rolling on the open water, a leering doctor with a harpoon administered inoculations, and an Oberst confirmed where they were going.

The legionnaires were quartered below deck, the hatches kept shut, locking in smells of fuel, sea water, and sweat from all the other men who had ever been stowed down here on the churning sea.

A cheerful bomber pilot with a deck of cards kept things bearable for Ritter. The ground crews weren't all volunteers and not all of them were well.

No one was allowed topside whenever another ship was anywhere on the horizon.

On deck they faced the bitter winds of February on the North Sea, so cold the paraffin of the massive inoculation under the skin of Ritter's butt froze so hard he could knock on it.

It was a long week on that heaving voyage from icy Hamburg to sunny Seville. From Seville another train took them to the front.

There, Ritter saw them. Messerschmitt 109Bs. They wore camouflage colors of dull grey-green and dull dusty brown. There were no swastikas on the airplanes in Spain.

Germany was one of the twenty-seven signatories to the Nonintervention Act, so officially the German airplanes weren't even here.

Radio Nacional declared, "There is no German Air Force in Spain. There is a Spanish Air Force, fighting Red planes and criminal Russian and French planes piloted by Red mercenaries."

Still, only an idiot could be unaware that the Luftwaffe was in Spain. Everybody was in Spain.

The recognition markings weren't German. They were Spanish Nationalist markings: black meatballs on the sides and wings, and a black X on a

white ground on the rudders.

Ritter would know that airplane in any guise. Those were Messerschmitts. *Those are ours. Here they are.*

But his transport drove past all the ME 109s and brought him here.

He climbed down from the truck at his Staffel's airfield and saw tired, battered bi-planes. He was back in Heinkel 51s.

He exchanged glances with Fritz, who sighed, "Well, at least we'll be fighting."

Not exactly.

Germany wasn't the only country trying out its aircraft in someone else's war. Russia sent I-15 and I-16 fighters to their Red allies in Spain. Chatos and Ratas.

The German Heinkel 51s couldn't compete with the Russian fighters. It was for the Messerschmitts to reclaim the sky for the Nationalist side.

The out-classed HE 51 in Ritter's Staffel were fitted with bomb racks for them to provide close ground support.

Ritter hated the bombs he carried, fiendish, jerry-rigged incendiary things. He wasn't even dropping them on strategic targets such as harbors or factories or railways like the real bombers did.

He was dropping bombs on Red troops.

Visions of dogfights faded into gasoline-smelling blood and ash.

Ritter learned that while he had been limping his HE 51 to his home field, Hitler had annexed Austria.

"It's only right that German people should be united," Fritz said.

"If you can call what those people speak German."

"Ritter, you're such a snob."

"It's why you love me."

Fritz had been lighting himself a cigarette from Ritter's. He passed Ritter's burning fag back to him. "You can eat this, Ritter."

Fritz had come to Spain full of slogans and strutting. He fit the Aryan picture, blue-eyed, blond, clean-faced, tall. But he dropped the zealous party line a day after he got here. Nobody was impressed. Party member wasn't the thing to be here, and Fritz always did the popular thing.

When Paul and Fritz first arrived at their airfield, they presented themselves to the Staffelf kapitän, who was bowed over his desk, getting rid of his paperwork with broad strokes of his pen.

Fritz hoisted a Nazi salute and shouted, "*Sieg heil!*" He said some more words regarding the glory of the Fatherland, their beloved Führer and the exalted Aryan race.

The Staffelf kapitän, Oberleutnant Johann Löwenstamm, lifted his own perfectly Aryan face from his writing. He scratched his brow with the end of his pen and said, "Beat it off somewhere else, would you?"

Fritz blinked.

Löwenstamm shoved aside the mess of papers, glad for the interruption. He jumped up from behind the trestle table, grabbed a fleece-lined jacket and his goggles, clamped a cigar between his teeth and headed for the door. "Come on you two. Let's see what you look like."

Oberleutnant Johann Löwenstamm had been, from that first meeting, Ritter's bright light in Spain.

Ritter was never given to hero worship. After he'd seen a man do all the things that mortal men do—eat, sleep, drink too much, piss, use the same prostitute he did—it was difficult to keep him deified.

But Löwe still dwelled on Mount Olympus. Löwe was always energetic, a natural leader. He was the one who made this miserable Staffel useful, even valuable.

But Löwe's tour of duty was done now.

Ritter never felt a part of any group until he got to Spain. It had been a fluke of nature, the belonging, and it only made sense for it to break up now.

The Staffel flags were out in welcome for Löwe's replacement, the new Staffelkapitän.

Ritter was ready to hate him.

He peered out from under the eaves of the villa where they were billeted. The sky had clouded over again. He wandered across the portico, patted the dog, lit a cigarette. He half-sat on the rail.

Weather reconnaissance said there were clouds all over Spain today. There hadn't been much to do since morning exercise.

The Nationalist forces on the ground had broken through to the Mediterranean on the 14th, leaving the enemy Red forces divided.

The bombers had gone on an unescorted mission to hit the Red harbor at Cartagena. Cartagena was too far away for the short-winged fighters to provide escort.

The old adage, "The bomber always gets through," was undergoing some rethinking after that mess of a sortie.

Fritz dragged himself up on the rail next to Ritter.

"Our new Staffelkapitän arrived in León."

"Good for him," Ritter said. Squinted up where the sun should have been.

"Ran into some weather. He got airsick and threw up on the plane."

Ritter tossed a spent match away. "*Lieber Gott.*"

Flights from Friedrichshafen over hostile territory took ten hours. That meant the new man had come in a JU 52 transport with extra fuel tanks. The JU 52, "Auntie Ju," was a flying corrugated warehouse. But she was dependable. Unless someone shot at her a bunch of times in the right places, she would get you home.

A Luftwaffe commander who got airsick?

Ritter looked to Fritz, suspicious. "Joke, right?"

Fritz shook his head.

"Shit," Ritter said.

Fritz spat. "He should have been on our ship."

Ritter gave a flat look of disgust. Some of the cooks, clerks and communications personnel had turned extraordinarily green on board that freighter. And you could feel sorry for them, knowing you weren't one of them.

It was another thing for it to happen to a fighter pilot.

Smoke puffs appeared beyond the first rise. Ritter heard a train whistle.

Fritz nodded. "You named the wolf. Here we are."

When the train came into view Ritter was surprised to see it was the Wohnzug, the command staff's mobile headquarters out of Saragossa.

Everyone wondered why the Red bombers never hit the Wohnzug. It was hard enough to hide a twelve-car train, let alone this one. The Wohnzug's leaking steam connections made it smoke all the time like an Indian war party in an American western film. In winter you could see it for miles.

The Wohnzug was twelve cars with an engine on either end. The sleeping cars had private compartments for the officers. NCOs were billeted two to a compartment. There were mess halls, a canteen, a kitchen car, a headquarters car, and two cars for spare parts.

Seeing the Wohnzug now on the move, Ritter knew something was happening, a lot bigger than delivering the new Staffelfkapitän.

The front had advanced again. The Staffel would all be moving to forward bases very soon. "Hope he brought the mail," Helmut said.

It began to rain in earnest.

"There goes the sun."

The Wohnzug slowed. It squealed to a long stop on wet rails. It huffed a cloud of steam into the already laden air with a hiss like a sigh.

None of the pilots of the third Staffel made a move to go out to meet it. They waited at the villa.

Löwenstamm had gone to collect the new man.

At last Löwenstamm appeared, walking across the rainy field from the coach house with a slender man not much older than any of the rest of them, built more like a swimmer than a wrestler. He wore a forage cap, the fore-and-aft kind that everyone called cunt cap. He had the wide-eyed, eager expression of a new recruit. Not what one would prefer to see in the man in charge. He looked around like a tourist.

"He got airsick?" Max asked.

Fritz snorted a laugh. Nodded.

"They say Admiral Nelson got seasick," Ritter said.

"Who is Admiral Nelson?"

"Was. Hero of Trafalgar, asshole." Ritter pushed off the rail. "Let's have a look."

Fritz fell in step, and with a sideways cock of his head told the others come too.



THE NEW MAN WORE the same uniform as everyone else in the German Condor Legion, the color of Spanish dust. Nearer, the pilots could see the new man's rank. Oberleutnant, same as Löwe.

Löwe presented the pilots of the third Staffel to their new commanding officer. The Oberleutnant acknowledged their salutes.

His name was Erwin Halle.

A fresh bruise was purpling over one eye. Halle explained that he'd been sitting on a crate on board the JU 52. He hadn't been strapped in. The plane hit an air pocket and he bounced off the overhead.

O Jesus. He's an idiot.

"You may have been sent here under false pretenses," Löwe said. "They probably told you you'd be heading a fighter squadron. Your train passed the airfield. Those were the fighters."

Paul Ritter watched the new man's face for disappointment.

Erwin Halle didn't flinch. "Yes, I knew that."

Löwe nodded once to say good.

Halle lifted his eyes toward the sky as it was raining on them. "No one warned me about the weather." He hunched under his turned up collar. "Not what I expected. I should have stayed home."

A voice behind him, very softly, said, "There's the train."

Oberleutnant Erwin Halle heard it, turned. "I was joking." He met Ritter's opaque dark eyes, realized. "You weren't."

Ritter's gaze remained steady.

"I see." Halle turned back to Löwenstamm.

Ritter expected to hear about his insubordination. Halle only said to Löwe, "I didn't expect it to be this cold."

Ritter wasn't sure if he was talking about the weather.

Löwe ushered Halle and all the boys indoors. He poured cognac for Halle and himself. "It's a different kind of fighting than anything you've trained for," Löwe told him. "We've had to modify tactics."

"They told me you were innovative," Halle said.

"They give me *Scheiße*. I make it work. The Messerschmitts need to escort us over the line. It's embarrassing to our boys. We can devastate an enemy defensive position, but caught alone in the air, we're easy meat. Ritter brought his kite back a few days ago with his elevator cable shot away, his struts loose, and a broken prop. He managed to land it. In a manner of speaking."

Halle's brows lifted. "Did he live?"

"He's right there." Löwe nodded toward Ritter.

Halle said nothing.

"We routed the International Brigade last month. My boys' carpet bombing was credited with the victory. Still there isn't one of them who wouldn't sell his mother for a Messerschmitt."

Max broke in with what he thought was a Spanish accent, "I already did Señor. I got one hundred pesetas for her."

"And another thing. Most of them don't think much of our Spanish allies. Try to keep that kind of talk in line." Löwe shot a glower Max's way.

Officially the Germans talked of their brave friends, the Spanish Nationalists. In private the Luftwaffe contingent of the Condor Legion was not fond of their hosts. And as for their Italian allies, the Germans were fond of quoting Franco: "Who asked for them?"

Halle glanced around. Must have noticed no one was wearing a helmet. "It's so quiet here. How far are we from the front?"

"Too far. Don't get comfortable. We'll be moving up shortly."

Halle looked relieved. "I was afraid I'd missed the war."

"No. We saved some for you. The Red forces are divided right now. We'll launch a new offensive *when* someone decides which half we're meant to pursue."

"North toward France," Halle said, no question. "That's where most of the Reds' supplies and foreign troops are coming in."

Löwe nodded. The newcomer had done his homework. "I wish. The Red northern command is in disarray. We could mop them up in days. Trouble is Franco wants Madrid. That's south. He's the Führer here, and nobody can talk him out of it."

The door opened. A mechanic stepped in, saw he was interrupting, started to retreat, but Löwe waved him in. "What is it?"

The Wart saluted quickly, and said to Halle, "Herr Oberleutnant, do you want a mouse on your crate?"

Halle looked to Löwe. "Mouse?"

Löwe cleared his throat. "The men have developed some . . . heraldry for their airplanes."

Halle would know about this. At home, the Messerschmitts of JG 2 "Richthofen," had been graced with a unit badge, a red script letter "R" emblazoned on a white heraldic shield.

In Spain, the Staffeln of Jasta 88 devised their own badges.

The first Staffel had a Holzauge. Wood Eye. It was what the Americans called a dead eye. Holzauge was a cartoon figure, his huge eye peeled skyward.

The second Staffel had a Top Hat.

"Here in the third Staffel, we've got Mickey Mouse. Don't ask. He was on the crates when I got here."

The Wart waited, paintbrush in hand.

The pilots held their breath. Their badges were decidedly non-regulation. Mickey Mouse was not exactly in the same league as the lofty Richthofen escutcheon. And Hitler was no fan of the American cartoon.

A new commander with his hair scalped that short was not going to want a cartoon on his unit's aircraft.

Halle nodded to the Wart. "Give me a mouse."

There was an audible out-letting of breaths.

"Oh good," Fritz muttered in Ritter's ear. "He's not going to be a bastard about things."

Ritter met Fritz's eyes. *I am.*

"And the red lion?" Halle asked. "I saw that on the cowl of one of the Heinkels. What's that?"

"That's mine," Löwe said. "I don't know where that came from either. He just appeared on my crate one day, and he stayed."

Someone artistic had done the deed. Forward of Herr Mickey's unit badge on Löwe's aircraft, the rampant red lion badge was all Löwe's.

"Something else the men do here, they keep a tally of their kills on their rudder stems. I don't know whose idea it was. Someone started painting a white bar for each victory."

Halle seemed to look inward, maybe trying to picture the HE 51s he'd seen on his way here.

The rudder stems of his new Staffel were completely bare of white bars.

Nobody counted the infantrymen you strafed in the road. You tried to forget those.

That night, the fighter pilots drove into Saragossa to bid adios to the gay city before they moved to the new front.

Their favorite haunt was packed with troops from all the Nationalist allies—fliers, infantrymen, the fresh, the wounded, all ranks. They wore Spanish fliers' blue, German drab, and Italian black. There were corded and ribboned generals and workers in overalls. And there were women. There wasn't a chair in the place without a good dent in it or re-glued legs. The ceramic shards and broken glass wouldn't be swept up until morning. A thick blue cloud hung in the air. There might have been music, for all anyone could hear.

Ritter was sitting at a table with part of his *Staffel*, when a Spanish woman with onyx eyes and a cloud of soft dark hair strutted toward him. She slid onto Ritter's lap, fastened her arms around his neck, and recited German words with stilted precision, "Good evening, *mein Herr*, have you fifteen minutes?"

Ritter was so startled he choked on a laugh and put his hand to his face to keep from sputtering beer on her. He swallowed wrong, coughed. His companions hooted like a troop of baboons.

The Spanish fighter pilots, who had apparently put the woman up to it, were howling. The woman fled back to their company.

Ritter, when he could breathe again, nodded a "well done," and ordered a round of drinks sent to the Spaniards' table.

Erwin Halle, tentatively smiling through the whole episode, said at last, "I missed the joke."

"Ach!" Ritter smacked down his beer. "Well!"

Halle had asked earlier where the rest of the *Gruppe* had gone. "The Capitano wants to know where everybody is."

Ritter reached in his pocket, and gave 100 pesetas to Fritz. "On me, Fritz, introduce our new leader to Spain."

The rest of the table rose, sniggering. This was their last night within realistic driving distance of Saragossa. It was now or never. Halle went with them hesitantly, because no one would tell him where they were going.

"Coming, Ritter?"

"No. I'm going to pick a fight with the Cadenas." He motioned toward the table of Spanish pilots who had set him up.

"Well, make sure they send the pieces back to Sariñena by morning. We're moving out early."

Ritter gave a surly salute. "Go show the *Häschen* how things are done in Spain."

The brothel was run with Teutonic efficiency. The Spaniards thought it was the funniest and most German thing in the world. For the set price of 100 pesetas, a legionnaire received a bar of soap, towels, two prophylactics, and his time with one of the medically inspected prostitutes who had been recruited for the Germans' sole use. The house was divided between the officer's side and the enlisted men's side. There were pictures to thumb through in the lobby so you didn't lose it during the wait, which could get

long. There was always a line. So there was a set time limit: fifteen minutes.

Despite the wait and the restriction, most of the German legionnaires weren't willing to risk free-lance companionship. Ritter had been warned by the medical officer on the voyage here that if he caught a case of gonorrhea, the worst happened.

"Your balls fall off?" Ritter guessed.

"Worse. Your wings. Out of the Luftwaffe. Stay with the brothel. It's government issue. Courtesy of your C-in-C, Hermann Göring."

"God bless the Fat One," Fritz said.

Ritter made it back to villa by morning, as promised, with two black eyes and a split lip but his nose still miraculously straight and his pesetas returned to him. He discovered them on his nightstand while he was packing.

"Guess he wasn't up to it, hm, Fritz?"

The sortie had been an eye-opener for Erwin Halle. The man was an altar boy. He'd kept his composure and said only, "I was warned this would be an unorthodox post."

In all fairness—and Ritter wasn't willing to be fair—he wouldn't have accepted the gift either.

He pocketed the pesetas and made ready to move out with his unit.

Halle tried to raise the command post on the phone. Finally he asked Löwe, "Is there a reason I can't get a line to CP?"

"It's probably been cut," Löwe said. "It's not far from here. We can drive."

Ritter heard that. Slipped out ahead of them, told the NCO who had brought the car around to get lost, and he held the door for the two commanders.

Halle hesitated, said that he'd intended to drive.

Ritter politely insisted, and Löwenstamm hauled Halle into the back with him, the better to talk to his replacement. "Let someone who's been here a while drive. The roads are bad. We lose as many crew on the road as we do in the air."

Ritter's stepmother always insisted she drive herself everywhere rather than be driven because she was subject to motion sickness and she said it didn't happen when you drove yourself.

So you want to drive, do you? Why is that, Herr Oberleutnant?

Ritter piloted a swerving bumpy sick-making ride. On Spanish roads it was easy. This was not the autobahn.

Halle held up bravely, though his conversation became quieter and quieter.

Ritter heard him, before he lapsed into silence, tell Löwe he was glad to be at the front. "Don't ever get that instructor designation on your rating. It never comes off."

They came up behind a truck on a steep hill, moving so slowly Ritter could have walked faster. The truck's gears ground. It belched smoke, stinking of diesel fuel. Ritter nosed up close behind it and stayed on its exhaust pipes until it crested the hill and he could see around it to squeak past it. He swerved around great pools of water. He had a legitimate reason. On a bombed road

there was no telling how deep the puddles were.

And swerves, his stepmother had told him, were more nauseating than jolts.

Suddenly he stomped on the brake. The car lurched forward, and Ritter nearly had both officers in the front seat with him. Löwe leaned forward drawing his Luger.

Ritter pointed ahead, "What do you think, Johann?"

Löwe followed where Ritter pointed, a hunter's gleam in his eyes. He spied the men ahead, doing something off the side of the road.

Then Löwe holstered the Luger. Almost sounded disappointed. "Ours." He tapped the back of the driver's seat. "Ahead slow. Don't startle them."

Ritter crept the Mercedes ahead until a sentry stopped them.

Löwe spoke to Halle as Ritter rolled down his window. "Our Paul has a real fighter's eye. And he's the best natural flier I've ever seen."

"Oh," Halle said. "Then he flies better than he drives."

The sentry came to the window and apologized for stopping the car. He explained the line had been sabotaged and that they'd lost one of their sappers to snipers. They hadn't flushed all the Reds from this territory yet.

As Löwe talked to the sentry, Ritter turned quietly to Halle, "You don't like my driving?"

Halle looked straight into his eyes. No anger in his voice. "You'll have to do worse than that."

Ritter faced forward, hands on the wheel.

O.K. He's not stupid.

He felt a twinge of conscience and couldn't keep the heat from rising into his face. Why? It wasn't that big a deal. Such a small stunt. He felt ashamed of himself and couldn't shake that feeling.

He should have done something much bigger.

Any move was a logistical nightmare. Erwin Halle wanted to handle it to show that he could. And Johann Löwenstamm was happy to let him, because he hated that stuff. And Halle proved himself a born administrator.

Still, when the *Häschen* gave an order, the men would glance to Löwe first, to make sure the order was all right before they obeyed it.

Until now Halle had been monumentally patient, or monumentally dull, to overlook the subtle and un-subtle insubordination.

Löwe told him, "You can't lead a fighting unit from behind a desk. The men want a leader from their own."

At this Halle showed his first flash of anger, a small one, "And do I look like I'm waiting for a bus?"

There had been no chance for Erwin Halle to prove himself in action. Since their move to La Cenia the weather along the coast had turned to crap. The HE 51s huddled in the rain beneath black tarps, rivulets of mud streaming

between the wheels. In the high winds it was all the ground crews could do to keep the kites tied down and standing upright with their wings on.

Rain pelted the villa where the pilots were billeted. Thunder rattled the shutters.

Early in May, the sky cleared. Something must have got airborne because Ritter heard the Flak guns drumming all night.

The pilots were wakened before dawn and summoned to the airfield.

At last.

They dressed in the steamy dark.

"Take your jackets," Löwe told them. "There's a mountain to get over."

The leather jackets were getting to be too much with their double wind flaps and fleece lining. The jackets were roomy enough with drop shoulders that didn't bind your arms, but they pinched at the wrists and at the waist to keep the wind from whistling in. Ritter liked his jacket very much in February in the Heinkel's open cockpit.

In the Mediterranean spring he didn't really want it.

The squadron bus lurched and splashed on the dark road to deliver the pilots to the airfield. Ritter's boots sank in saturated earth. He had to tug for every step.

A pitted, muddy track lead into the Ops shack.

Ritter dropped his heavy jacket, dragged a chair around backwards, and sat astride.

The map was new. Löwe hadn't stabbed any holes in it yet.

But it was Halle who gave the briefing.

Halle didn't stab at anything. He wrote on a chalkboard in a neat hand, and Ritter wondered if this wasn't a replacement Adjutant that got lost. Or maybe he was a refugee from supply. Yes, supply.

Ritter might even feel sorry for him in supply.

Unless he could deliver Messerschmitts, Ritter hoped Halle would wash out or quit and just leave this Staffel the way it was.

Löwe stood at the side of the room, arms crossed, smoke rising around his head, this time from a pipe. Löwe wasn't particular about what he smoked. He would set fire to anything.

Löwe would be leading them this morning. He only let Halle do the talking.

The new campaign was, as everyone guessed, southward. Halle gave them the assembly area, routes, altitudes, times. The HE 51s were to neutralize the ground fire while the heavy bombers flew to their target.

The bombers' target was on the far side of the mountain, near Albocacer where a Red artillery division was reported to be moving in.

Ritter was writing notes on his hand when his pen blotted a great black spurt on his thumb. "Oh Scheiße!"

Löwe's brows lifted. "Problem?"

Ritter held up his black thumb. "Target for the day."

"Looks like we got it," Löwe said.

"Looks like you stuck it where it doesn't belong," Fritz said.

"Fritz knows these things," Max said.

"I need a pen," Ritter said. "This one's turned communist."

One came flipping across the room. Ritter caught it. "Thank you," he said, and apologized. To Löwe.

Ritter sat in the cockpit. It was still dark. Lights of the flare path snapped in the pre-dawn wind.

Ritter craned around to find Halle.

He picked him out by shape. Wide shoulders. Narrow all the rest. Made him look taller than he was. Didn't look nervous. He crossed the rutted field as if he'd done this a hundred times. Of course he had. He was a flight instructor.

He needed to be shot at.

Halle headed to an airplane in the hindmost Kette for his first sortie in Spain.

And he kneeled down at the wing, and crossed himself.

That is probably necessary.

Ritter faced forward, ran through his checks.

The field was in rotten shape. He was glad the *Häschen* wasn't going to be in his way.

Ritter signaled his mechanic when he was ready.

Otto the bear gave his prop blade a mighty spin. "Free!"

Ritter pressed the starter. The engine's loud crack split the dawn quiet. Blue flames jetted from the exhausts. A hot blast rushed past his windscreen. Noise and low rumble spread across the field. On either side of him, Fritz and Max brought their own machines to life.

At the signal flare, Ritter released the brake.

The rolling HEs raised rooster tails behind their wheels before they munched into the air.

Buffeting wind under Ritter's planes made his kite dip and swing. He formed up with Fritz and Max, then looked across. Halle was up neatly.

The coastal area was greener than where they'd been operating before. Poplars quaked, shaking off raindrops. Pines lifted light green spires on the mountains amid darker black-green cypresses.

The mountain rose in their path. The winds had torn the clouds away. Some rags of them still hung on the summit. The HEs climbed through them. The vapor was stinging wet. It settled a clammy cold on all the metal surfaces.

Above the clouds, Ritter could peer over the edge of the planet and glimpse a corner of the sun while it was still new, a red fiery brilliance in a sea of pure blue air. It was beautiful. Up here it was easy to forget what you were about.

The Heinkels descended back through the clouds to the other side of the mountain. Ritter lifted his goggles and wiped off the condensation as it filmed the lenses.

Ground mist clung in the low parts of the valley. Gray shrouds of it swirled around moving vehicles.

There, on the road, crouched against the swollen brown river, an armored column advanced.

The dive-bombers went in first, a single Kette. Berlin had sent only three of them. These were so horrifying and so accurate they redefined the name. Now, when anyone said dive-bomber – *Stuka* – it could mean only these.

If any machine could scare a man to death, it was the JU 87. Its signature was the hellish howling it made as it plunged. There was talk of putting sirens on them to make them even louder.

And if looks could kill, the Stuka had the war. It was a shark-nosed beast. Its deep radiator bath gaped like a predator's maw. Insect-like antenna masts angled from the topside, and crank wings gave it a profile of evil. It was the only airplane whose fixed gear didn't look like something hanging out. The legs of the Stuka looked like outstretched talons grasping at prey.

Terror was as much the objective here as destruction was.

You never met a Stuka pilot twice in Spain. Their turnaround time was quick. Berlin was trying to blood as many Stuka pilots as possible and get them home.

From an unpromising beginning, the JU 87 had become a star of the German re-armament. Before the addition of dive brakes, the Stuka killed its first pilots – and buried them on the spot. Unable to pull up, the first Stukas dove, with their bombs, halfway to hell.

The Stuka was devastating now. And horrifying. It could dive as steep as eighty degrees and plant a 500 kilogram bomb within a very small radius.

That, thought Ritter, *is a bomber*. His Heinkel's load of six nasty little 10kg bombs tacked on his underwing racks felt like an afterthought. Because it was.

Ritter sighted the Stukas up there now. They hesitated over the target, seemed to stop, then one by one half, rolled and dropped into a stoop like peregrine falcons, nearly straight down, screaming like the trumpets at Jericho.

As they pulled out of the dive, their crutches swung out and hurled the bombs away.

And the walls came tumbling down!

Ritter looked to the lead HE 51. There was Löwe's signal.

It was the Heinkels' turn.

The Red defense was awake now. AA pocked the sky in dirty puffs. High. The Reds were aiming high.

The Heinkels descended, and narrowed their formation into close pairs for their low attack.

Wingtip to wingtip, Paul and Fritz skimmed the treetops.

Paul Ritter moved his guns' safety off with his thumb as he cleared the trees and found the road.

He dipped a wing to make a last second visual doublecheck of the backs of the soldiers before he opened fire. Nationalist troops wore a white bar on their backs. But all was well. No white bars. These were Red soldiers. Ritter depressed the trigger.

The aircraft shuddered around him. Cordite fumes dusted his windscreen. Fountains of mud plumed from the earth in his path. Men dove away to either side. Ritter didn't look too closely at what he hit.

He sighted a French-built half-track. Wanted that. Not these poor Landser. Screw them.

He was flying too low for safety, below 50 meters, but there was the target. He couldn't miss. He pulled the bomb levers.

Bombs away.

Suddenly buoyant with the weight loss, his crate bobbed *up!*

Not fast enough.

Climb! His sluggish engine failed to carry up the momentum.

Come on, damn you. Get up, get up, get up!

A sickening concussion came up from beneath him like a bubble bursting. His engine hesitated in the blast wave. Seemed to have no air in it. For an instant he couldn't inhale.

Frozen in the moment like an image in a lightning flash, he thought, *I've gone to hell.* Then the explosion filled his ears, hammered against his eardrums. His kite's stays twanged. A sound like thrown gravel was the peppering of bomb splinters against the HE's belly.

Clods of dirt on their way back down rained on him, and he knew he was still alive.

The HE 51 struggled upward. His lower wing was perforated.

Otto was not going to be happy with him.

Black smoke and incendiary bits floating on the air touched his fabric wings.

Oh no. *Not here. Not fire. Mein Gott, don't do this.*

Ritter rolled.

The cinders slid off without catching.

Behind him, the Spanish Nationalist links in this chain were hitting the enemy column.

Ritter climbed at a crawl. Rejoined Fritz who was suddenly rocking his wings and pointing.

Curtisses! Also known as I-15s or *Chatos*. Snub Noses. Whatever you wanted to call them, they were the Reds' bi-plane fighter.

Injuns! Circle the wagons, boys!

Ritter chased Fritz's tail as his Staffel rounded into a defensive circle.

Ritter saw a snub-nosed Red try to move in. It flew toward Ritter's sights.

Wait for it. Wait for it.

It closed on Fritz, lining up the shot.

Come on. Come on.

Ritter couldn't wait. Fired.

His tracers crossed the Curtiss's bow. Missed. But the Red Curtiss banked away.

Another Curtiss closed on Ritter's beam, four staccato red points in its round face blazing. Tracers leaped at Ritter, dropping short and behind. But closing.

Ritter set his teeth together. He would not break the circle if it killed him.

Tracers steamed at his wingtip.

All right, who is covering me? Take the shot. Take the shot.

Ritter waggled and bobbed, still in the circle. The Curtiss was close on him now, its tracers just about taking off his eyelashes.

Will someone please drill this bastard?



PAUL RITTER MADE A HARD jarring landing at La Cenia, rolling on blown tires the entire length of the field without brakes until his Heinkel mired itself to a muddy stop.

Otto met him at the root of his ravaged wings. "What did you do to my airplane!"

"It deserved it! It didn't climb worth a shit!"

Erwin Halle was making a cautious landing on the rutted field. Neatly done. His bombs were gone and his guns had been fired, so evidently he hadn't frozen under fire.

When he dismounted he looked kind of sick. He whipped off his helmet and goggles. Bright eyes in the white mask of his cordite-darkened face were wide. Black greasy film from the incendiaries darkened the fleece of his jacket flaps.

"Who's not here?" He was counting heads, counted ten.

"Where's Löwenstamm?"

Someone pointed at the horizon. "There!"

Johann Löwenstamm was coming in on the deck for a fly by.

He roared across the field *just* high enough to rock his wings. All the ground crew ran out to cheer the returning conqueror—everyone but Otto, who was close to crying over Ritter's battered airplane.

There hadn't been an air victory in this Staffel since any of them had been here.

Löwe pulled up, performed an inside loop and executed his landing at the bottom of the loop.

"Goddamn, look at that," someone breathed, shaking his head.

Löwe shut down, unstrapped, stood up on his seat, struck a heroic pose with one foot up on the windscreen and shouted, "Don't just stand there, take my picture!"

He jumped down. Men clustered round him. His Wart was already painting a white victory on his rudder stem.

Halle counted twelve airplanes. All the planes of the third Staffel were safe home. He looked confused.

"I thought—"

Löwe strode toward him. Löwe moved like a freight train. "Halle! You don't look good. Were you hit?"

"I saw a bi-plane go down. I thought it was yours."

"It was mine, all right! I drilled the son of a bitch!"

Halle didn't act relieved. He looked more ill than before.

"It was a parasol wing," Halle said thickly.

Friendly Heinkels and allied Fiats had parasol wings.

Enemy Curtisses had gullwings joined to the fuselage.

Halle had seen Löwe shoot down a parasol wing.

No one else was paying attention to Halle. They were cackling and hooting over Löwe's kill.

The pilots moved back to Operations in a herd. They crowded forward to hear Löwe's debriefing.

As Löwe told the Intelligence Officer what had happened, Halle picked up a recognition model of an enemy Curtiss. He said unhappily, "This isn't what I saw go down."

Löwe passed Halle another recognition model.

The IO looked up at them. "What kind of engine did it have?"

"It was blown off when I saw it," Halle said.

"Radial," Ritter said.

"What kind of wing?" the IO asked.

"I didn't notice the wing," Ritter said. "I noticed the guns."

"How many guns?"

"Four guns around the engine, firing through the prop. Two top, two sides."

"That's a Curtiss." The IO wrote something down. "You're a witness, Ritter?"

"*Jawohl*," Ritter said. It was going to be hard to keep the gushing out of his report.

Halle was staring at the two recognition models in his hands. "What am I looking at?"

One model was the standard gull-winged Curtiss 1-15. The other one

looked just like it except it had a parasol wing.

"An I-15bis," the IO said.

"A—?" Halle started. Didn't know how to finish.

"A later version of the same thing," the IO said.

Halle looked from one model to the other. No one had given the new man the most recent recognition model for I-15bis.

Halle set the models down.

Max picked them up and gave them back to Halle. "Why don't you keep those."

Halle either missed or ignored the sarcasm, because he did keep them.

The party that evening was loud. Löwe's voice boomed above the rest. It wasn't the drink. Löwe always bellowed.

Halle was quiet.

Pilots talked with their hands. Löwe, retelling his tale, decided he needed three hands. "Here! Ritter! Fly your own crate!" He pulled Ritter in.

Ritter put his hand into the picture, flying ahead of Löwe's left hand.

"There we were, in the circle of death, and here, out of the sun, comes Pedro the Red!" Löwe menaced from the side with his right hand.

"Are you sure it wasn't our amigo Juan?" someone said.

"No. Comrade Pedro was in a *Chato* here on Ritter's starboard."

Ritter waggled his hand. "Yeah, yeah, I'm here. Take the goddam shot!"

Löwe chuckled. Told the others, "I let Ritter get a little worried. The evil Pedro the Red was just *here*. I kicked rudder, angled off, and *bang* into his engine, perfect shot."

"Adios, Bolshevik swine," Max said.

"Amen," Ritter said. He glanced around.

Halle wasn't there.

The noise of the party in the villa bounced between the hills.

Sounds seemed louder in the night. The report of a gun cracked and rebounded.

Löwe was outside, throwing empty bottles up in the air and shooting them with a broom-handle Mauser.

He heaved another bottle up, but released it too late so that it arched backward over his head. Löwe spun with his Mauser, following it.

Found someone behind him. Löwe hesitated on the trigger.

The bottle thudded down in the soft dirt between them without breaking.

Halle was there, holding the same warm drink in his hand as he'd begun the party with. "Am I in the way?"

"No," Löwe said. He pointed the muzzle of his Mauser at the fallen bottle.

"I decided it was a Fiat." He retrieved the bottle.

He'd toasted himself into a merry state. He tossed the bottle up. Caught it by its neck. "Or is a *Chato*? What do you think?"

Halle stiffened to attention, very correct. He clicked heels, gave a slight inclination of his head. "I must apologize for questioning you, *mein Herr*. I was clearly out of place."

"No, no," Löwe tossed the bottle away. "You reported what you saw. Nothing more or less. You didn't accuse me of anything."

Halle hadn't said that Löwe shot down a friendly. He'd said the airplane had a parasol wing. And so it had.

Löwe lit a cigarette, waved the smoke away. "My fault. You seemed so well schooled I assumed you knew all the aircraft in Spain. I let you go up without quizzing you on friend or foe." He draped an arm around Halle's shoulders, leaned on him heavily. "You may complain to Berlin."

Halle stood like a pillar. "No, *mein Herr*. You're very generous."

"We know you've studied your lines. Now tell me what you really think."

"I'm feeling enormously relieved and a little ridiculous. I'll drink a toast to your victory."

"No. We've done that toast to a watery grave. This party was supposed to be yours. You made it through your first mission. Where's my drink? I had a drink." He found his glass where he'd left it balanced on a rock.

"To—" He clinked his glass against Halle's. "Your baptism by fire. You're one of us now."

The transfer of command was a hungover ceremony. Ritter didn't believe it was really going to happen until Löwe was on the train.

The red lion and the white victory mark came off of his aircraft.

The men were all Erwin Halle's men now.

The others thawed toward the new Staffelführer. Löwe was gone and there was nothing to be gained by pissing the new guy off.

Fritz von Soden had a new best friend.

"Politics," Fritz told Ritter. "Just politics. And temporary. He's so godawfully Catholic."

Ritter crossed himself.

"Yeah. That kind of bullshit." Fritz crossed himself.

"Wrong hand," Ritter said.

"What?"

"Other hand. *In nomine Patris, et Filii*—"

"What kind of Italian turkey gobbling is that?"

"Latin."

"Same thing. Worse. Just when we're throwing off foreign domination."

"He's *your* buddy, Fritz."

"For the moment."

"Maybe he's only going through the motions to keep our allies happy."

"I never thought of that. Yeah, that has to be it," Fritz said. "Funny you should be the one to think of that. You can be downright fair when you want

to.”

“It slips out. It won’t happen again.”

No one could complain of the quiet anymore. The whole month of May brought plagues of “Night Ghosts.” Red airplanes attacked the Nationalist rear positions in darkness. The German Flak unit had to be pulled back.

The enemy were getting bolder.

The villa where the pilots of the third Staffel were billeted hugged a mountainside and was safe enough with the lights doused. All through the night they heard Flak pounding from the airfield.

Then the rains returned.

The HE 51s hadn’t flown a sortie since Halle had assumed command. The bombers based back at Saragossa were the only German aircraft getting airborne.

The brothel was also back in Saragossa. Ritter thought it a damned long drive for fifteen minutes with a whore who called him Pablo. He spent much of the time drunk.

At month’s end the sky cleared. The sun came out with a fury.

The pilots flew wearing nothing but shorts, boots, goggles, and a parachute pack. There were some yelps as they settled into the cockpits in the blazing sun.

Their first sortie with Halle in sole command was to search for a Red two-centimeter battery, with orders to waste it.

They found it straight off. Halle jumped ahead and signaled with a wave of his wings. Then an anti-aircraft gun threw up a cloud of splintered *Flocke*. It missed Halle.

Max, directly behind Halle, plowed into the splintered metal. Ritter jammed his stick into the corner. Scarcely avoided hitting Max. “*Scheiße!*”

Instead of leading them on to the target, Halle pulled up.

Max’s kite spiraled wide, sinking, smoke trailing from its engine. Ritter raced after Max. Fritz kept watch from higher up.

Ritter drew alongside Max’s wing. Max waved weakly. There was blood. He was too low to bale out and that machine wouldn’t make the 1000 meter rise that barred the way home.

Max motioned that he was setting down.

He managed an ugly landing on a high narrow clearing. Broke his undercart doing it. He scrambled out of the cockpit and waved.

Ritter pulled up. Halle was signaling for a bomb drop in between Max and the enemy emplacement.

The Heinkels laid down an incendiary line. Ritter added his bombs to the line and followed the others back to base.

He waved off the Spanish worker who was hauling a bomb toward his airplane. “Get that away! Otto! Get this crate flight ready now!” He waved off

the armorer, "Don't put bombs on it, just do the guns!"

"Leutnant Ritter."

The armorer froze. Ritter swiveled his head to face the *Staffelkapitän*.

Ritter said coldly, "I await your order, Herr Oberleutnant."

Halle barked, "Von Soden! Ritter! Go get Max."

Otto already had a fuel hose in the side of Ritter's airplane. The armorer was reloading the guns.

Halle strode away yelling to the dispatcher to clear these two as soon as they were ready to fly.

Ritter belted on two pistols like an American gunslinger in the movies. He had always fancied himself a cowboy.

Paul and Fritz found Max's airplane by the column of smoke spouting from the hillside. It looked like Max had managed to set fire to his kite. The airplane was flaming as Ritter circled low.

He scoured the forest edges, straining over the side of the cockpit to see. At this rate he was going to fly into a tree. He signaled Fritz that he was setting down.

Ritter flew back to the crash site and landed, while Fritz circled.

Ritter stood up on his crate, cupped his hands and shouted over his engine's roar.

"Max! Maxie!"

He climbed down, shouted into the trees, "Max!"

The smoking line where Halle had signaled for the bomb drop still smoldered.

Max wasn't coming out from wherever he was hiding.

Ritter heard Fritz's engine change song. He looked up to see Fritz half roll and dive in, strafing the woods.

Scheiße! Ritter jumped down from his airplane, crouched next to its undercart, pistols drawn.

A face appeared amid the pines. Ritter cried, "Max!"

Something whistled past his ear.

Ritter dropped flat to the ground fired both pistols. The face dropped away. The woods appeared to be crawling. White flashes winked between the trees with what sounded like pops through the noise of his Heinkel's engine.

Ritter scrambled into his cockpit. He pivoted his aircraft a quarter turn to face the forest and unleashed his guns.

Shredding needles and splintering wood burst at the forest's edge.

Ritter strapped in, pointed his kite into the wind, opened the throttle, and released the brakes. The Heinkel sprang into a run, bounced. Picked up speed. Too short. The level grounded ended.

Ritter pushed the throttle to the gate and drove over the edge of the cliff.

The air picked up the broad planes before he could impale himself on the steeped pines below.

Max's mechanic hovered, expectant, at the airfield's edge, watching for

his pilot's return.

When Paul and Fritz set down, Fritz couldn't look at man. Ritter met his eyes and shook his head. The Wart sat in the dirt and cried.

Ritter stalked to Ops to report.

Passing indoors, he couldn't see anything for the clouds that gathered before his eyes in the relative dim after the sun's glare. Streams of sweat trickled down his scalp. His chest hair was a soaked mat. His shorts stuck to him and his flight boots felt like ovens.

He blinked, focused on Halle. The Staffelkapitän wore a shirt even in the heat. Ritter supposed that was so you could see his epaulets.

"Did you find Max?" Halle asked.

"He's gone."

Halle looked crushed.

Ritter's glance fell upon a message in Halle's hand, the paper dented where it was tightly held. It was from Berlin and addressed to the fighter group. Halle folded it, mumbled, "Nothing to do with us."

He made Ritter give his report minute by minute, looking for some oversight in which to insert hope. There was too little to reach for.

Halle covered his eyes, turned away.

His first mission as sole commander. He'd lost a man.

Ritter watched in silence. Wondered if Halle could feel hostility strafing up his back.

Halle faced Ritter. "What's on your mind?"

"It's insubordinate, Herr Oberleutnant. I had best not."

"You have leave to speak."

"I would much rather not."

"Then consider it an order."

"I was thinking I don't suppose you ever lost anyone back home at flight school. Unless you crashed students in which case you ought to be used to this."

Halle stared back, stunned. Even his eyes paled, the light behind them snuffed out. The brightness gone, they were now just gray. Ritter had been taking so many jabs at him, it was unnerving finally to get a mortal stroke in. It felt like he'd shot him.

He looked so very young, like a boy playing a war game only someone had actually *died*.

Halle quietly reminded him that he'd once said Ritter would have to do worse. "Do you remember that?"

"I do."

"Well, you've done it." Then with a slight tremor in his voice he said, "Any more?"

Already certain he would be wingless when this interview was done, Ritter decided to speak his mind.

"They could have sent us Messerschmitts. They could have sent us parts.

There are 100 different kinds of motor vehicles here. They all need parts and none of them are interchangeable. They could have sent us something that *fit* somewhere. Instead they sent us you. We *had* a Staffelkapitän. Best part of this unit. The only thing that worked brilliantly and they decide to replace him. With you."

There was a very long pause. Halle turned to gaze out the window. When he finally spoke it was with his back turned.

"Do the others share your view?"

"I wouldn't know. These days I talk about anything but you. Morale's low enough." Ritter would go down for insubordination, but for spreading dissension? No. Halle was not going to pin that on him.

This pause went on forever.

This is it. Out of the Luftwaffe on my ass.

"Is that it?"

"That's it."

"You may go."

Ritter rapped his heels together, saluted at Halle's back, and went out.

Through the window Halle could see Ritter stoop to haul up a mechanic from where he'd been sitting in the dirt. The Wart was utterly wretched, his forage cap pressed to his face. Ritter took the bereaved man's arm, pulled it across his own shoulders and guided him away from there, presumably to get him drunk.

Halle watched with the sense of being outside looking in.

Still in hand was the telegram, more wrinkled the tighter he held onto it. It was a message of congratulations from Hermann Göring to the brave men of J/88 on their victories.

The ME 109s of the second Staffel had had a terrific day.

Ritter balanced himself on the portico railing and read a newspaper. Two other officers were playing chess as a *Feldwebel* watched. An Alsatian bitch lolled at their feet, head on her paws. Beyond the portico there were no shadows anywhere.

The gramophone was playing.

The war front had moved away southward—not before the third Staffel lost another man.

Rumors were flying that the Legion was going to be reordered, possibly at reduced strength. No one was sure what that meant to the Heinkel Staffel of J/88.

La Cenia was now safe enough to serve as the landing strip for couriers and transports from Germany. The men had seen one pass over the beach this morning.

"Anyone heard the outcome of the heavyweight championship?" Dieter asked, head bent over the chessboard.

"Foregone conclusion," Helmut said.

All bets were on Schmeling.

"Yeah, but I need to know if the knockout was in the third round or the fifth."

"First," Ritter said. "Louis."

A pawn went flying past his head. "You are such a bullshitter."

They could hear someone coming up the walk.

Dieter told Ritter, "Whoever that is down there, will you tell him to get my pawn?"

Ritter looked from his week-old newspaper to the walk. "You tell him."

It was Erwin Halle.

The Oberleutnant stopped on the steps with one foot up on the portico. He never wore sunglasses so he was getting quite a squint tanned onto his face. When he relaxed indoors a spray of white lines lead from the corners of his eyes. A quick motion of his head told them not to stand up. He was looking for the Technical Officer. "Where's Karl?"

"Went to the medic."

"What's wrong? Is it serious?"

"He's sunburned."

Smirks over the chessboard implied a story to it.

"I'm not going to ask. Is he there now?"

Dieter stood up. "I'm going over there, Erwin. What do you need?"

"Tell him some new furniture has been off-loaded at León. I want him to take our mechanics to León to put the wings on."

Chairs skidded back. Chess pieces toppled. The shepherd barked.

Helmut ran inside yelling, "*We have Messerschmitts!*"

The dusty field cradled by mountains was nearly lost in the haze. Heat rippled off the scorched land. Ritter walked out to the airfield with a sense of unreality.

He wore his shirt tied around his waist by its sleeves. His skin was dark as a Spaniard's now, and the sun had seared a reddish streak in his dark hair.

Someone ordered him in Spanish to stop. He kept walking.

The Messerschmitts stood in a haughty row, their proud noses stuck up in the air. These were the first four. There would be twelve.

This was what thunder looked like sleeping.

Their underpinnings had the spindly look of birds' legs, a make-do sort of arrangement for a creature that didn't really belong down here on earth.

The fighters still wore their factory coats of silver gray. Ritter approached one. It was smaller than his bi-plane, sleek and compact as a bullet.

He ran his hand along its shadowed side as if it were a racehorse.

He'd memorized every part of these machines. He noticed all the changes in these newest ones. Where in the earlier model had been only holes, there were added short exhaust pipes to keep the superhot exhaust away from

the engine cowling. And the radiator bath he thought was different, deeper maybe.

The aerial masts were new. These Messerschmitts had radios. And there were the guns. Twice the guns now.

You could conquer the world with a weapon like this.

The Warte gave the new ships their warpaint. The upper parts got colored the same dull gray green as the Spanish fields in summer. The underside was the color of the Spanish sky. Around the exhaust ports was painted black because that part would get black anyway, and the RLM liked to be neat about things.

Next they added the Nationalist recognition markings. The Nationalist colors, red-yellow-red, were too close to the Republican colors, red-yellow-purple, so the Nationalist recognition symbols were instead the Legion's black disk—the meatball—and the St. Andrew's cross in all six positions. A tall black X on the white rudder marked all the Fascist airplanes no matter their nationality. Fascist wingtips were white where the Communists were red.

Then the numbers were painted on. Ritter frowned.

These numbers were out of sequence for the third Staffel. Anything in the 50's belonged to the second Staffel. Ritter thought they must be re-sequencing the code.

Then a Top Hat got painted on one.

Ritter stared with a sinking sensation. Containing his panic, he walked over, asked the painter quietly, "What are you doing? Don't you know how to draw Mickey Mouse?"

"This airplane has been assigned to the second Staffel, *mein Herr*."

Ritter stalked away to find the Technical Officer.

Karl, the TO, was none too happy himself. Looked like he'd been robbed.

Ritter spoke softly when he was angry. "What the fuck is going on?" he said very very very gently.

Karl shook his head. "These four machines have been appropriated by the first and second Staffeln to replace their losses. Shut up, Ritter. I know. We said something. The Oberleutnant was out-gunned. There you have it."

"Johann would not have let this happen."

"We *will* be getting the other eight MEs," Karl said.

The authorized strength of a Staffel was twelve aircraft.

The first and second Staffeln would be back up to authorized strength now, leaving the third Staffel only eight MEs.

"They give us eight Messerschmitts," Ritter murmured as Fritz walked up beside him.

Fritz planted his fists on his hips, arms akimbo. He wore dark sunglasses. He pulled his lips back, his white teeth set on edge.

"Eight Messerschmitts, ten pilots, and you've been a real shit to the Staffelkapitän. Good, Ritter, good. You know that feeling when you drop

your bomb load and you can't get altitude quick enough to get away from your own blast?" Fritz nodded, pleased with his analogy. He clapped Ritter on the shoulder. "I'll let you know what it's like to fly a Messerschmitt."

"And just where do you think I'm going?"

"Well, it seems the Heinkels have been so successful in the ground support role that Legion Command has decided to keep them. They're forming a whole new fourth Staffel and giving it all the Heinkels—and two of us," Fritz said. "Only question is, you and who else?"

Erwin Halle ordered an early meeting of his pilots. Ritter was late, in no hurry to attend his own burial.

He dragged a chair around to sit astride in the back of the room with Fritz. Halle was up front, drawing diagrams on the chalkboard.

The room was thinly manned. Ritter looked around to see who wasn't here. He leaned aside, whispered to Fritz. "Where are the new boys?"

Two new pilots had arrived to replace Max and Günter.

Fritz shrugged.

Dieter gave a nod backwards over one shoulder. "Fourth Staffel."

Ritter opened his mouth, stuttered more loudly than he intended, "You mean the new guys aren't replacing Max and—?"

Halle turned from the chalkboard.

"There are already eight of us and eight Messerschmitts. That's quite tight enough. Ritter, are you well?"

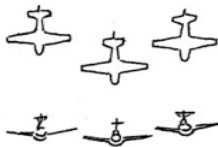
Ritter coughed, said weakly, "Yes."

"Pay attention here. I have a lot to cover."

Unable to find his voice, Ritter whispered, "Yes, *Herr Oberleutnant*."



THE FIRST THING ERWIN HALLE did was change the way things had always been done.



The basic flying unit in the Luftwaffe had been a Kette, a tight formation of three aircraft with the center plane in the lead, the way geese flew. Halle proposed changing all that. He wanted his airplanes flying in pairs.

Paul Ritter listened, dubious. This Staffel had sometimes flown two planes abreast, but that was only because they were carpet bombers. The Messerschmitt Staffeln formed up in Ketten because that's how German fighters flew.

It was also how British fighters flew.

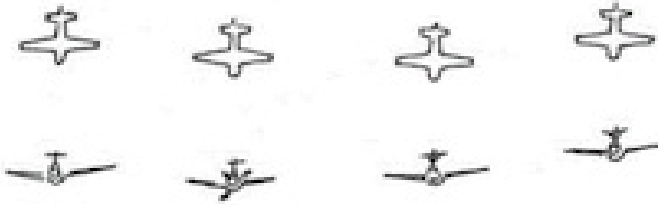
Halle wanted his Messerschmitts in pairs and spaced much farther apart with one airplane slightly higher than the other. This, he said, would free the pilots from concentrating on keeping formation, and clear their sightlines to each other's blind spots.

"It's the difference between marching in parade order and fighting in trenches. This is guerrilla air warfare. Your life depends on watching the sky. *Nothing* depends on keeping nice tight formations. I don't want any pilot

of mine taken unaware because he was watching his position in formation instead of scanning the sky.”

The basic unit from now forward in Halle’s Staffel would be the Rotte, the pair. The leader would have the role of hunter, the wingman the task of keeping guard on the sunside.

Two pairs together formed a bigger unit, the Schwarm, with the pair leaders flying on the inside, their wingmen on the outsides, watching their flanks.



“Look at the back of your hand. Your four fingers are in the proper formation. Rotte leaders are in the middle, hunting. Their wingmen guard the outside. Your leader is this one, Ritter.” Halle held up the proper finger.

Ritter hunched lower in his seat, so he was just peering over his crossed arms. “Yeah. Got it.”

The drawings on the chalkboard began to make sense, depicting a Kette and a Schwarm viewed from the top and head on.

The aircraft in the Schwarm looked awfully far apart. “Erwin, is that drawing to scale?” Rolf asked.

“No, I ran out of chalkboard. I want you farther apart than this. I want you two hundred meters apart.”

Someone whistled.

“That puts the fighters on the outside ends more than a half kilometer away from each other. We won’t be able to see each other’s cockpits much less read hand signals.”

“So use your radio,” Halle said.

“Oh.”

“This is the twentieth century,” Halle added.

There were some sniggers. Rolf shriveled back into his seat.

“You’ll be closer together than you think,” Halle said. “Because of the speed of these aircraft, a half a klick is nothing. You’ll need the space.

“And an open formation will make us harder to spot. Any Red pilot can spot this.” He pointed to the drawing of the old style Kette, the tight grouping of three.

“I learned to fly in the Black Luftwaffe. When the Diktat kept us from flying in Germany, we learned to fly in Italy. They taught us to fly in Italian parade formation. But I am not going to fly a modern German aircraft into

combat in an Italian pageant order —”

He had to stop because most of the pilots broke into cheers.

“The Rotte isn’t a new formation. It’s a battle tested *German* formation. Boelcke and von Richthofen hunted as a pair. I asked the Fat One if there was a reason we had to fly in Ketten. He said no, not really, except that the Kette is what the rest of the world uses. I told him the rest of the world was wrong.”

Ritter sat up straight. Erwin Halle had balls. *The world is wrong.*

Anyone could tell the man read a lot. Thought a lot. He wasn’t a fighter — not like the rest of them were fighters anyway. He was athletic all right, but not rugged. Ritter tried to think what he did look like.

A falcon.

Clear-eyed, lethal, and fragile as a bird of prey. That’s what he was.

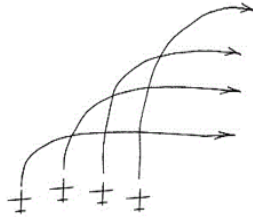
Ritter remembered a master falconer told him never to hold his bird at eye level. You could ruin a bird like that. Ritter stared Halle straight in the eyes. Halle’s gaze held steady. It was Ritter who had to drop away.

“Ritter, did you have a question?”

Ritter lifted his head again without meeting the eyes. “Yes, *Herr Oberleutnant*. There’s a reason the Ketten are so tight. Turns. Turning in formation will be impossible with the airplanes spaced that far apart.”

He pictured a wheel rim spinning around a hub.

“That’s why you’re not going to turn that way,” Halle said. “Your Schwarm is going to execute crossover turns. Each airplane cuts behind the one next to it in a natural turn and ends up in reverse order. He drew another neat diagram.



The man must stay up nights, *thinking*.

Ritter grudgingly admitted that the ideas *seemed* to make sense. But he had always thought that people who got their theories out of old books and drew tactics into little pictures were in serious trouble.

And then the talking was at an end, and Halle sent them up two at a time to try their new wings.

“Don’t step on the flap.”

Ritter froze with his foot raised to step. He looked down, moved his foot over to step on the fillet.

Otto had startled him. Ritter was already being corrected and he hadn’t even got into the cockpit yet.

A feeling like fear seized him. Or maybe it really was fear. He wasn't sure the flutter came from but it was always with him at the start of a flight. He always left it behind on the ground. But every time he started up, fear was here to see him off. No matter how routine the flight, the transition, that passing from one world to another, was momentous and not done without dread.

The canopy hinged open to the right. Ritter mounted from the left as he would a thoroughbred. He dropped onto his parachute pack in the low hard bucket of a seat.

Otto climbed onto the wing root to strap Ritter in, tight.

The instrument panel was dark gray, smooth, and unchipped. The white numbers on the instruments' black faces stood out clearly. Everything was new and clean. The black interior was spotless. Ritter inhaled the classic new vehicle sniff. The harness straps were stiff and still kinked from the factory folds. The windscreen was unscratched, polished clear for him. There was no grit on the floor. The only footprints were from the Technical Officer's test flight.

Ritter had never been in anything so new.

It was a tight fit, the Messerschmitt cockpit. He could tell that Fritz was feeling cramped because Ritter could hear him complaining loud and non-stop about "little guys." Finally Fritz's voice raised to a shout across the airfield. "Are you *comfortable*, Ritter?"

"Yes, Fritz. Thank you for your concern," Ritter sang back.

"Fuck you, Ritter."

"Not just now, darling. Really you ask at the worst times."

Grunted as Otto gave his straps a hard tug.

Otto climbed down from Ritter's crate to let Halle step up on the wing root. Halle rested his elbow on the edge of the cockpit.

"How are you doing?"

Ritter fit his feet on the pedals. They were high. "Am I supposed to be chewing on my knees here?"

Maybe that was exaggerating, but the pedals *were* high.

"That will help keep you conscious under g's, and this bird can pull a lot of them. It'll be easier for your heart to pump blood to your head this way."

Halle took him through the taps.

The only thing Ritter couldn't find for himself was, "How do I cock the guns?"

"It's done for you."

The guns were primed pneumatically and fired by an electronic solenoid.

"Good show," Ritter said in English.

Fritz was shouting from his plane, "I can't see a goddamn thing!"

Ritter looked forward. Forward was actually *up*. "I can't either," he told Halle. Ritter couldn't see anything in front of his kite other than clouds and

blue sky in front of his airplane's enormous nose.

"That is *the* problem with these," Halle said. "It was a trade off. Your ME isn't built to perform on the ground, other than to get *off* the ground *right now*. That's the name of this game."

It was Ritter's kind of machine. The ground and everything on it was nothing.

"Don't be afraid of the brakes. She won't nose over. But take it easy on the turns when you're taxiing."

"I've heard these pull hard to the left."

"That problem's been fixed. Mostly. The torque is normal. Let her take herself off. If you don't rush her, there's nothing to it. If you force her up too soon she *will* leave her left wing behind then plays games with the ailerons. If that happens, don't overcorrect, or she'll play tug of war. She suddenly lets go, and you've planted a wing in the ground. Wings are easy to replace, but save the spares for combat if you can."

"I can."

"You're accustomed to fixed landing gear—"

Ritter's hand went to the undercarriage selector. *I know. I know.*

"Right. Remember to take your gear up and remember to *put it back down*. In case the hydraulics go, the emergency control is there on your left. Crank like hell to get your gear down." And to Ritter's impatient nodding to get on with it, Halle said, "I've had experienced test pilots belly in right in front of my face."

It irritated Ritter that Halle was so familiar with these machines. Ritter didn't want some other man, especially one he didn't particularly like, to describe his beloved's intimate habits to him.

"I've never had any problem landing anything," Ritter said.

"Then you're the only one," Halle said. "Remember when she comes down, the horizon is *here*." He indicated a point well below his forward sightline. "You'll probably want to touch down with two wheels to see where you're going. But, just like if you force a lift off, she'll want to dip her left wing. Mind the ailerons. Landing speed is a lot faster than you're used to. One hundred forty five kilometers per hour is well above a stall and it'll keep your controls responsive."

Ritter was nodding. *Come on. Come on. Come on.*

At last Halle asked if he was ready.

"Yes!"

"Show me."

Halle had laid a few traps for him in case Ritter should neglect the pre-flight. As Halle had showed him the controls, he'd changed things, left the flaps fully up, turned off the radio, shut the radiator, and moved the tail plane trimmer wheel.

Ritter went through the drill, sprang all the traps under Halle's vigilant

eye. *O.K. teacher, get off my ME.*

Halle tugged at Ritter's straps, testing for tightness. "This is good."

"Otto loves me," Ritter said.

"It's not just for the aerobatics. When the hood is closed there's not much headroom. You can smack yourself on the Plexiglas."

Yes, yes, yes. Basta. Enough.

One good thing about all this *Quatsch* was that the flutter in Ritter's gut had gone away, and Ritter was anxious only to be gone from here. Otto the bruin was standing by, just as impatient, glaring at this strange man standing on *his* airplane, reaching into *his* cockpit and meddling with *his* pilot.

"Well?" Halle said.

"She's talking to me," Ritter said.

"I've heard her," Halle said. "'Fly me?'"

"That's not exactly what she's saying to me."

"Then let's not keep the lady waiting. Break your neck and legs."

"Thank you."

Halle jumped down.

It took two men or one Otto the bear to crank the inertial starter up to full rpms. Ritter watched his Wart labor. Sunlight through the Plexiglas canopy heated the air in the small space to stifling even with the side panel slid open.

A trickle of sweat threaded down Ritter's scalp beneath the leather helmet. He didn't want to wear the helmet but the headphones were set into it.

Otto's brawny flesh undulated like a great bruin's as he lugged the crank around. The engine moan built to a whine.

I need to get this right the first time or Otto won't love me anymore.

Otto yanked out the crank. Ritter pulled the starter knob. Flames and smoke shot from the exhausts with a roar and a hot blast as the propeller turned. Power surged under him. Filled Ritter with a rush.

Ausgezeichnet!

Otto climbed onto the wing and sat on the leading edge to be Ritter's forward eyes for taxiing. All Ritter could see ahead was the prop as a dirty blur, and the sky flickering like a movie projection. To either side he could see the grasses turn over a paler yellow-brown in the propwash. Otto waved for him to taxi out.

Ritter opened the throttle. The ME moved like a storm front into position, sending out a spray of dried grass and dust from its path.

When the aircraft was pointed into the wind, Otto jumped off the wing. Ritter looked over at Fritz in his ME, ready also.

The dispatcher's flare arced high.

Go.

Ritter ran her up and released the brake. The ME raced across the field, faster and faster. Ritter knew how far he had for the takeoff. As Fritz had said, "If you hit the trees you've definitely gone too far."

He felt the rickety legs take every bump. In a moment the tail rose and he saw where he was going. He kept a cautious foot on the right rudder pedal, sensing the headstrong beast wanted to go its own way. The ME hurtled across the field, eating up the distance. The propeller had disappeared from view entirely. The low monoplane squeezed the wind to the ground and the ME stepped into the air.

Seven hundred horses on silver hoofs. They said the gods gave an ancient hero Pegasus to ride. The gods never gave the ancient hero anything like this.

Ritter took her up. He felt the air drag more than he imagined it would.

Landing gear!

He retracted the undercarriage.

Much better. This was now as smooth as he thought it should be.

He thought of his grandfather's horses, remembered riding the half-ton of sinew and hide, the feeling of all that strength under his rein. There were 700 of them under the cowling at his command.

The Messerschmitt didn't even have the engine she was born for yet. It wasn't the engine that gave the ME so much more speed than lesser machines. It was the ME's small wings and bullet lines. The air flowed smoothly over the slick paint on the metal skin. The ME sliced through the air like a polished dagger.

The ME had become an extension of himself. Ritter was barely aware of his body at all except for his racing heart and sexual heat. Dancing nerves seemed to extend out to his very wing tips.

He saw his shadow. He remembered the first time he was ever in an airplane. He was so surprised to see its shadow on the ground. It hadn't occurred to him before but that there must be one. The shadow had made it all real. This is it. You are really here and you really have wings. Child-sense dictated that if you have a shadow, you are real.

He saw it now with the same sense of wonder, that angular taut shape racing over the land. *That's me and I'm an ME 109.*

The edges of the shadow diffused with his gaining altitude. He glanced over at Fritz, glanced all around to make sure they owned the sky.

He was disappointed to find that they did. He wanted challengers.

Where are you, Ratas? Goddammit, where are you now?

The guns were loaded—four! He had four! The desire to loose them was overpowering. But he had strict orders not to fire unless he needed to. The battlefield wasn't so far away that an enemy couldn't appear at any second and catch him in an unfamiliar aircraft with no ammo.

Not firing the guns had been the only real prohibition for this flight. Otherwise he was on a very long leash. He supposed he should be doing circuits and practicing take-offs and landings. But Halle knew that once in the air the boys would run for the heavens and Halle hadn't ordered them not to. Only told them to watch their fuel levels.

Aloft it was cooler. Why was Ritter surprised that things should be better up in the air?

He took the ME up high, high where his wings spun contrails off their square tips in the supercooled air. He fit his mask over his nose and switched on the oxygen. His head cleared. All impressions were vivid. Life was immediate. He went higher than he'd ever been, where only eagles and the mighty could go.

At 8400 meters the ME was crawling through a tenuous atmosphere. His kite would go no higher.

Ritter bunted over. The response was instantaneous. He heard a joyful shriek. His. The sound surprised him. Usually so silent. He didn't even cry out having sex.

He plummeted in a power dive. The aerial wires screamed.

He didn't know how he had ever lived without fuel injection. It was the difference between this Messerschmitt 109 C and those 109 Bs given to the other Staffeln before him. This fuel-injected Jumo 210Ga powerplant changed everything. Just open the throttle and she goes. *Now.*

He lost almost half his altitude in no time, his ears caving in. He lessened his speed and leveled out gradually into a turn.

He rolled the ME over. It was true. Upside-down, the Jumo engine didn't quit, not for a moment.

He was invincible.

He opened it up as fast as she could go, 486 km/h—sideslipping all the way. He had misplaced the rudder trimmer. Then remembered there wasn't one. He pressed the pedal. Pressed hard. All the controls solidified at this speed. That would be something to remember.

He pushed the ME to find all her limits. He tried to make her stall. He climbed through the burbles and stood her on her tail. The stall came gently, a simple falling. The ME dropped one shoulder over.

"Ritter, are you all right?"

Fritz's voice startled him. Ritter wasn't used to voices up here. It was an intrusion. He pulled up. The question had pissed him off.

And what would you do if I said no?

"I'm fine," Ritter snapped.

He tried a tight turn, flirting with another stall.

G's drained the blood from his head in a crushing pull that sank his chin to his chest. Suddenly came a *bang!* The stick pressure gave in his hand.

"Fritz, I've been hit."

"You're good, idiot."

Heart overspeeding, Ritter leveled out. The stick responded. The blood returned to his head. He searched for what had gone wrong.

The airplane was perfect.

He knew what that bang was.

He tried the stunt again. In the tight turn his blood sank away again. A

second self seemed to be watching, piloting for him. He flew with his soul anyway, not his brain.

He watched the inside wing. Tightened the turn.

The leading edge slot popped open with a bang to make up for the wing's smallness as it approached stalling speed. The redirected airflow moved the aileron. Ritter was expecting it this time. Regained full control immediately.

He straightened from the turn. Checked his gauges. He'd lost altitude, and a red light on his fuel gauge said it was time to go back. He thought it was lying, but his watch confirmed that he'd been up here much longer than his flight felt.

The air grew hotter as he descended. Condensation collected on his canopy then burned away.

Approaching the field, Ritter lowered his landing gear. He braced for a change in balance but the wheels descended evenly from both sides, so the center of gravity didn't shift. The only change he felt was the wind resistance.

When he lowered the flaps the nose dipped and the rudder broke into the judders. Ritter re-trimmed the tailplane and cut speed. The nose lifted and the vibration went away.

Ahead to his left Fritz was coming down. "Hate to be a nag, Fritz, but are you quite sure you don't want your landing gear?"

"Shit!" Fritz pulled up.

Ritter continued his own approach. The ME was still talking to him. The trick was to listen.

He could see everyone at the side of the field watching, pilots, mechanics, Spanish workers. They would be expecting some ragged edges on this landing. Nerves were natural when flying a new machine in front of a Staffel full of rivals and a lot of curious foreigners. And there would be Halle. Halle would be so understanding of any mistakes, Ritter would just want to hit him.

Halle had said he would probably want to come down on two wheels to see where he was going.

Bullshit. I'm going to three-point this bird.

Ritter checked his air speed. He aimed straight, got his last forward look and pulled the stick back, lifting the ME's proud chin into her haughty landing attitude.

An inward quaver gnawed his calm as he was pulling up past the angle where he could see anything in his path. He saw blue sky and clouds.

Where was his tail wheel?

I'm going to fall on my back. He kept pulling. Felt an impulse to chicken out and land on two wheels.

No. His airspeed was too low and it was too late.

Just when he thought he'd misplaced the ground, she set down on three wheels.

He felt the jarring rumble of earth under his tires. He turned cautiously,

mindful of his fragile undercart, and he taxied in.

He pressed on the brakes and brought the ME to a stop.

The humming roar of the engine shut down as he pulled the cutout. The prop's last sputtering jerks were like a startled protest, as if the machine realized it was dying and suddenly put up a fight. She slowed, coughed. Quit.

Herrgott, engines always sounded so surprised, and the sudden silence was a monstrous void.

And now Otto was standing on the wing, knocking on the canopy. Ritter unlatched the lock. The Plexiglas lifted, let in the air. Ritter pulled off his leather helmet, shook his hair. He was beginning to see why Halle kept his own hair cut so short all over. Ritter was wet.

He climbed out, stepped onto the wing. A sound reached his noise-dampened ears, like the rush within a seashell. He thought it was inside his head, but it was the other pilots and ground crew applauding. Ritter struck a pose like a gymnast at the end of a spectacular routine. Halle nodded and waved him to come in.

Someone blurted, all exasperation, "Just like parking a damn car!"

Halle's brows shot up. A twitch played at his mouth. Ritter knew what Halle was not saying: *You have obviously never seen Ritter drive.*

"How was it?" Halle asked. Not really a question.

Ritter opened his mouth, closed it, gave a wry glare to say it was a stupid question and there were no words.

Fritz was coming in again, landing gear down this time. The left wing dipped precariously, nearly kissed the ground. Fritz corrected and put the ME down on two wheels then sat the tail wheel down.

As Fritz strode from his mount, he hailed Ritter. "I don't see any bits lying on the field. I guess you made it down all right, Ritter."

The voices started all at once, telling Fritz how perfect Ritter's landing had been. They all said so. And this was not a generous group.

The smile stayed on the lips but vacated the pale blue eyes. "Really?" Fritz said. "Now that's luck. Wish I could have seen it, Ritter."

When everyone in the Staffel was familiarized with the new machine they went up in the new formations. Four aircraft took immediate possession of a wide swathe of sky. They tried out the crossover turns and fired their guns.

They practiced this way, and within days they were ready to face the Reds.

The order came down an evening in mid-July. The re-fit third Staffel was now operational. As the sun sank behind the mountains, the rows of new war machines waited under the camouflage netting, spinners held high and proud.

The twilight wind sighed through the wire stays of the obsolete HE 51s.



CANYON SHADOWS WERE STARK. The rivers became the color of the shadows. A dusty haze blurred the horizon where land met sky. The blue vault overhead reached forever.

The wide finger-four formations of the Messerschmitts let the hunters take in everything for miles. They didn't have a specific target on this flight. Only to make a sweep over the Red front.

This was a *Freie Jagd*. Free hunt.

Each pilot had four guns at his command—two 7.92 mm MG 17 machine guns armed with 500 rpg set under the cowling, and a gun in each wing carrying 420 rpg. The fighters were anxious to find a target for their guns.

Paul Ritter saw them first. "We have company high to the right. Lots of them."

Black specks appeared like a cloud of gnats. Ratas. A whole flock, maybe fifty aircraft.

There you are, damn you.

"Six to one," someone said. Sounded like Helmut.

"Had to make it fair." That was Fritz.

Halle's voice on the radio sounded strangely flat. He ordered his two Schwärme to turn with him, and he climbed, trying to give them a good position before the enemy could sight them.

It wasn't to be. The Ratas changed course suddenly. Smoke darkened from their trails. They were burning emergency rich fuel.

"They spotted us, Halle."

"Then let's at them."

The Messerschmitts and the Ratas moved towards each other, all climbing, trying to be on top when they met.

The Messerschmitts arrived high.

The topmost Ratas lifted their noses and spat fire.

Their bullets couldn't climb either.

All formations dissolved into a milling dizzy mass. The sky was without clouds. There was no place to hide. For the first time in this intervention Ritter felt like a bird of prey, heart hammering, in danger and dangerous at the same time.

Everything happened faster than thinking about it.

Halle engaged first. He wheeled. Moved in so close Ritter winced.

Halle loosed his guns and the Red plane disintegrated under him.

Yelling broke out on the radio. Whoops, curses, grunts. Some of them sounded like they were in a brothel.

Ritter stayed with Fritz, chasing a Rata. Fritz fired. Too far away. His tracer rounds dropped short of the target.

A Rata passed between them.

The opportunity appeared so fast Ritter almost didn't take the shot. Conscious mind was too late, but the body was already reacting.

Nerves singing, heart jumped into another gear, Ritter pressed the trigger on the end of the stick. The ME shivered. White tracer streams from his guns sprayed down in the Rata's path. They arrived late and the Rata flew past. Ritter hauled around, jabbed at the rudder pedal. The phosphorescent streams swayed. He squeezed the button as if a death grip would give it more power. His wings shuddered with the recoil. Held his breath. Flickering strands burst before his eyes. The stream from his right wing snagged the target.

He gasped. *Yes!*

Pieces of the Rata's cowling splintered off. The machine kept going, its engine bared, the top of one cylinder sheared away, the connecting rods flopping madly through the hole. Ritter hesitated on his guns as the Rata fought for stability. The squat Russian widowmaker was hard enough to fly under the best of conditions. The plane was finished. Ritter didn't have any hard feelings against the pilot.

Come on, Pedro, get out of there.

Ritter could see unbuckled harness straps flapping out of the open cockpit. The pilot was preparing to jump.

Suddenly Fritz was on him with all four guns. He hammered the broken Rata to oblivion.

Scattered bits of it spun away.

"*Abschuss!*" Fritz cried. "Did you see it! Did you see it! Did you see it!"

"Every moment," Ritter said dully, and pushed his throttle forward. He lugged the stick sideways and rolled on a wing tip. "Coming past you on

your left, Fritz. Do something about this rat on my tail."

Ritter led the Rata past Fritz's guns. Fritz fired, missed. The Rata pushed down and fled for the deck.

Over all of the shouting, Halle was ordering his men back to base.

As Ritter banked homeward he could see four columns of smoke rising from the ground. A surface wind drew the billows out into comet tails along the treetops.

I told you to fucking jump, Pedro.

The MEs quickly left the mass of Ratas behind. The enemy turned around at their point of no return.

Five MEs rocked cordite-streaked wings over La Cenia. The ground crew jumped and waved.

Ritter set down.

The ground crew was still scanning the horizon for the eighth airplane.

Halle glanced around, almost frantic. "Who's gone? Ritter?"

You wish. Ritter lifted a hand and waved, acknowledging his existence.

"Erich?"

"No," Ritter said. "It's Dieter."

The radios were all deathly quiet. Dieter wasn't to be seen or heard.

Halle was as angry as Ritter had ever seen him. In fact, Ritter couldn't remember ever having seen Halle angry. He took physical hold of Erich, who had been Dieter's wingman. Halle's voice went up in pitch. "What happened to him?"

"I don't know, *Herr Oberleutnant.*"

"*You are supposed to know!*"

Erich had brought a Red plane down. In the heat of the hunt, he'd lost sight of his rottenführer, his pair leader, Dieter.

Halle's face darkened purple-red. He told Erich that if Dieter failed to come back, Halle would not confirm his victory and Erich would be on the next ship back to Hamburg as a civilian.

"Dieter is your leader! You stay with him! You are up there to see your rottenführer home. A victory at the cost of a dead comrade means nothing! No victory is worth one of my pilots! You stay with each other! You are all you have up there—!"

Erich zipped up his flightsuit. "I'll go back and look for him—"

"It's too late for that!"

Then the field defenses were shouting out the approach of an aircraft.

Friendly.

"Hold your fire!"

An engine snarled louder on approach.

Dieter's Messerschmitt lowered landing gear.

Erich said, "There he is."

Halle, still shaken, growled at his pilots, "Remember what I said."

No one was likely to forget it.

Dieter had got lost. He rejoined the others, grinning, sheepish. "Where did everybody go?"

"Dieter! What happened to your radio?"

"Oh. Everybody started yelling. I turned it off." And Dieter had to duck because his mates were throwing things at him. Hard.

All the machines had returned undamaged. They'd lost no one, and the Staffel had its first victories. Four of them. Each *rotte* claimed one enemy.

"And we gave them nothing!"

Halle ordered all his pilots to the Intelligence Officer for debriefing before they could embroider their stories.

Fritz and Ritter had one victory between them. "You don't split a victory," the IO said. "Who got it?"

"In that case, I was pair leader and I sent it down," Fritz said. "It's mine."

"Fritz, he was already done for when you shot him."

"That's a *bit* much, Ritter. The plane I shot looked healthy enough from my angle."

"With his engine cowlings and part of his engine blown off?"

"I didn't see that."

The IO pointed his pen from one to the other. "Decide who got it."

Fritz hissed to Ritter, "We have to choose, or neither of us gets it, and it just goes to the Staffel as a whole."

"It wasn't your victory," Ritter said.

"Don't be a grabbing Jew, Ritter."

"Take it, Fritz! There's more where that came from!"

"Right. Time will tell," Fritz agreed.

One white victory mark went onto Fritz's rudder stem. Otto the bruin, snarling things in thickest Bavarian, lumbered out with paint solvent to take off the mark he had just carefully painted on Ritter's crate.

Ritter's face felt hot. He hoped he was suntanned dark enough to cover the blush. He'd taken a fly-by for nothing. No one mentioned it. He could have handled outright insults better than this careful silence.

Of the Jasta's twenty-two victories, half of them belonged to Halle's Staffel. None of the kills were Ritter's.

Fritz, who had scored again, said, "You see, it really was my victory. But don't feel bad. We'll get you a real one of your own."

Ritter couldn't hit anything. Not since he'd shot the Rata in the engine. He knew he had done that. He was sure he had. Thought he had.

But he couldn't seem to do it again.

Erwin Halle was racking up victories at an astounding rate. All Halle had to do was go up. Then he would come down, make notes, pass along what he'd tried, what worked, what didn't.

And you knew he wasn't padding his reports, because whoever was flying

on his wing for that sortie came down gushing, "You should've seen him!"

The Top Hats came asking about Mickey Mouse's funny formations, and Halle *told* them. He didn't keep secrets from the other German units. As far as he was concerned, they were all his men.

The men deified Halle. They were long past saying he could walk on water. Erwin Halle was the guy who said, "Let there be light."

Except Ritter.

It wasn't right. It was as if Löwe had never been here, and Ritter was alone in resentment.

In July, Bayerische Flugzeugwerke AG was renamed Messerschmitt AG. The change of the company name didn't officially change the name of the aircraft. The airplane was still officially designated Bf 109.

All the pilots and ground crew still called it ME 109, just as they had all along.

At the end of July, the Reds in the north crossed the lower Ebro into Nationalist territory at the river bend.

Until now the Nationalist offensive had been pushing southward, but the Luftwaffe hadn't moved its fighter bases forward with them. So the fighters of J/88 were now in a good position to wheel around and face the new Red attack from the rear.

The hot, treeless interior was as close to hell on Earth as Ritter ever wanted to see.

From July and well into August they were fighting the same battle at the river bend, the exact same battle, over and over. The ME 109s escorted the allied bombers over the front to destroy the bridges. The bridges reappeared overnight. And they would do it all over again.

Then the Nationalists opened the locks on the River Ebro. The flood surge swept away the International Brigades as they tried to cross the river.

The bodies were still washing up.

There were no German ground troops in Spain, so real coordination of air and ground forces was not to be had. The Spaniards would nod and nod to German proposals then do what they wanted anyway.

"Well, it's their war," Ritter said.

"And our school," Fritz said. "We learn."

The Germans learned that if they could just coordinate their ground and air forces, they could be devastating.

A German joint air-ground assault would be unstoppable. Such a force could move like lightning.

Until July, Ritter had thought that all he was lacking was the proper aircraft. Now it was August, Ritter had a Messerschmitt and he was the only man in the Staffel without a white bar painted on his rudder stem.

"You're afraid of what you can do," Dieter said.

It sounded like a Halle-ism, and Ritter was annoyed. "Not likely."

He spat.

Erwin Halle had become everyone's Father Confessor. The others would talk to him as they would their priest, their bartender, their best friend, their favorite prostitute, whoever it was they talked to when they needed to talk—like when they'd just killed someone.

Ritter remembered Löwe after his first kill, crowing on the wing of his airplane. Killing the enemy was what he was here for. Löwe was proud as if he'd brought down a twelve-point buck.

But some of the others came down looking like Halle had, like he'd been shot in the gut rather than just scored a triumph. And those men would talk to Halle about it.

Ritter would be damned if he would ever tell Halle anything.

Not that he had anything to tell. He may as well have been shooting tracer rounds.

The sun sank toward the mountains.

The fighter pilots were back at the villa, readying for dinner.

Ritter was still at the airfield with his plane's tail jacked up into flying position, guns aimed at the pattern board. The engine was running, and the airplane strained against the chocks and the ropes that bound her tail to the trestle. The propeller's captive thrashing beat up a storm of dust that glowed in the sinking sun's ruddy glare. Ritter sat in cockpit, sweltering, wearing only shorts and boots. He flipped up the plastic square on the Reflexvisier. It illuminated.

He took hold of the stick and sat as he would in combat. The crosshairs were dead on the board. The target wavered in the heat. At his Waffewart's signal he fired the guns. Then he switched the safety back on, pulled the cutout, and climbed out to stand on the wing. He waved a cloud of yellow-brown dust from his face. It collected on his wet skin. He shaded his eyes and watched Otto and the Waffewart walk out to check the pattern of holes on the target board. Even from here Ritter could see that they were fine.

There's nothing wrong with the guns.

It's me.

Sound of footsteps approaching. Ritter glanced back. Stomach dropped. *Scheiße!*

Halle.

"Problem with your crate?"

Ritter closed his eyes. Caught.

There was the damning pattern on the board, the holes neat as could be. Nothing wrong with the crate.

Halle was squinting up at him, fists on narrow hips, his sleeves rolled up

to his elbows, his shirtfront patched darker with sweat. He wore his forage cap on his close shorn head. He hadn't dressed for dinner yet either.

The bald-faced lie seemed the best approach. "Yes," Ritter said.

Halle motioned to Otto to let the kite's tail back down. "Get this one flight-ready. And mine. We're going on a *Freie Jagd*."

Ritter climbed off the wing. Swallowed down his stomach, which kept rising to his throat.

"You're going to take me up and shoot me," Ritter said at Halle's back.

"Don't think it hasn't crossed my mind."

The ruddy sun, touching the mountain, cast very long shadows.

Ritter dropped into the cockpit. The parachute, fit into the hard bucket seat, kept him from scorching his ass off. He plugged into the radio. The oxygen mask hung at the side of his helmet. He lowered tinted goggles over his eyes. Otto checked all his connections, tightened his straps. The confines instantly became suffocating when Otto closed the canopy over him.

Ritter always felt queasy before flight.

Once he left the ground and tucked the gear into the ME's belly, the ache loosened its grip on his gut.

He still felt humiliated and fatally inept.

He followed Halle, rising out of the furnace. Higher up it was merely hot.

Halle led the way over the mountains. Ritter could navigate the way blind, he'd flown it so many times. He knew when they were nearing the last summit that would open to the Ebro valley.

"Ritter. Take the lead."

Halle dropped back into the wingman's position.

Ritter thought of a mother hawk driving songbirds at her clumsy fledglings to give them their first kill.

I don't have a mother, and I don't need you to fill in.

"I don't know what's happening, Herr Oberleutnant. I'm a better shot than this." Couldn't believe he'd just said that.

"I'm not," Halle said. "The controls respond to a finer touch than I've got. Get in close and feed it to him. The ME is not a stable gun platform."

"I know. But I can hit targets. I can't hit an airplane."

It should have been easy after strafing. He hated strafing. Towards the end he hadn't even been looking any more.

"What are you aiming at?"

Ritter hesitated, confused, "The Red airplane."

"What part?"

"What *part*?"

"Pick a spot."

"I can't hit the side of the barn and you're telling me to shoot out the window."

"Maybe you're afraid of killing. Aim for the engine, not the cockpit."

"I'm not afraid of killing."

"You're either a cold blooded son of a bitch or a liar."

"Then I'm a cold blooded son of a bitch," Ritter said.

"Aim for the cockpit."

Static crackled in his headset, then an anguished voice on the R/T, his: "I'm a liar, Erwin."

Scheiße! I hope no one's picking this up on the ground.

His eyes stung. His mouth prickled. His throat felt thick.

He was going to cry.

Scheiße! Scheiße! Scheiße!

"Aim for the engine," Halle said.

"You mean aim for the door and I'll hit the side of the barn?"

"Aim for the engine. You'll hit the engine."

"Aircraft, course seven," Ritter said, automatically, as soon as he saw them.

"I see them. Now do as I say."

The enemy patrol numbered twelve aircraft arranged in stepped flights, heading away.

Ritter and Halle climbed above a wispy layer of cloud and closed in. The Ratas weren't paying attention.

Ritter dropped from the thin clouds, singled out a Rata. Called it. "Number three is mine."

No clear shot at the engine. He centered the Rata's tail in his reflector sight, moved his thumb to the trigger.

Halle: "Closer."

The Rata flew on dead level, unaware.

Ritter closed in. "*Herr Oberleutnant, my sight is full of Rata.*"

"Closer."

He's going to see me. He's going to hear me. I'm going to be in his lap in a second.

"Closer."

Jesus. Gott.

"Give him everything."

Machine gunfire rattled his heart in his chest. He veered up to avoid the stripped pieces of his victim.

The Red never saw it. It was easy.

Ritter dipped a wing to watch the burning fuselage fall. *You just killed someone. The horror is there is no horror.* He started to shake. *Oh yeah. There it is.*

Became aware that Halle was yelling at him.

A clatter on his wings.

Ritter jinked.

It wasn't gunfire hitting him. It was spent shells. Halle had just shot someone off his back. A Rata had come up while Ritter was staring after his kill.

Halle: "When you hit him, get out immediately!"

"Yeah. Yeah." Ritter knew that. He searched around for the other aircraft

but there weren't any. Specks way over there were running.

"How are you?"

Ritter started a lie, then tried to find words for shock. He was feeling too vulnerable, like something without a shell that really ought to have one. Before he could form an expressible thought, his second self was speaking dryly, "*Achtung!* Enemy sighted. Course six."

A cluster of enemy aircraft appeared in between mountains. In the direction of home. Thirty Chatos and Ratas together.

Halle took the lead. "Follow me. How many rounds do you have?"

"Most of them," Ritter said.

"Don't lose me."

Halle drove toward the enemy swarm, climbing. Called his target at the leading edge of the mass. "Do you see number 37? He's mine. I think 41 might be trouble. Watch him."

"I have him," Ritter said.

Halle moved in fast, took his intended out, simple, brilliant. Wheeled away.

Ritter saw himself as if split in two, or as two halves coming together, more like. The part of him that went through life never aware was suddenly very aware for the first time in his sleepwalking existence.

One self was physical and sparking all over, the other a serene analytical overseer.

With danger all around, he saw all with complete clarity. Fast. Exact.

The Chato, number 41, descended behind Halle.

Ritter pushed the ME's nose down. The number 41 filled his Reflector sight.

His ship quaked, his hand tight on the trigger. Burnt tang of cordite stung his nostrils.

The Chato broke up. Ritter veered away.

The mass of Reds was scattering.

Halle called another target. Ritter joined up with him and stuck there. Drilled a Rata off Halle's tail. Got a piece of it, but the kite didn't go down.

Ritter followed Halle up to where the sky was open.

"Anyone chasing us?" Halle asked.

"No." The enemy were scattered wide, becoming specks. "They're all running. They must be low on fuel."

"So am I. Let's go home."

The flares of the airfield at La Cenia were in sight. "Let's beat up the villa," Ritter said.

There was a silence on the radio. Ritter thought Halle was about to shoot down the idea, but he must have been checking his fuel gauge because he said, "Lead on."

Ritter skirted the mountain, flying below its peaks, and drove down the

steep winding road past the villa low enough to shake the roof tiles.

At last he touched down at La Cenia airfield.

The other pilots of the third Staffel piled into the cars and drove out from the villa to meet Halle and Ritter.

Ritter greeted them with two fingers.

"Victory!" Dieter cried.

"That's not a V. That's two victories."

"One each? Or who got two?"

"Two each."

"Each?"

Ritter was flushed, still on a high. "Just a little free hunt."

Otto had a paintbrush waiting. He was making long overdue alterations to Ritter's rudder stem.

"Hey, Meister Braun!" Ritter shouted. "Don't paint those victories so fat."

"Why?" Fritz said. "You afraid they're not all going to fit?"

"Yes, that's exactly why," Ritter said.

Halle walked over to see Otto's artwork. The kerls quieted a little. Halle inspected the painted marks on Ritter's crate, then glanced toward the rudder stem of his own plane, which was beginning to look crowded. "You'd better start making them skinnier, Otto."

The men let out a screeching cheer that sounded like the baying of hounds, and Ritter grinned without wanting to.

I would fly though a building for this man.



IT WAS TO BE A ROUTINE FLIGHT except that Bryan Catrell was Officer Commanding.

Squadron Leader Macy told Bryan to take A Flight up to keep the boys and their kites keen.

Bryan had been on his best behavior since his run in with the RDF last spring. He'd thought the station commander was going to have him sacked over the matter of the borrowed Hurricane, but Wing Commander James Aycok had nosed the aeroplane over directly it was returned to him, so he might have been too embarrassed to draw any attention to it.

Both squadrons on base were equipped with Hurricanes now.

Bryan glanced back at his Numbers 2 and 3, their wings tucked tight behind his.

We look smashing.

He glanced in the mirror at Yellow Section flying astern in another impressive vic.

The sky was clear except for a few white tufts high, high above, torn off the top of a thunderhead. A storm was on the way, but right now was glorious.

Peace would come to an end soon. Hitler's troops were already mobilized. Their entry into Czechoslovakia was imminent.

Down below, the Lincolnshire countryside looked peaceful, the greens daubed here and there with red, amber and gold. Bryan's Hurricane rode steady as a rocking chair.

Something startled him to awareness. He looked back and up. Something was in the sun.

"Mandrill, this is Mandrill Leader. All Mandrill aircraft break right! Go!"

Bryan's engine changed song. He and his Hurricanes peeled off and half-rolled to the right.

"Hullo Mandrill Leader. This is Yellow Leader. Say, Bryan, what are you about?"

"I don't know."

Bryan had glimpsed something coming out of the sun. He could scarcely believe anything could be up there.

Was this it? Out of the clear blue, Jerry was here?

He looked again, and the intruders were upon them, fast as a shot. They roared overhead, two vics stacked astern, smaller than the Hurris, all sky blue underneath, with red, white, and blue roundels under those elegantly rounded wings.

Spitfires!

There was no question where they came from. There were only six of these aeroplanes in operations anywhere, and here they were, turning tight for another pass at Bryan's flight.

An appreciative whistle sounded over the R/T.

"Mandrill squadron, Mandrill Leader calling. Gentlemen, choose your targets."

"Balls!" someone said.

It was an optimistic order. Bryan's Hurricanes were the targets and they had been chosen.

The Spitfires broke out of their beautiful vics and were dropping into attack positions on the tails of Bryan's Hurricanes.

Bryan suddenly thought it advisable to add, just in case anyone misunderstood the situation, "Mandrill aircraft, get into position but please do not press the trigger. Games, gents. These are ours."

Bryan pulled into a steep climb. The lighter Spitfire stayed with him.

Don't think I shall give up just because I think you're beautiful.

Bryan pushed the throttle to the wall and jinked, trying to get that black spinner out of his mirror.

The Hurricanes and the Spitfires were flying with the same engine. This game was a test of the aircraft designs.

The Spits were small and tidy—like a German Messerschmitt, but more elegant.

The Hurri was a rock steady gun platform. In war games, hunting bombers, Bryan had taken splendid unblurred pictures of Blenheims with his gun cameras. The Spitfire carried eight guns too, but the Spit would need a steady hand to keep those guns on target.

Bryan had never seen anything look quite so joyful in flight.

He'd never seen operational Spitfires. These had to be the first in production. The tail wheels and aials were new. Otherwise they looked like the prototype. And they were coming at him.

He was at full throttle, 12 pound boost. He pulled the red plunger at the left of his dashboard — the boost control cutout. The acceleration pushed him into his seat.

The Spit stayed with him.

Bryan turned hard, tried to. The stick moved as if set in hardening cement. His head emptied, his vision breaking into dots. He saw as through a tunnel. Turning.

He came out of the turn. The tunnel widened.

He blinked. He was out from in front of the Spit, but he'd lost altitude.

He tried to maneuver around onto the Spitfire's tail. The Spitfire went vertical and Bryan lost it. He looked up.

Couldn't find it.

Had it stalled in that maneuver? Even a Spitfire couldn't hang on its prop.

He looked all around. The Spits were nowhere.

A spinner rose into his mirror. "Jesus Christ!"

And then it veered away. Executed a victory roll in parting.

Smart bastard.

The Spitfires reformed their vics and soared away.

"Who is bloody laughing on our frequency! Are you a Spitfire?"

"No," Bryan said, laughing. "This is Mandrill Leader. Mandrill Flight reform. Let's go home."

The pilots of A Flight dismounted from their Hurricanes, all talking with their hands. A sergeant ran out to the field and told them that the station commander wanted them in his office. Now. Yesterday.

An exchange of understanding passed among the pilots.

"What did we do?"

"Nothing," Bryan told his men. "But we're about to hear the King James version."

Mrs Aycock, whom everyone called Mum, had positioned herself outside the office, where she trimmed roses. She was the squadrons' early warning system for her husband's moods. Storm warnings were out. Mum Aycock was clipping roses.

The pilots filed into the ogre's den.

Wing Commander James Aycock sat with his hands clasped together on his desk. The silver hairs on the backs of his thick fingers made his hands look like a single giant troll's fist.

He lined up the pilots of A Flight before him like a lot of truant schoolboys.

"Someone called the police to ask if England were not being invaded," he said tightly. "The constabulary informed me that a flight of my aircraft were beating up a golf course. Not only that, but half of them did not have

markings on them—I do not want my aeroplanes flying without proper identification codes—”

“Those were the Spit—”

Bryan elbowed the Flight Sergeant silent.

Aycock looked down at his notes and read, “RJ-G and RJ-D. Could that be anyone I know or shall I look at the record?”

“Those are myself and one of my flight sergeants, sir,” Bryan said. No need to name the flight sergeant. “I was Officer Commanding.”

Aycock rose like something volcanic.

Stomping footfalls sounded on the steps outside. The station commander’s door flew open, rapped off its stop and vibrated. Squadron Leader Macy swept in like a gale off the North Sea. His dusky face had turned strange shades of red. His pencil mustache twitched on his lip. He demanded to know why his men were being reprimanded without going through him.

Macy’s and Aycock’s shouts overlapped each other.

“... not your men! Not your aircraft. . . !”

“... Authorities telephoned me. . . !”

Macy turned on the row of staring pilots. Stand down!” And he moved aside for them to get through the doorway.

“I wasn’t done with those men!”

“Out!”

“Catrell, stay!”

“Catrell, go! “

“Sirs?”

“Out!”

The pilots of A Flight chose to obey Macy, and quick-filed out of Aycock’s office.

Bryan pulled the door shut after them.

The pilots regrouped in the common room.

“Cor! Thank the lord for Macy!”

“What’d Aycock light into us for?”

“Just stay quiet and everything will fall on me,” Bryan said. “I’m the one he wants.

“It was the Spitfires who started it.”

“No use putting 19 Squadron’s pot on. God, they were pretty.” Bryan felt disloyal saying so.

“What the devil were they trying to do?”

“Embarrass us.”

“Did it, too.”

“How many of those kites are there now?”

“How many?” Bryan said. “I think we just saw them.”

“Who needs them?”

“And did you manage to get a bead on one?”

"Almost. Yeah, I almost had him. We were surprised."

"Hardly a fair simulation of actual combat," Bryan said. "Quite right."

When Macy returned, he threw himself into a chair and reached for his pipe. "Aycock's dead. I killed him."

"Good show."

"Did you really?"

"In my dreams."

The pilots of A Flight surrounded their squadron leader, apologized for the trouble. Macy lifted a hand, shook his head. Didn't want their apologies.

"What was his big drip anyway? I don't understand what we did wrong."

"Dangerous stunting over a populated area," Macy said. It had the sound of a quote. "Was it? Were you?"

"Stunting, yes," Bryan said. "I don't think it was dangerous. I wouldn't say we were over a populated area either. We had company, Macy."

"Who? Someone up there with you?"

"Spitfires."

"What exactly were you doing?"

"Dogfighting."

Macy picked up a pamphlet, reached it toward Bryan. "You weren't, you know."

"What is this?" Bryan took the pamphlet, frowned at it, insulted. "A training manual?"

"Aycock wants us to study it. I marked the page."

Bryan began to read, lowered it. "But this is absurd."

"Did I say it wasn't?"

The informational pamphlet explained the effect of high speed turns on pilots and the potential for blackouts. Bryan read aloud, "Maneuver at high speeds in air fighting is not now practicable."

"Read the note in the margin," Macy said. "That's Aycock's writing."

"The era of the dogfight is over," Bryan read. He lowered the pamphlet. "Then would someone mind very much telling me what we just did?"

The station commander was not done with the dogfighting incident. He summoned Bryan in for a talking to.

"We were on the brink of a world war. These hijinks cannot be tolerated."

Bryan's brows drew together.

Aycock growled, "You have a question, Flying Officer?"

"Yes, sir. How did we move so quickly from *are* to *were*?"

"What?"

"On the brink of war, sir. Are we not?"

"We are not. Thanks to the level head of Neville Chamberlain. Britain will not go to war for Czechoslovakia."

And he explained that the Prime Minister had called a conference at Munich.

France, Germany, Italy, and Great Britain had reached an agreement at a conference in Munich whereby Czechoslovakia would cede all districts having fifty percent or more German-speaking population to Germany, if Hitler would leave the rest alone.

"France, Germany, Italy, and Great Britain," Bryan said. "Did anyone consult Czechoslovakia on this?"

"It's best for them."

"What becomes of the Skoda armament works?"

"That remains in Czech hands."

"I see the method of this madness."

"No, you don't," Aycock said. "No, you *do not*. I shall tell you this once, then you are to forget it: The Luftwaffe have four thousand aircraft. The RAF have forty two bomber squadrons, seventy Hurricanes—Hurricanes, not Hurricane squadrons—six Spitfires, a critical shortage of spares, and reserves of only two hundred pilots. And that is the only reason you still have wings. *Now you see.*"

Bryan returned to the barracks.

Macy stood ready to go to war for him, but Bryan shook his head. "Old clot wrote me up. Paraded a lot of numbers in front of me. It's past a joke."

"He's just talking, Cat," Prentice said. "If he could have sacked you, he would have done."

"He said that too."

The absurd numbers still troubled him.

The odds could not possibly be so bad. Could they? Bryan knew that Britain had let the Hun get ahead in arms production. But could the British deficit possible be that dire?

Have we made peace with the dictator because we can't fight him? How did we let this happen?

The post brought something unusual.

Prentice lifted up a large envelope. "Who was flying D against the Spits last week. Bryan?"

"I was in D," Bryan said.

"Looks like this is for you." Prentice passed Bryan the envelope. It was addressed to "RJ-D, RAF Digby."

"Ah. My kite is getting mail," Bryan said.

He opened the envelope, and slid out a photograph of his Hurricane, its call letters RJ-D centered in a ring sight.

Macy looked over his shoulder. Whistled.

Prentice leaned over Bryan's other shoulder. "Oh, you're dead, Cat."

"I'm not Cat. Cat was my father."

"Not even blurry. Look at that."

"I see it. Thank you very much for pointing that out to me."

“Cheeky bugger.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

Bryan held the photograph at arm’s length. “I think I shall send it to Aycok when I leave here. It’s just the way he’d like to remember me.”

“No, Bryan. He should very much like you in a bowler hat. Do mind your step. That’s twice you’ve crossed King James. And, as the Yanks say, three strikes and you’re out.”



PAUL RITTER SCORED TWO more victories over the Ebro bulge in quick succession.

"What got into Ritter!"

"I think I have the hang of this," Ritter said.

He was accustomed to the Messerschmitt now. He didn't need to think about flying. All his concentration went to combat – but only his own combat. So said Fritz when Fritz claimed a victory that Ritter didn't see.

"Just say you saw it, Ritter. I can't find anybody who saw it. If I were Spanish this would be a confirmed kill. I can tell you exactly how it happened. I can't believe you didn't see it. You're supposed to be my wingman. You're so busy filling your own bag."

"Are you sure *you* saw it, Fritz?"

"You bastard!"

"Yes, I'm sure you're right."

"You saw it then?"

"No. I'm a bastard."

"Ritter!"

"This happened on their side of the line I assume."

"Yes."

"What color smoke did I see?"

"Black. Is that a trick question?"

"I didn't make up the questions."

"You damn well don't see glycol coming out of a radial engine."

"Petrol vapor is white. They have petrol, don't they?"

"Why are you trying to trip me up?"

"Give me that." Ritter grabbed Fritz's report, read what he was supposed to have seen, pushed it back at him, and filled out a witness's report to give him confirmation for the kill.

Autumn brought rough skies, rain again, and mud. The pilots read in the week-old newspapers reporting on the Munich Conference. All the pilots were relieved that war hadn't broken out without them.

Early in October Ritter's ME was damaged, but he wasn't in it.

Red bombers had hit the airfield at La Cenia, destroying one ME 109 and damaging four others. One of those was Ritter's.

The replacement fighters coming from Germany were ME 109Ds.

They were fit with a more powerful Daimler Benz engine, but that engine wasn't fuel-injected, so right away Ritter hated it. The D model also had a larger turning circle, and no wing guns. It had a 20 mm cannon firing through the propeller hub, which was great when it worked, which it usually didn't, as it tended to seize up from the engine heat. There were too many bugs in this transitional model, so Ritter asked to keep his repaired 109C.

The weather turned cold. The ME's closed cockpit, much-cursed at the height of summer, was a blessing now. Ritter didn't mind cold unless it was the cold of an open cockpit in winter at 5000 meters up.

Following one turbulent flight without intercepts Ritter came down and was surprised to see Erwin Halle hidden behind his fuselage, leaning against it for support, taking in great gulps of air, and swallowing hard.

Couldn't believe it.

He does get airsick.

Ritter had long since dismissed that rumor.

He watched Halle navigate fragiley back to operations. He paused put on a good front before going in.

Weakness had always wakened in Ritter an impulse to kick. Now he just watched and wondered: *What in hell ever drove you to become a fighter pilot?*

Mid November, the Nationalists declared the Battle of Ebro a victory. The toll on the ground had been ungodly on both sides.

The Luftwaffe's fighter squadrons were ordered to stand down. And Berlin was ordering Erwin Halle home.

"They can't!" Paul said. "Why are they pulling him so soon?"

"I think they're going to suck his brains out and make copies of him," Dieter said.

In the four and a half months that Halle had been piloting a Messerschmitt,

he'd passed up everyone else's year-long scores.

Halle collected Christmas greetings to deliver for everyone who would be stuck here in Spain through the holiday.

A Tannenbaum had arrived to cheer those still posted in Spain.

The legionnaires were going to play Sankt Nikolaus for the local children and fill their shoes with treats. When the children didn't have shoes, Sankt Nikolaus would supply those too.

For the first of several farewell parties for Erwin Halle, the Staffel planned to go into Saragossa.

Ritter stuck his head into Operations. Hissed. The Adjutant didn't look up.

"Hey." Ritter tossed a glove at him. The Adjutant picked up the glove from his desk as if wondering how it got there. He looked over, saw Ritter leaning in doorway.

"Where's Halle?"

"He went to church."

"Sure. Right. Where is he?"

"Check your bung hole, Ritter."

"I'm saving myself for you."

The Adjutant threw Ritter's glove back at him.

Ritter checked the motor pool.

The Mercedes was gone. The vehicle log showed Halle's destination as Saragossa.

Ritter reported back to the others. "He started without us."

Halle's Staffel piled into a truck and drove out after him.

The sappers had the road patched together well enough that all the bridges stood, and no downed trees barred the way. There were still bomb craters but not big ones. It was a long jolting ride to Saragossa.

The pilots checked the brothel first. Halle wasn't in the lobby.

After fifteen minutes, no Halle appeared.

They tried the cabaret next.

Halle wasn't there, but they were, so they started Halle's farewell party without him.

Ritter walked unsteadily across the wide plaza. He could smell the river, sensed its open valley in the blackness behind the great hulking mass of a basilica that rose before him. The massive church was domed and towered like a mosque. At the center of its roof, a cluster of brightly tiled cupolas of many colors surrounded a greater dome.

Ritter was passing the building, when he saw, on the street beside the plaza, the Mercedes.

Ritter stepped inside the basilica.

Ornate passages smelled of beeswax and incense. Flemish tapestries hung in small inner chapels. Marble pilasters soared to byzantine cupolas. Ritter's eyes were watery, so the candle flames were all haloed.

These buildings, he decided, were best toured drunk.

He came to a side chapel. It was oval, tiled all different colors, surrounded by marble columns, and hung with brocades.

Inside the chapel there were three altars behind a silver grille. On the righthand altar stood a Madonna on a marble plinth surrounded by many many candles. The olive wood figure was black with the soot of centuries of devotion from all those candles burning at her feet. She bowed her blackened head over the flames. Sad, she was always sad.

There was one person here, kneeling.

You've got to be kidding, Ritter thought. He'd gone to church. He'd actually gone to *church!*

Ritter would have laughed, but no quiet was thicker than the quiet of a church.

Ritter hung back. He wouldn't go into the chapel.

He'd always said Erwin Halle was an altar boy, but Ritter wouldn't have believed this if he hadn't seen it. This show wasn't for anyone's benefit. No one was here.

How can you believe in this?

Ritter rejoined the party at the cabaret. Halle never showed.

The sky was spongy black without stars. Ritter looked down from the mirador to the steep road that lead up to the Staffel's villa. He was alone up here.

He heard footsteps behind him.

The silhouette in the dimlit doorway was immediately recognizable.

Halle froze like a stag at the edge of an open glade. He asked without alarm, "Who is here?"

Ritter answered from the balustrade, "*Prosit.*"

"Paul." Halle walked out to the mirador.

Ritter passed him a bottle. "Help me kill this."

Halle took it, looked at the Spanish label, tilted it to see how much was left. "Must it die tonight?"

"It will."

"Pros't." Halle drank. He didn't usually drink, but he didn't need to be well tomorrow.

He passed the bottle back to Ritter. "Don't eat the new Staffelkapitän alive, will you do that for me?"

"If that's an order."

"It is."

"I wondered that you didn't kick my ass back to Berlin in the first week."

Halle held up a thumb and forefinger barely apart to say how close he'd

come.

"Bet it's snowing there," Halle said. "Berlin. I wonder how long I'll keep my tan. I'm going to miss the sun. The beach. Beautiful churches here. Are you Catholic, Paul?"

"Sort of. Not really. No."

"Someone talk you out of it?"

"No. My idea."

Halle took another hit off the bottle. "A month before I came here, the Gestapo stopped me. I was returning to my airfield. I had ashes on my forehead. They said they can't tell Catholics by the size of their noses like Jews, so if I kept my mouth shut I could be tolerated, but there I am in uniform with ashes on my face. I was 'a black vulture of German nationalism.' They told me the head of the Luftwaffe is the second man in the Party, as if I might not know this. I think they expected to see my ashes removed at the neck, but our Hermann just laughed."

Our Hermann? "*Göring*?"

"That's who they took me to. The Fat One shook a finger, just like this. Just like I was a child. Told me not to provoke the Gestapo. He told me I ought to join the Party. I said no."

"What did he say to that?"

"He told me not to provoke *him*. Then he told the Gestapo to take me to my airfield. They weren't happy."

"How do you know I'm not a Gestapo observer?"

"You're not."

"How do you know? Because I played the *Lorelei*?"

Halle had requested the song at one of his going away parties. Someone recently arrived from Germany said, "But it's illegal. It was written by a Jew." To which Halle said, "That is so dumb." And Ritter had played the song.

"Paul, you have no allegiance past the Luftwaffe."

It was irritating to be read so clearly. It was true. Ritter had never heard anyone put it so perfectly in words.

"And you? God and country but not the Nazi party?"

"I'll serve them as long as they're running my country. But I will survive the National Socialists."

"You're planning on living a thousand years."

"The Reich won't. Too much hate to stand a thousand years. I don't hate anyone."

"Don't you have to hate to kill?"

"Do you? Did you hate those seven men you shot down?"

Ritter thought about this. "No."

He was really rather fond of them.

Halle said, "I'm going home on the mail plane." That was the JU 52 to Stuttgart. "Anything you want delivered, Paul?"

Ritter shook his head. "Not unless you can send back a keg of Bavarian beer for Otto."

"If you're serious I can probably do that. Any letter for your parents?"

"They don't know where I am."

"They'll be worried sick."

"My mother is dead. And Herr Ritter can buy another son if he needs to."

"Are you sure you want to do this? I don't know if you realize quite how much of a bastard you can be."

"I'm a natural."

"You mean that."

Ritter gave a slow cold smile. "You know, whenever someone calls you a bastard, if you just agree with them, they don't listen. You're the first one who's ever caught me."

"I didn't mean to."

Ritter couldn't maintain eye contact anymore. If eyes were windows of the soul he didn't want to be invaded. "You're a dangerous man, Erwin. You pay too much attention to people."

Ritter turned, rested his elbows on the elaborate balustrade. He scanned the black sky as if expecting an air raid.

"The Reich doesn't care about legitimacy," Halle said.

Ritter smiled toward the sky. "They don't care about an unwed German girl giving birth. They *would* have something to say about a married woman giving birth to a child other than her husband's."

"Do you know who your father is?"

"I have no idea. Could be a Jew for all I know."

Ritter had been born after several years of fruitless marriage. His birth didn't coincide well with his father's tour of duty. Mother had been blond. Herr Ritter's hair, before it had fallen out, had been dark blond.

Paul suspected Herr Ritter meant to disown him as soon as he produced a suitable replacement.

"My stepmother never had children. Herr Ritter had a lot of women. In twenty years I'm the only child. One *suspects*."

"You're right. Herr Ritter will be concerned."

Ritter's stepmother, Jutta, was a dark-haired, dark-eyed woman, so no one blinked at Ritter's coloring when the three Ritters stood together as a family. Herr Ritter's choice had been carefully considered.

Appearances were everything.

"Don't you ever want to call him Father?"

So odd the questions Halle asked. No one had ever asked Ritter how he felt. To keep up appearance, that was all that mattered. Whatever was inside was fine as long as it stayed there. Keep face, that's the thing. Immaterial that there may be nothing underneath, but keep face.

He'd been raised Catholic, but he wasn't permitted to go to confession.

Someone will assume you've done something.

"Herr Ritter is some man whose name I happen to have," Ritter said. "He let's me keep it as long as I carry it well. I don't like stand-ins. You noticed."

"Look at me."

"I can't. I really can't."

Ritter drank down the rest of the bottle. His head was ringing. "It's dead." He swung the bottle. "My kill."

Ritter faced Halle now. "That was all shit, you know. What I said. I made it up."

Halle said nothing.

"Mind you I shall kill you if you repeat any part of that."

The threat was spoken for its own sake. Ritter had never heard Halle telling tales about anyone.

Ritter hadn't the vaguest idea why he told Halle all that. Ritter had never told anyone, not Fritz, who knew he was of doubtful parentage, but not all that other *Scheiße*.

"I hate the ground," Ritter said. "I wish I could go up and not have to land. Ever."

"Be careful what you wish for."

"I don't have to be," Ritter said, and launched the empty bottle off the mirador. He waited till they heard the distance brittle crash. "I mean it."



BRYAN CATRELL COULDN'T SAY when he first noticed Mrs Aycock or sensed he might have something in common with her.

Mum Aycock was a quiet person, always decorous and wistfully sad. She never complained. She would do motherly things for "her lads" of the fighter squadrons, who all called her "Mum," even though she had less than a dozen years on even the youngest of them and she had no children of her own. She was plain, soft-spoken, and slender. She had a slightly rounded way of standing with her arms folded at her waist. If you were airborne, she would be looking up at you, waving.

She went through life quietly, folded like a flower in the shade.

Bryan knew what it was to be exquisitely bored while great things were happening somewhere else.

James Aycock was gone for the afternoon. He hadn't taken his wife with him. He forbade her to fly.

Mum Aycock was walking at the edge of the airfield in the cold sunlight. Something slipped from the pages of the book she carried under her arm. Bryan ran to retrieve it. It was a pressed rose. He caught her up. "Mum?"

"Oh. Thank you. They're everywhere."

Roses grew all around the Aycock's cottage. When the bushes were in bloom there were roses in every vase in the Mess.

Bryan looked over her sloped shoulder as she placed the pressed flower

back in the leaves of the book. "Pretty," he said.

"I can't stand the bally things myself," Mum said. Then, "If you're a gentleman, you'll forget I said that."

"But I'm not. But not to worry, you didn't say it."

"I always thought you were a nice man."

"I was a nice man."

She gave a faint sad smile. "I hear a heart breaking."

"I'm not sure if the heart isn't more humiliated than broken."

"Trampled one way or another," Mum said.

"You have read my diary."

"You don't keep a diary."

"You also read that in my diary. How did you know I don't keep one?"

"You're not the type."

"What's the type?"

"Backward-looking men who tend immaculate rose gardens."

"Been into the sherry, have we, Mum?"

"Must have done," Mrs Aycock said, and, before she could dig herself any deeper, took the offensive, "Who is the girl who broke your heart?"

"She's marrying someone else."

"Which she? You have dozens of girlfriends, Bryan."

He hadn't meant to, but he heard himself telling her all about Lady Jane and his flight to Aberdeen the autumn before.

He'd obtained Jane's address in Switzerland from a friend of hers and he'd written to her several times. He never heard from her. Finally he was getting the idea that there might be a reason for that. Then he read of her engagement in the *Times*. She was marrying an earl. And he felt foolish.

"I guess I wasn't quite on. I'm a ridiculous middle class boy."

"I daresay this is the first time you have ever had a woman decamp on you," Mrs Aycock said.

"You're laughing at me."

"A little."

When she smiled, Bryan couldn't remember why he'd ever thought she was plain. She glanced away.

"Mrs Aycock," he said, beginning a question.

She waited.

"What is your Christian name?"

"Mrs."

"Mrs Aycock," he started over.

She waited, not prompting him. She clutched her book to her chest.

"Would you like to go up?"

Her expression melted to blank incomprehension.

He nodded aside to the field where the squadron hack, a Hawker Hart, was sitting, ready for flight.

She gave a small gasp. Her face brightened. Dormant life flickered and she was radiantly pretty. Then the spark faded down to disappointment as reality re-asserted itself, and she folded herself back into her place. "Mr Aycock would kill you."

"I shan't tell him if you don't file a flight report."

Only one answer was possible. "Yes. Please."

Bryan bundled her up for the cold open cockpit and helped her in. She made quite a picture in the over-sized sheepskin jacket, two scarfs, leather helmet and goggles. But he didn't dare take a photograph.

He didn't know if she was wearing gloves. Her hands were lost in the long sleeves. He strapped her in snug.

The erk said, "Sir, if it's all right with you, I don't see her."

"Of course not. She's not here."

The bi-plane lifted from the aerodrome. In the wake of the Munich crisis, the field had been primitively camouflaged. Hitler had been ceded the German-speaking areas of Czechoslovakia if he promised to leave the rest unmolested. Chamberlain had accomplished Peace in Our Time.

Someone else had sense not to believe it, and the aerodrome's field and hangar roofs here were painted with wavy lines of green and black.

Peace was returning to Spain in the form of defeat. The bloody Civil War was winding down and Great Britain had recognized Franco's Fascist government a fortnight ago.

Everyone refused to be impressed with the Luftwaffe's success in Spain. How could the Germans *not* do well while attacking defenseless villages and shooting down Reds who piloted nothing better than tomato crates?

The sun came out as the Hawker Hart climbed. A haze showed on grey tree branches. Spring was nearly here.

It always struck Bryan odd to be able to step back far enough to view the world like a map, to see the outlines of pastures, and threads of roads with their slow-crawling motor cars.

He dipped a wing over the red brick buildings of Cranwell. He twisted around to look at his passenger to see if she knew where they were. She clapped her hands, which were lost somewhere in those long sleeves, like a child.

He asked through the speaking tube, "How are you doing back there?"

"Lovely, thank you."

"In the mood for a loop?"

"Can we!"

He took her up high, through a stinging cold wisp of cloud, and he turned the heavens up-side-down for her.

Then it was time to think about finding his way back to his aerodrome.

It was easy. He looked for the green and black wavy lines painted on the open field.

Late in the evening, Wing Commander Aycock returned to base. Mum greeted him, hung up his coat, asked after his journey.

He lit his pipe slowly and asked, "Anything special to report, dear?"

His wife shrugged her thin shoulders, folded her arms. "No."

He climbed the stairs in chill silence.

She knew at once she had been caught in a lie.

It hadn't been a question. *Anything to report.* It had been a chance to confess.

She sat on the edge of a chair. Organised her thoughts. She knew she couldn't make contact with Bryan. Any attempt would make things look worse. She and he had only gone flying, nothing else.

She could talk to James.

No. That would be protesting too much.

She rose. Only one thing to do. Make tea.

She couldn't imagine what her husband was imagining. She would just have to read it in his diary.

Bryan would find out soon enough one way or another.

On Good Friday, the alarms sounded. German troops had entered Moravia and Bohemia. Herr Hitler meant to have all of it, the Czech lands, the armament works, all, except the piece that had been carved off for Poland during the Munich conference. Der Führer would get that too in time, no doubt.

"Hitler lied!" Wing Commander James Aycock bellowed.

"Coo! Fancy that," the sergeant orderly mumbled under his breath.

But James Aycock was genuinely astonished. He slumped, instantly older.

The Chain Home early warning system was turned on twenty-four hours a day from now forward.

The squadrons received the news of the invasion like a thrown glove.

"We're at war then!"

"No."

"No?"

"No?"

"What does it *take*?"

There was no explaining it to young men trained to fight. What made anyone think the Hun would stop with Czechoslovakia? The next step would be Poland. That much was fairly obvious. Hitler already thought Gdansk and the Corridor was his.

"If we don't stand together we all fall down," Squadron Leader Macy said. "It's only a question of what order, and even that is not too difficult to puzzle out."

On Easter Sunday, Macy entered the common room and gave Bryan his orders. "Catrell, you're being posted elsewhere."

Bryan paled. Not that he minded leaving here. It was the shock of being given the sack.

Macy's neat mustache thinned on his tautly stretched lip, his pipe clenched hard between white teeth. He faced the window and narrowed his eyes as if trying to see something on the horizon. "Wasn't me, Bryan. But I don't think it's a bad idea."

Bryan hooked a thumb around a button of his tunic. "Why doesn't it feel like a good idea from here?"

"I've always liked you. But you rub up the Winco the wrong way."

"I'm sure he's posting me way out of the way."

"I'm not sure it's been arranged yet. Wherever you go, it's got to be better for you than here."

Bryan nodded. "You're right." Suddenly he was looking forward to it. "I would like a change."

But when the final orders arrived the next day, Prentice hovered in the doorway, not coming in. "Sorry, Cat."

"What are you doing way over there, Prentice?"

Prentice held the paper as far away from himself as he could and he edged backwards. "They used to kill the bearer of bad news."

Macy stalked to the door, grabbed the message from Prentice and stalked back in.

The other pilots clustered to see, except Bryan who remained in his sling chair, feet over the side. "How bad is it? Shall I murder Prentice?"

Someone read over Macy's shoulder and whistled long and low.

"Run, Prentice, run."

"Is it abroad?" Bryan asked. "I think I should like to go abroad."

"It is, actually," Macy said. "Abroad."

"Nairobi?"

"Wrong."

"Singapore?"

"Wrong."

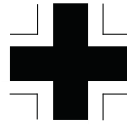
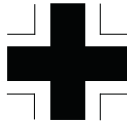
"Ismailia?"

"No. It's Warsaw."

"Warsaw?"

Warsaw. Bryan riffled through his memory, a little slow off the mark. "But there is no RAF presence in Warsaw."

Macy lowered the orders with a wry straight-line smile. "Bang right first time."



THE HEAVY WOODEN DOOR opened a crack. A dark eye peered out, grew huge. Jutta Ritter opened the door wider, restrained shock on her thin face. She whispered, "Come in."

Paul Ritter took off his officer's cap and walked into his father's home.

Jutta put him in the library. "Let me think how to break this to him," she said, hushed, and withdrew.

How to break this to him. As if Herr Ritter had become delicate and Paul's homecoming was difficult news.

The house was overbearing, heavy with tapestries and upholstered chairs and dark paneled walls. Oil paintings in monstrous frames depicted the sashed and bedizened bourgeois from whom Herr Ritter sprang.

These people are strange to me.

Ludwig Ritter made his appearance, wearing a dark suit and carrying his silver headed walking stick, and Ritter wondered for a moment if he were to be beaten with it.

Herr Ritter was entirely bald now, still lean, his body custom-fit for straight-backed chairs. He fit a monocle to his eye to inspect Paul. Jutta stood behind, her hands clasped tight.

Herr and Frau Ritter opted for the nothing-is-wrong approach. Always a good one, Paul thought. They welcomed his return. No one referred to the fact that he had not sent word for an entire year.

Jutta did most of the talking. "How brown you are."

"Am I? It's faded. I looked like a Moor."

"Spain?" Herr Ritter guessed.

"Yes, *mein Herr*."

"Did you learn any Spanish?"

"No, *mein Herr*."

"That's good."

They asked after his medals and insignia. "Is this good?"

"This one?" Paul said. "Everyone has this one if they did anything at all."

He pulled at the red, black, and white ribbon of the Iron Cross second class.

"What about this one?" Jutta pointed to the badge below his left pocket, an eagle encircled by a victor's wreath and carrying a swastika in its talons.

"That means I'm a pilot."

"Oh." She pointed to another swastika-toting eagle over his right pocket.

"And this?"

"That means I'm in the Luftwaffe."

"What about these?" She straightened the yellow collar tabs each embroidered with a cluster of oak leaves and two sets of wings.

"That means he's an Oberleutnant, darling."

"Is that good?"

"I'm an officer," Paul said.

They decided that was good.

"Are you allowed to wear a tie in uniform?" Herr Ritter asked. Sounded doubtful.

"It's part of the uniform, *mein Herr*."

"Odd sort of uniform. Mufti." Herr Ritter sniffed. "Odd sort of duty, if you ask me."

"All the young men want to be in the Luftwaffe," Jutta offered. "I think he looks very handsome."

"Any other medals?" Herr Ritter asked.

"When everyone is home I'm due a Spanish Star."

"Ought we to have a celebration?" Jutta asked.

"It's probably expected," Herr Ritter said.

"Then we must."

The party happened to fall on the date that Burgos radio announced that the Spanish civil war had ended on 29 March 1939. The Nationalists had taken Madrid. Even the Americans must recognize the legitimate government now. France and Great Britain already had done.

"We have a hero at our party," Jutta said. "How wonderful.

They had assembled a gathering of the right people.

Jutta arrayed herself in a tight-sleeved, floor-length gown of black wool crepe that draped close to her pinched waist then fell in long flowing folds

like a Grecian gown. She'd regimented her hair into neat glossy cadogen rolls that looked as if they could maintain that position for a long time to come.

After she had greeted all her guests she found Paul by himself. She slipped her gloved hands around his arm, and guided him firmly back to the others. "Your father has some good news. The government asked if we had any jobs unworthy of Germans. Of course we do, we have factories. The machines are so loud you could go deaf. Now, your father can pay the government for Jewish workers. It's a lot less than he has to pay Germans. The government feeds and clothes and houses the Jewish workers. Good jobs are left for good Germans. Someone has to do the menial chores. I think it's a splendid idea — make them work for their keep. We've been supporting them all along. I hope one is that thieving banker who charged those usurious rates on our business loans when no one else had money to invest."

"Why don't you import some American darkies," Paul asked. "I like their music better."

"I can never tell if you're making a comment or making fun of me."

"And that frightens me, Ju."

"You're your mother's child," she said. "God knows you're not his."

Paul wondered if she knew exactly what she'd just said. Had Herr Ritter told her he was incapable? Paul thought not. It was not Herr Ritter's way.

But after fifteen years of fruitless marriage, perhaps even Jutta could figure that out.

The woman was probably ground down with scorn for not producing German babies. The Reich was giving awards for breeding. Five children earned a woman a medal.

Jutta led Paul to a knot of people who were talking.

"They're actively doing something about the problem now," a woman was saying. "They finally got them out of the schools. I didn't want my children in school with *those* people."

"They spend so much time making themselves different," a man said. Might have been a relative. Paul didn't know.

"'Thou shalt not this and thou shalt not that.' And our food isn't good enough for them. It's not clean. Imagine that! Not clean enough! For them! 'God's chosen.' Really? Then let God take care of them! If they don't know where they're not wanted, they deserve two years hard labor for being stupid. If *Kristallnacht* didn't show them where they weren't wanted, they mustn't be allowed loose in society. You look like you have a comment, Young Herr Ritter?"

"No, that was expressive," Paul said. "I don't think I could add anything to that." He'd been trying to imagine Erwin Halle making that speech, and was having trouble believing that the two men were the same species.

Elsewhere in the room someone was clamoring for a toast to the returning hero.

Soon all the glasses were raised. To Paul Ritter.

Paul joined in, "To my mother's son." He lifted his glass to the frozen smiles of Herr and Frau Ritter.

The bell chimed a late arrival. Paul opened the door to a blond sunny face. "Fritz!"

Paul threw his arms around Fritz. Felt him chuckle against his chest.

"Cheer up," Fritz said. "Reinforcements have arrived!"

"They've all opened fire on me! Cover me!"

"Here." Fritz pushed a small gift-wrapped box at him.

The little jewelry box contained a Mickey Mouse pin.

"This is great!" Paul pinned it on his uniform. "What are you drinking, Fritz?" Paul picked up an empty champagne bottle and waved it. "These keep evaporating out the sides."

"Beer," Fritz said. "I have missed German beer. That Spanish pee water took so much to get drunk I used to spend the whole night watering the bushes."

Paul filled a stein for him. He found himself another bottle of champagne. Then he and Fritz stole upstairs where it was quiet.

The crucifixes that once hung in every bedroom had been replaced by portraits of Adolf Hitler.

Paul kept his voice low. "When I was a boy, Socialism was a word spoken in this house in the same voice as smallpox. Listen to them now. The whole flock is bleating."

"Ritter, that's the point. Isn't the idea of a democracy for a flock like this a prospect to drop you cold? Imagine this lot thinking for themselves. The right leader could have them singing *Hava Nagila*. Lucky for us Hitler took up the crook instead."

"Lucky!" Paul whispered. "Listen to them! Go down there and listen!"

"So what if it's all blather. They need cud to chew to keep them busy."

"I suppose you're making sense for once, Fritz. Only I don't like listening to that half-chewed stuff coming back up. There's acid in it. You wouldn't believe. And I consider myself fairly vicious."

"Consider yourself a shepherd dog. We're the teeth and brains of this group."

"I have an overwhelming urge to bite someone."

Paul searched through his drawers. At last he retrieved his cigarette holder and a rosary.

Fritz sneered at the beads. "You don't believe in that stuff."

"No. I don't see how anyone does."

"I didn't think you went for that shit," Fritz said, relieved. "Rome is the same as Moscow."

"Rome is the same as Moscow — go chew it downstairs!"

"It's true."

Paul pocketed the rosary. "This was my mother's."

"You should have said so."

Paul took another drink of champagne.

"Ritter, you're going to be sick tomorrow."

"It's what I started with. I can't switch now. I need something or I'll never endure this."

When they rejoined the party, an American businessman cornered Paul.

"What is the difference between a Fascist and a Communist?"

Paul blinked. The man was earnestly waiting for an answer.

"Fascists salute with an open hand. Reds salute with a fist," Paul said.

The man blinked.

"And Capitalists have round thumbnails," Paul continued. Paused. "And very tiny pricks."

The American's head jerked up from inspecting his thumbnails.

"And they are very gullible."

"I was asking a serious question."

"Do I look like a politician?"

"You fight for Fascism."

"I am a soldier. I serve my country."

"In Spain?"

"On the beaches of New York," Paul said.

Jutta was asking for him. Paul used her summons to escape from the man.

Jutta made Paul run through all his insignia again for her friends.

A woman asked gravely, "And what is this one?"

"That's Mickey Mouse," Paul said.

"I see."

It's a joke. Laugh, you solemn asshole.

A hunched-over little man spun suddenly around. He adjusted the spectacles on his nose and glowered at Paul's chest.

"The blond youth of Germany are being lead on a Jewish tether! Have you no pride! No shame! Mickey Mouse is the most miserable ideal ever concocted. This is a Jewish plot to undermine the strength of German youth. Your good sense ought to tell you that a dirty, filth-covered vermin—the greatest bacteria carrier in the animal kingdom—cannot be a suitable ideal for good people! Have you nothing better to exalt, that you play into the hands of American business Jews out to make money? Down with Jewish brutalization of the people! Down with Mickey Mouse. Wear the Swastika!"

"Excuse me," Paul said, attempting to withdraw.

The man tapped Paul with his walking stick. "I wrote a whole editorial on the subject. It was in the paper. Youth don't pay attention. How did you miss it?"

"I was probably in Spain strafing communists at the time," Paul said and didn't wait for a retort.

"Fritz, get me out of here."

Paul hung on Fritz's lapel, and they staggered outside. "Did you bring a car?"

"No," Fritz said.

"Shit."

Paul led the way to the carriage house, and pulled the cover off Herr Ritter's car.

Paul stared at the unveiled automobile. "He bought a new one."

It was a 1938 Mercedes Benz supercharged 540 K sports tourer. Black. Dazzling clean. Immaculate.

"Doesn't look like it's been out much," Fritz said.

"Herr Ritter just likes to own things. He loves his car. If you can say that Herr Ritter loves."

They climbed in, started it up. The fuel gauge remained where it was.

"No petrol," Paul said. "Can't get far on fumes."

"Drive," Fritz said. "I'll get us some petrol."

As they drove out of the residential area, Ritter noticed many shops with boarded windows. "Business gone bad?"

"Never better," Fritz said. "Something of a riot last fall. I guess the whole country was wading in broken glass."

"*Kristallnacht*." Ritter had heard it mentioned.

"That's it. Don't worry about it. They were all Jewish places. The Jews had to pay to clean it up. Drive in here."

Fritz pulled his Nazi strings to get the Mercedes' tank filled, and they drove off, careening through the streets, singing the *Horst Wessel Lied*. For Ritter, who could not give a rat's ass about a thug like Horst Wessel, the song was his own version of *Auld Lang Syne*. His and Fritz's first posting in the Luftwaffe had been to JG 134, Jagdgeschwader "Horst Wessel."

The banners high, the ranks closed firm

The SA marches with silent steady tread.

Comrades whom the Red Front and Red Storm shot

Are marching with us in spirit in our ranks.

Suddenly the front end of the car jumped the white-washed curb with the explosion of a blown tire and sound of twisted metal and the shattering of the headlamp — and then the slow creak of a bowing lamp post.

Ritter pulled himself off the dashboard and stared, offended, at the bent street lamp, and the fallen red, white, and black Nazi flag draped over the long crumpled hood. "What a stupid place to put that."

He tried to back the car away from the post but the two things were pretty well wed.

Fritz and Paul climbed out to see what could be done. They kept singing, and eventually the police found them.

The men in green coats made Paul Ritter stand up and face them. "Where are you posted?"

"Werneuchen." Ritter hiccupped. "I'm a flight instructor." He staggered into Fritz. "I fly better than I drive."

The buzz of the drink was beginning to wear off, and Ritter realized he was in trouble. *Fine. Arrest me. Do anything. Just don't send me home.*

Herr Ritter would kill him when he saw his car.

Then a limousine turned up the street. It rolled slowly to a stop. Men wearing black coats climbed out.

Gestapo.

The Gestapo officers asked what was going on here.

Ritter became very quiet. He let the civil police explain.

These black-coated Gestapo would either rescue Paul and Fritz or break them, just to show that they had the power.

Fortunately there were civil police here to put down.

A Gestapo officer put one arm around each of the pilots. These boys, he explained to the civil police, were heroes. This was all high-spirited fun. And after all, the last song these boys had been singing when the police had the bad judgment to arrest them had been *Deutschland Über Alles*.

The civil police retreated.

One of the Gestapo saviors grinned in Ritter's face, gave his shoulder a friendly squeeze, and advised him that the Führer did not approve of alcohol.

Ritter swore he would never touch it again as long as he lived, and at the moment he meant it.

"Heil Hitler," said the agent.

"Heil Hitler," Ritter said.

His stomach rolled. The champagne started up. He swallowed quickly. The aftertaste of vomit stayed in his mouth.



15



BRYAN CATRELL SLOUCHED, resting his cheek on his fist, and he gazed bleakly out the window at the passing clouds.

Prentice had delivered him to London to board the plane to Copenhagen. "I'll tell you all the Polish I know, Bryan."

"You know Polish?"

"*Dobry.*"

"What's that?"

"It means good."

"You couldn't tell me the word for bad? I fancy I should find that more useful."

"You can learn that one for yourself, Bryan."

"Thank you ever so much. What else do you have?"

"That's it."

Macy had given him a bottle of John Haig in farewell. He'd been told it was likely to be consumed by customs officials on arrival, so he drank most of it prior to his departure. He joined the plane to Copenhagen feeling none too well.

From Copenhagen he continued on to Gdynia on board a Lockheed Model 14 Super Electra. Most of the fourteen seats were empty. As it flew over the Baltic Sea, the coast rose blue from the horizon. Bryan wondered if he was

looking at Germany or Poland.

Good question, he answered himself.

As the Lockheed made its approach over the gulf, Gdynia's medieval spires poked up through the industrial haze. Farther beyond, he thought he could glimpse the hotly disputed city of Gdansk, universally recognized as the next item on A.H.'s list.

In spite of Poland's peril, Bryan had heard it said that Great Britain would never waste valuable equipment on Poland. No doubt Wing Commander Aycock considered himself to be sending nothing of value in the person of Great Britain's new assistant air attaché, Bryan Catrell.

And the true punchline to this joke Bryan only learned after he arrived.

Poland didn't have an air force.

Not as an independent armed force like the RAF or the Luftwaffe. The Polish Air Force had been subordinated as a rather neglected arm of the Polish Army.

The new assistant air attaché then learned that there was no air attaché *per se*. Bryan would answer to the military attaché, an Army Colonel who kept an office in Warsaw.

The Colonel was a swarthy, square-built man with a thick black mustache. He regarded Bryan with "the look." It was a guarded assessment charged with threatened masculinity, as if to say: what makes you think you're so special, fly boy?

"Gin, Flying Officer?" the Colonel asked.

"No, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Good for you," the Colonel said dryly and helped himself.

Running through Bryan's throbbing head was his single Polish word: *dobry*. When would he ever need to know *dobry*?

Soon after his arrival he attended an embarrassing airshow. There were a half dozen *Los* bombers – which were actually impressive – and the rest of the machines were humiliating. The Poles trotted out a monumental array of obsolete dead ends.

Bryan told the military attaché about it. The Colonel said, "The Polish Air Force, such as it is, is an army support unit. The army don't know what to do with aircraft."

"They don't *have* any aircraft," Bryan said.

Days later, on April 6th, the English language broadcast announced the signing of a mutual assistance agreement between Great Britain and Poland.

Someone must have told the Foreign Office about the air show.

Feeling a nuisance at the embassy, Bryan had himself shipped out to the field to attach himself to 110 Squadron of the Army Pursuit Brigade.

When he arrived he wondered if the air show hadn't been put on for a hard luck story, because the operational aircraft he found here, if not quite up to date, at least belonged to the proper decade. The Poles had pioneered the

technology in fact. Theirs was the first air force in the world to have all-metal monoplanes as front line fighters.

The Panstwowe Zakłady Lotnicze P.11 was an all-metal stressed-skin monoplane interceptor, armed with four light-calibre Polish-built machine guns. It was agile, and its gull wings afforded it good visibility, but it was an open cockpit craft with fixed landing gear. And though the P.11 had provision for a wireless, most of the aeroplanes in the squadron didn't have them. The radial engine was underpowered, giving the P.11 a maximum speed of 242 miles per hour.

Bryan had been braced for worse.

He had however expected his squadron to speak English. Did not everyone? Not one man in the squadron knew a word.

The Polish equivalent of a squadron leader knew French. He was a tall strapping son of a lumberjack with high-boned cheeks, a high flat brow, and thinning brown hair above, though he was only twenty-six years old. His name was Major Jan Bujakowski, and he became Bryan's keeper.

The men of his squadron called Bryan "Lieutenant Catrell," which made him feel like he'd been promoted, but the rank was only their equivalent of a Flying Officer.

He was billeted in primitive quarters, and the squadron spent much of the time sitting around a shabby crew room. Bryan hadn't seen the officers' mess and he was getting the idea that this was it. He hadn't seen anyone dressed in mess kit. Most wore a baggy one-piece overall of undyed linen. It was a spacious, utterly shapeless garment, equipped with several voluminous pockets, and the legs were gathered at the ankles. The Poles provided one such giant sack for Bryan with a badge on it bearing two stars for his rank. All the pilots looked rumpled.

Bryan shifted on the couch, arranging himself around a broken spring. The crew room hung under a thick cloud from their noxious cigarettes. Smoke ash like coal dust left a gritty film on the furniture and the windows.

A stream of inseparable syllables rushed past Bryan. There was some kind of cheerful challenge revolving round a locked attaché case.

Jan interpreted into French for Bryan:

"Zdzislaw say if Jerzy open the case, he can have all the money inside."

Jerzy had been watching too many American gangster films because he held his ear to the lock as if he were actually going to hear tumblers fall. He made delicate turns with his broad fingers.

Zdzislaw looked on, his massive arms crossed, confident of his money's security. Deep chuckles resonated in his barrel chest. He winked a blue eye at the Englishman, pointed at Jerzy, and said something in the way of a question.

Jerzy demanded silence. He was listening for all he was worth, deftly turning the lock, the back of his head towards Bryan.

Bryan, in sight of everyone but Jerzy, stealthily reached over to the case

and gave a light, deliberate tap to the side of it with his fingernail.

Jerzy's head bolted up, his broad fleshy face beaming with a surprised gap-toothed smile. All the others laughed.

With new enthusiasm Jerzy turned the lock the other way, listening intently, barking at the others for complete silence. When a suitable time passed, Bryan moved in for another covert fingernail tap as his squadron mates tried to contain themselves. At the second *click* of Bryan's fingernail Jerzy looked up with a triumphant air and the other pilots laughed themselves breathless. After the third tap, Jerzy, wearing a smug face of victory, dramatically tried the latch. His smile slipped to confusion when it failed to budge.

Someone told him what the Englishman had been doing.

Jerzy came at Bryan, making to strangle him. His snarling grimace was an ill-disguised grin.

As Jerzy throttled Bryan—his thumbs nowhere near Bryan's windpipe—Bryan thought that exile was not going to be as bad as he'd feared. You could go a long way without words.

And as soon as he learned how to fly a P.11 *Jedenastka* with its arsy-tarsy throttle, he was one of them. In the air, with no wireless, the language barrier disappeared altogether.

Bryan liked the Poles. The pilots of his squadron were boisterous, courageous. They acted with their hearts before their heads. And these boys could drink. Bryan had thought he could too, but his new friends left him afloat. The first bout he thought he had been doing well, matching them round for round. But the mead had insidiously dissolved the muscles in his legs, and when he tried to stand up, the floor came up and hit him. The Major told him confidentially, in French, "You need to be fatter."

And they could shoot. In a contest of marksmanship it was difficult to declare a winner with the bull's eye torn out every time. Using a pulley for a moving target failed to dislodge the log-jam in first place. Then the bottle of vodka made the rounds to handicap everyone. Bryan tried to pass on the drink, but that was not done, so his marksmanship went to hell, and Jan won in the end.

Bryan had earlier committed the mortal sin of watering his vodka. This was met with looks of complete horror. Thereafter drinks were thrown back neat and in one gulp.

Bryan found himself in the odd role of being the reserved one in the group. He'd never been good at keeping a stiff upper lip, so he thought this funny. His Polish friends referred to his English stoicism, and Bryan laughed.

They dragged him to the RC chapel on Sundays. Mass always ran long and Bryan used the time to catch up on his sleep. But then so did the other pilots. It was your duty to nudge the man on your right or left if he broke into a full snore, and to make sure he stood up and knelt and mumbled *et cum spiritu tuo* at the right places. And if by chance they *all* fell asleep, there was always a contingent of intense women across the aisle on Mary's side you

could count on to be praying for you. Bryan knew if heaven turned out to be RC after all, then he was going in spite himself.

The situation in Poland seemed calm since the announcement of the mutual assistance agreement. Then on 27 April, Jan told Bryan that the Germans had broken the world air speed record again.

"That news is a month old," said Bryan. "You mean the Heinkel 112."

"No," Jan said. "Another record. This happen yesterday. New record is 469 miles an hour. A Messerschmitt 109."

A flight mechanic drove Jan and Bryan to another airfield. Waiting for them there was a gull wing fighter that looked like a P.11 with a canopy over its cockpit, a stouter spinner, and a bigger cowling to house its bigger engine—a 970 horsepower Gnome-Rhone radial. And there were metal pods under the wings to cover the 20 mm cannon cradled in the struts.

"Is first," Jan made sure Bryan noted that.

The PZL P.24 was the first interceptor to be armed with two cannon. It also carried two 7.9 mm machine guns outboard of the cannon.

The P.24 had been the most advanced aeroplane of its kind when it was built. It stayed that way for the blink of an eye.

The radial engine barked to life, coughed out a swirling ball of exhaust. Three blades lashed then blurred as all the cylinders fired.

A brown dust cloud swept out from the propeller and flattened the yellowed grass. It had been a dry spring.

Then the mechanic turned the P.24 over to Bryan.

Chocks away, he taxied over the pitted field.

The P.24 was sure-footed on its wide track.

Its climb was brisk next to his *Jedenastka*.

Above the dust haze the sky was clear.

The seat had him perched high and the gull wing gave him wide visibility over drought-dulled fields.

He paid careful attention to landmarks because his map was nearly useless to him. No place looked in print like it sounded except perhaps for Lublin and Poznan. He'd been in Poland a week before he realized that "Varshava" was Warsaw.

He found the shrunken lake he'd been told to look for. His weapons were loaded. Wladyslaw the mechanic had chattered eager instructions. Jan translated, "Wlad say, you must fire the cannon."

Bryan moved the safety off with his thumb, and pushed the stick into a dive. He came in low, put a bead on a clump of reeds. Holding it was easy. The high wings made the aircraft as stable as a church pew. He depressed the trigger. The whole machine shook, roaring, spitting fire.

The lake exploded. Water spouted in lines of fountains. The muddy water flew high. The reeds were annihilated.

Bryan gave a wordless yell and pulled up.

Not so dusty!

This wasn't as bad as he'd expected. Not by half. The undercarriage didn't retract, and the P.24 was forty miles per hour slower than his Hurricane, but its speed might be enough to intercept the German bombers. And it could certainly bring a bomber down if it did get one in its sights.

As a fighter pilot, it was the German bombers Bryan needed to concern himself with. Forget the Messerschmitts, he was told. Messerschmitts don't destroy cities.

Bryan's squadron flew interceptors. Their job would be to take down any Heinkel 111, Dornier 17 and Junkers 87 that came to Poland.

Bryan thought this machine could do that.

He returned to the airfield and set the P.24 down gently on its scissor legs. The oleo struts within the fuselage absorbed the jolts over the lumpy ground.

Jan greeted him with a big grin. "Good aeroplane!"

Bryan took off his leather helmet. "Good aeroplane." He then confessed he'd had misgivings after seeing the machines at the air show.

"Those." Jan spat. "Those not even Polish. Those are French aircraft. Old ones."

"Why did you trot those out at the airshow?"

"Because we do not have these."

Polish erks were dismantling the P.24. They took solvent to the temporary factory markings.

Bryan was confused. "What? What are they doing?"

"The aircraft, the P.24, they are sold."

The workers were even removing the Polish national markings – the four squares of a red and white chessboard.

"Sold! You don't mean they were built for export?"

"Yes. For export. That is how you say. Your French is better than my French."

"But our squadron doesn't even have any of these yet!" Bryan cried. *Our squadron*. He thought of it as his squadron. "Why is Poland selling its best aircraft?"

"The army, it need money. Don't you –!" He mimicked Bryan's gaping mouth. " – at me! It is not my idea."

"Who bought them? Who bought these aeroplanes?"

"These go to Greece."

"Bulgaria," Wlad said.

"Greece," Jan said.

"Bulgaria," Wlad said.

They argued in Polish, but the nations' names were close enough for Bryan to understand that these aeroplanes were leaving on a southbound train.

Bryan interrupted, "And where are Poland's P.24s stationed?"

"We have not P.24s."

Bryan said slowly, "Your government sold them all."

Jan nodded.

"I don't understand."

"It is not to be understood." Jan strode away, leaving Bryan behind. Bryan sensed deep wrath, and he ran after Jan.

"Look, I don't know how this is going to be received from an outsider, but I have to say this is a stupid strategy."

"What strategy?" Jan said.

Bryan heard the bitterness now. He stammered, and Jan continued. "We know! Do not tell *us*. We are in the hands of army whose chief do not believe in air power."

"What *does* he believe in?"

"Cavalry."

"That's archaic."

"It works in 1920 against the Russians. Of course the Russians have not aircraft in 1920. You want to know strategy? I tell you strategy. Aeroplanes are taxis and spies. Liaison and reconnaissance. We go from here to there and we go up and look around. The Pursuit Brigade?" He spat on the ground.

"So what does the army intend to do with the Pursuit Brigade?"

"Our leaders are like our aeroplanes — this way, that way. Too many design. None carry through. What is now strategy? I do not know. It is classified."

"Christ!"

"Yes, we need him." Jan crossed himself. "I wish you speak Polish. I tell you what I really think."

"I already know."

"Yes, I think you do," Jan said and hugged him suddenly. "We are good fighters and we are not afraid. We have our English friends!"

"Where are we going?"

Bryan had noticed their driver wasn't taking them back the way they'd come.

"You see the bomber now. The *Los*."

"The Elk!" Bryan brightened. "Yes! I've seen it. First class!"

The PZL P.37 Elk, at 305 miles per hour was the fastest bomber anywhere. It was a big, clean-lined, truly modern aeroplane with retractable undercart. The Elk could carry a load heavier than the Elk itself.

"We have thirty squadrons of twelve Elk each."

"You have three hundred and sixty of those bombers! That's excellent!"

"Target date is 1941."

Bryan coughed. He just caught on that Jan didn't know any future tense verbs in French.

The Poles *would* have three hundred and sixty *Los* bombers.

In 1941.

"What happens if the Germans don't agree with that date? Say they want to move the war up a bit. How many do you have now?"

"Now?"

"Yes, now."

"I do not know. We export Elks too."

When they arrived at the factory, the first thing Bryan noted, before they went inside, was the lack of gun emplacements to defend the installation.

"Jan, there are no defenses here. This is the first place the German bombers will hit."

"Then we stop them before they get here," Jan said.

As they toured the factory Jan said, "Stop worry about the ME 109. I do not believe the Nazi have a fighter that go 469 miles an hour."

Bryan pointed at the sleek Elk. "Me, I'd still like to see a dorsal machine gun on these bombers to keep the Messerschmitts off their backs."

"They make a model of Elk with three machine gun," Jan said.

And a proud PZL representative pressed the Major to tell the English attaché something.

"This man. He say they plan one of these as a fighter with eight forward gun. Be like Spitfire."

The PZL rep grinned brightly.

Bryan bit his tongue. Not for nothing was the bomber called "Elk." It was huge. With its fifty-eight foot span and weighing five tons empty, it would have the turning radius of Noah's Ark. And for rate of roll, twenty four hours thought Bryan, who guessed the Elk would stand a better chance of qualifying as a minor planet than as a fighter plane. He answered the grin, "It is a most excellent bomber."

But Jan was laughing too hard to translate.

On the jarring ride back to the fighter squadron's aerodrome on a treacherous road, Bryan asked. "Whose idea was a delivery date in 1941?"

"I am not sure. The English, I think."

"Sounds like something we would do."

Jan took Bryan scouting for possible locations for forward air bases, where British and French allied bombers could refuel after dropping bombs on Germany's weapons centers when war broke out.

Bryan remembered Aycok telling him that 30 of the 42 English bomber squadrons couldn't penetrate deep enough into Germany to hit strategic target and get themselves home again.

"See this way," Jan said. "Your bombers, they take off France, they bomb deep in Germany, they land here. We refuel them, load more bombs, send them back over Germany again. They land France. Our bombers do same. What do you think of that?"

"It's good," Bryan said. He thought it was so good that the suggestion had better not come through him. Suggestions from Bryan Catrell were likely to squib it. To date, English assistance or even an exact definition of the form it was to take was slow in coming. Bryan was beginning to wonder if "slow" were even the proper term.

He confided to Jan. "I have to believe England's intentions toward Poland are half-hearted. Otherwise they would not have sent *me*."

Jan refused to believe this. "You understand everything."

Bryan understood too much. He told Jan, "Your government ought to open high level staff talks. Make our Chiefs of Staff talk directly to yours. Our chiefs will either have to accept the Polish plan or say just what exactly England's intentions are."

Jan thought it a capital idea and he sent it up the ladder. Not long afterward, Bryan was called in from the field to report to the military attaché in Warsaw.

"The Poles want staff talks with England!" the Colonel bellowed at the assistant air attaché. "The Chiefs of Staff are somewhat concerned."

Somewhat concerned was diplomat-ese for something on the order of an air raid alert.

"What the devil could have possessed the Poles to imagine such a thing?"

The question was rhetorical, so Bryan said nothing.

"Who would have thought the Poles would have the impudence to come to our door with a shopping bag. Whatever gave them the idea!"

"If we're to be left to it here, I think we deserve to be told," Bryan said.

The Colonel stopped short. He regarded Bryan as something alien. "Who precisely are *we*, Flying Officer Catrell?"

Bryan shut his mouth. Felt a chill.

They intend to abandon us.

Us.

Me and the Poles.

The first of August brought a touch of rain, hardly enough to settle the dust, but the cool dampness in the evening felt good.

At dusk Jan came to Bryan with leather helmet and goggles in hand. "Want to fly?"

"Any time."

Jan waved for him to come along. Jan said nothing more. Only pointed him at a P.11.

Wlad helped Bryan into his parachute.

"Where am I going, Wlad?"

"Follow Jerzy," Wlad said.

Jerzy was grinning hugely. His wide-spaced teeth looked like a picket fence in his broad doughy face. Jerzy had taken a fancy to Bryan. Anything Bryan did, Jerzy thought was great. Jerzy knew only three English words, yes, no, and cheers, and he used them at every conceivable opportunity.

The crack and snarl of waking engines broke the evening stillness.

Bryan followed Jerzy up into the darkening sky. There was no radio in this particular *Jedenastka*. It didn't matter. Bryan was flying with Jerzy who could only have told him yes, no, or cheers.

Bryan came down squinting in the gloom for sign of hangars or any buildings. He saw only a pasture. He thought that Jerzy must've balled up the

directions, but he couldn't ask him.

Bryan followed Jerzy down to land on untilled ground.

As Bryan shut down his machine, the undergrowth on the left edge of the pasture moved.

The *bushes* came running.

Camouflaged men swarmed around the two P.11s. As soon as Jerzy and Bryan were out of the cockpits, the men pushed the aircraft off the grass runway, and covered them with camouflage netting, then heaped straw on top of that.

It was dark when they finished.

The P.11s looked like hay bales.

Wlad was here, waiting with a lorry to take the crews back to the aerodrome after they shed their foliage.

At their home field, Bryan found the places for his and Jerzy's P.11s were now filled by other aircraft. Bryan squinted in the dark to see what they'd put in the P.11s place.

They looked like old trainers and write-offs.

Should any picture-takers wander over — Bryan saw them sometimes way up high — they would notice nothing changed in the number of aircraft at this aerodrome.

Bryan rejoined Jan Bujakowski. Jan said in French, "You have question now?"

Bryan shook his head, no. The Poles were hiding their best aircraft elsewhere and setting out decoys on their home airfield, the airfield that enemy bombers would target. "It's brilliant."

Then he noticed one of the decoys. It was a huge hulk-winged locomotive of an airplane with blisters beetling from all positions. Bryan laughed. "You *don't* expect the German picture takers to take that for a real aircraft?"

The thing was what an aeroplane would look like if Heath Robinson went into aircraft design.

Jan said, without laughing, "Is *Zubr*. How you say?" Jan, quite the artist, quickly sketched a shaggy bison in the dust at their feet. "Is called *Zubr*."

"Is it for real?"

Jan wiped his hands on his coveralls. "Is no good."

There was a saying among engineers that if it looks right, it's right. From the looks of *Zubr* this one had to be altogether wrong.

"*Zubr* look better from there," Jan pointed skyward. "*Zubr* has wings. He is big. For spies." Jan pointed up again. "Our intelligence reports that their intelligence reports our strength at nine hundred aircraft."

He repeated it in Polish for the rest of the squadron, and everyone laughed. Bryan wished that were funny.

Bryan received an invitation to tea with the British ambassador in Warsaw.

Bryan's mess kit, which he'd had no use for so far, was in good shape. He hastily organized a haircut. It had been awhile. Brown curls collected in an alarming pile on the floor of the barbershop.

Flying Officer Bryan Catrell made a decorative guest at the British embassy. The ambassador's other guests questioned him about his work, trying to make polite conversation. Bryan didn't know what to tell them. His host could see Bryan was uncomfortable. When the others were gone, the ambassador asked if something was wrong. Bryan finally blurted, "It's just that, sir, I'm not at all sure what the hell I'm meant to be doing here—" And quickly to the ambassador's wife, "Sorry ma'am."

The ambassador and his wife diplomatically showed no insult. "Don't give it another thought, son," the ambassador said benignly. "Neither do I."

Letter from Great Britain's ambassador in Poland (excerpt):

Does the Foreign Office feel that the east of Europe is so far away that it is better to leave the settlement to Germany and Italy in the hope that they will achieve some sort of balance? Does the Foreign Office feel that a certain neutral bloc might, until Hungary fall into the German maw be of some use? Does the Foreign Office feel that Poland is worth strengthening or not?

Bryan's birthday approached. He'd been in Poland five months.

One encouraging development was that the Polish Air Force had placed an order for seventy P.24s equipped with 1050 horsepower engines.

Those could not be delivered too soon. Bryan could feel the breath of the Reich down his neck like the physical presence.

On 16 August 1939, a Polish soldier was shot on the frontier.

Even England had to admit that the question of invasion was not *if* but *when*.

And when did England plan to send anything?

England asked why did Poland not let the Russian Army cross their border in the event of German aggression.

At that report, Jan detonated. "We should feed ourself to the bear to keep from being eat by the mad dog! We beat the Russian in '20. We beat the German now!"

On 21 August, Moscow announced a ten years treaty of non-aggression and neutrality with Nazi Germany.

War was here. Not declared, but here. The Nazis need only step over the border. The tinder was stacked, the match lit. They were only waiting for it

to catch.

At the eleventh hour, on the 25th of August, a British military mission arrived in Poland. Bryan received the news with shock and hope. *They've come!* England was in it! This would give Hitler pause.

The military attaché summoned Bryan to take an embassy motorcar—it was a vast Daimler—and collect the members of the mission at the airport.

Bryan sang all the way there.

The British delegates wanted to see a Polish aerodrome. Bryan took them out to see his. Some members of the press corps followed after them.

Up close they could see the antiques and decoys, but not one of them seemed to recognize that they were looking at rubbish.

A member of the press corps asked why the Poles did not withdraw their planes from their forward aerodromes in anticipation of a German attack.

Jan and Bryan exchanged panicked glances. Truth was, they *had* withdrawn their true strength from the German border.

Bryan knew that correspondents transmitted stories by telephone, and telephone lines to Paris and London ran across Germany. Jan and Bryan didn't want to announce any of their tactics.

Jan improvised. "We do not wish to provoke the German."

Bryan tried to keep his eyes from rounding. He took Jan aside and hissed, "You don't want to *provoke* the Germans? That's the best you could think of!"

Jan shrugged. "Your government tell us not to mobilize."

Bryan whispered, "There are thirty German divisions on your border. Everybody's bloody mobilized."

"Our treaty with England is no good if we provoke," Jan said.

At length the military mission admitted they had come to Poland with little better than good wishes and apologies. And even those dissolved once outside of Polish earshot.

Bryan was driving the dignitaries back to their lodgings. The embassy's long Daimler rolled slowly through the blacked-out streets of Warsaw. Bryan overheard his passengers behind him.

"Poles are opportunists. When Hitler was carving up Czechoslovakia, Poland got their piece. Bad form, considering that they are next."

"If only the Poles were not so stubborn about Danzig."

So it was Danzig now, was it? Envoys to Poland, and they called Gdansk by its German name.

"If Hitler becomes embroiled in Poland, it will keep him occupied. Hitler does not want a war with us."

Bryan rolled the Daimler gently to a stop. The envoys, intent on their conversation, climbed out where Bryan held the doors for them. They didn't even look at him.

Bryan was safely back in the Daimler and driving away before the envoys could realise that he had let them out nowhere in particular. If they made it

back to the hotel or not, Bryan didn't care.

He delivered the Daimler, sans passengers, to the embassy and he returned to his squadron in a jeep.

He was fuming by the time he arrived. It was late. The Polish pilots and ground crew were all waiting up for him. Blinking back shamed tears, Bryan told them what he'd done. Jan relayed it to the others in Polish.

The Poles burst into laughter. They howled, crippled themselves with mirth, until Bryan had to laugh too.

He hadn't realized while he was doing it that it was quite so funny. He'd been too angry.

Jerzy clapped him on the back with an enthusiasm to fell trees. He gave a great braying laugh.

Jan poured him a drink. "*Na Zdrowie.*"

"Why not?" Bryan said. He picked up the glass and saluted them. "*Na Zdrowie.*"

Sunday, 27 August came hot and sultry. The churches were full. Hitler had issued terms of peace designed to make war inevitable.

Poland refused the peace.

The next day German troops moved into Slovakia, and assembled at the Polish border.

30 August at 2.30 P.M. Poland ordered general mobilization, to hell with English pleas for restraint.

"Where are our Hurricanes?" Jan asked the air.

Poland had been endeavoring since June to buy ten Hurricanes. The aeroplanes had yet to materialise.

"The Colonel says they're on the boat now," Bryan said. "What about our P.24s? What's the status of those?"

"One pre-production new model," Jan said. "Fly good."

"And the order?"

"Oh. The order was cancel."

Bryan dropped his face into his folded arms on the table.

"Maybe we are spared this year. In Poland, it rains in autumn," Jan said and the others bragged about their abysmal weather. Jan said the wet roads were so bad that only cavalry could negotiate them.

Bryan had been on the Polish roads and he almost believed this.

The Poles also had promises that in event of a German attack, England would launch airstrikes immediately to draw off the Luftwaffe.

France promised to invade Germany in force on the fifteenth day after an attack.

All Poland needed to do was hold out until the allies and the rains came.

Meanwhile, the date of Bryan's birthday had gotten out, and his squadron were plotting some kind of celebration right in front of him, looking at him and snickering, probably telling him their plans, but of course he understood

none of it. He only knew to expect some surprise on September 1st, 1939.



AN EXPLOSION WOVE INTO Bryan's dreams. Became a half-waking thought. Thunder?

He opened his eyes. The clock read 4.45.

Muffled concussion and reverberation quaked through the ground, while the sky itself murmured, as many engines hummed a guttural base note.

Aeroplanes.

A blast split the air, quite near. Bryan tumbled out of the bed and hit the floor. He covered his head. The window cracked, dropped from its frame, and shattered.

Voices now. Bryan couldn't catch a word, but knew what they meant.

They're hitting the aerodrome.

Running footsteps sounded in the corridor, the fast clumping thuds of unlaced boots.

Shouting. A quick pounding on his door. "Bryan!"

Bryan shouted up from the floor, "I'm up! I'm up!"

He grabbed a helmet and coveralls, bundled them under his arm and ran into the corridor.

A whistling of wind in falling fins grew loud. Bryan dropped to the floor. The bombs hit nearby. The building shuddered. Bryan hunched, turtle fashion, head between his shoulders as the walls shook. He strapped his helmet on, and eeled into the coveralls. When the floor stopped moving for a

moment, he got up.

He ran outside. AA pounded from the base's few big guns. Grey bursts smudged the dark sky. On the ground, dawn mist swirled where bombs had disturbed the still morning.

High above him, vees of evil birds buzzed. Bryan recognized them from newsreels. The sinister crooked outlines of inverted gull wings.

The monsters seemed to pause. Then they pointed their noses down, directly down, and moaned. The weird howling bounced off all the buildings, amplified, became a shriek.

"Stukas!"

Jan was there, clad in pajama bottoms and a helmet, his rifle aimed at a Stuka.

It came screaming from the sky, so direct and determined it seemed to have Jan's name on it. Its jagged shape grew larger and larger.

Jan stood his ground, shooting.

The Stuka's crutch swung out. The bomb hurtled down as the crooked shape lifted away.

The bomb whistled, struck a hangar.

Concussed air knocked Jan off his feet. He rolled.

Smoke billowed into an angry sky. More Stukas screamed toward the aerodrome. Men dove for the trenches.

Bryan was afraid to go to earth. In no hurry to attend his own burial.

As if outside his own body Bryan saw himself skitter on the ground. He'd trained to be a pilot, a fighter. He didn't want to be exterminated on the ground. He didn't want to go without a fight.

Jan grabbed his arm. "Bryan, we are crazy." And they scuttled for a trench.

Explosions boomed on all sides. They went on forever.

And when a pause extended, Bryan flinched at the silence instead. He looked up.

Another wave of aeroplanes was coming in. These flew in wide formation. Seen face on, they were small, single-engined. The slight dihedral started from the base of low wings like a Spitfire. Bryan recognized them from far off. "Messerschmitts."

The MEs were supposed to be in Germany, defending against allied bombers. Instead they were here, on the offense. Machines he'd thought so beautiful swept out of the sky low enough to touch, flicking tongues of fire through their propellers. A line of bullets caught the old *Zubr*. It crumpled heavily.

A bowser leapt. Burst into an orange-black plume.

Earth spewed up in fountains and hailed down in clods and flaming bits.

Bullets pinged and whistled.

An ME roared over the gun emplacement at the drome's perimeter. It left the gunner slumped over the sandbag parapet.

Suddenly Jerzy, wearing nothing at all, was scrambling out of the trench. He charged across the field towards the gun emplacement, yelling.

Another pair of MEs hove over the horizon, coming in low. Jerzy looked to be running in slow motion.

The Messerschmitts opened fire, their trails of advancing bullets spitting like burning fuses.

"Jerzy!"

The impacts lifted Jerzy off his feet for an instant. His body twisted and jerked, then flopped back to the dust.

When the last wave rumbled into the distance, the field, the hangers, the tents were all in flames.

Bryan ran to Jerzy, dropped to his knees, and tried to revive him.

"He is dead, Bryan."

Bryan didn't look up. He saw Jan's bare feet next to him, the barrel of his rifle hanging at his side.

"I—know that."

An erk crouched to help Bryan. He arranged Jerzy's sprawled legs together and grasped the ankles. Bryan slipped his arms under the beefy shoulders and clasped his hands at Jerzy's wide chest. Dust and blood matted Jerzy's blond hair. His slack doughy face looked stupid in death.

Bryan lifted with a grunt. They carried Jerzy to a lorry where the ground crew were laying the other dead.

Heavier load he never carried.

This is my nightmare, Jerzy. What are you doing in it? A pilot, dead on the ground before his first battle. God. God damn.

When Bryan turned away from the makeshift hearse he was utterly lost. Men were running past him. Transport vehicles were already taking crews to the secret aerodrome in effort to get their squadron airborne to cover Warsaw. Bryan felt useless and in the way.

He washed off the blood, and dressed himself. He collected his few things. He spied a telephone in a shed. He picked up the receiver, put it to his ear. It was dead.

Outside, Jan was barking orders with a commanding calm urgency, mobilizing the tatters of his squadron. He was still in his pajamas. He gestured with his rifle. "Bryan, you drive Jerzy's jeep!"

Jerzy's was an American Willy's jeep. God knew where he'd got it. Bryan hesitated. Forced himself to ask if he could drive the jeep to his embassy.

"Yes! Yes!" Jan flapped his arms. "Tell the English to come!"

Bryan climbed into the jeep, almost sat on a bottle of vodka tied with a ribbon. He moved it aside.

There was an envelope underneath it.

Addressed to Lt. Bryan Catrell.

For a moment he just stared at the envelope. He couldn't comprehend

how his name got on it.

Fingers shaking, he broke the envelope's seal.

Inside was a carefully written note from Jerzy who didn't know any English:

Dear to you/familiar/ my friend Bryan on your 23 birthday. Sincerely, Jerzy.

On the road to Warsaw, traffic was nose-to-tail the opposite direction. The streets were clogged with people, motorcars, mule-drawn wagons, push-carts piled high with worldly goods, bicycles—anything that moved was in the road—geese, goats, dogs. Bryan hadn't known that there was so much livestock in the city. He was moving against the current.

It was 9.00 by the time he made Warsaw.

The morning mist had burned away and the weather was wretchedly splendid.

White storks rose from slate rooftops all of a mind, clacking and squawking, and they wheeled away.

An overloaded donkey stopped in its tracks and opened its mouth into a long bray.

Bryan stopped the jeep, listened.

A hum shook the air, an angry sound like hornets, with the deep expectant menace of an earthquake. He looked up, found them. Bombers.

Bryan grabbed Jerzy's helmet out of the back seat. He jammed it on and peered from under its rim at the sky.

A black mass of ominous crank wing aeroplanes covered Warsaw like a shroud. The Stukas pitched into their steep dives.

And howled.

"Almighty God!"

Unearthly scream, joined by human voices. The flutter of falling bombs. Deep boom of explosions.

The blasts boxed Bryans ears. Rocked the earth.

One Stuka continued its low pass, strafing right up the street where Bryan was stopped.

Bryan vaulted out of his jeep, seized a little boy off a bicycle and dove off the road for the shelter of a doorway.

Bullets spattered the road, chipped the cobbles, pelted on slate roofs, and ricocheted off the jeep. Bryan huddled against the stone doorpost.

As if through gauze he heard the crash of windows, shrieks of the hit and those who loved them.

When the raid was over, Bryan let go of the little boy. The child said something. Bryan told him he did not understand. The boy shrieked, ran for his bicycle and pedaled away for all he was worth, screaming and pointing back.

Bryan supposed he should have spoken in French.

Some young men were climbing into Bryan's jeep. Bryan discharged his revolver into the air. The young men scattered.

Returning to the jeep, Bryan found Jerzy's gift bottle of vodka was gone.

Bryan tucked Jerzy's note into his breast pocket and drove to the embassy.

British calm reigned within. Bryan was compelled to follow suit. He dusted himself off, tucked his helmet smartly under his arm, smoothed back his hair.

Thick carpets absorbed his booted footfalls.

He was horrified to learn that he was not at war with Germany.

England had not declared.

He looked for the military attaché, found instead the ambassador holding the telephone, a tin hat on his balding head. He waved hullo to Bryan and motioned for him to go ahead and put his helmet back on. He covered the mouthpiece and explained, while he was waiting for someone to pick up the other end, that the Germans had crossed the border in three places without a declaration of war. "They're moving south into the industrial area—we rather expected that. Northwest to unite with Danzig—of course. And from behind us, from Prussia—rude surprise that last part. The rest was more or less expected.

"Oh, and a few German spies were reported to have parachuted in. English sounds rather close to German to Polish ears, so keep your identification on you at all times."

"But we're not at war," Bryan said, mystified. His hearing was dampened from the bomb blasts. He was afraid he might be shouting.

"Herr Hitler and Herr Göring have assured Herr—ahem, *Mister* Chamberlain that the Germans are only bombing military targets."

A deep boom of a delayed bomb shook the ground, rattled the windows. The embassy rang like a singing bell. Crystals shivered, tinkling, suspended from the chandelier. Bits of ceiling moulding came loose, pattered down and dusted the deep blue carpet.

"I am continually assuring them that they are mistaken." The ambassador looked then into the receiver. "Well, that's packed up." He put the phone down. "Not altogether a bad idea."

Packing, he meant.

Bryan spent the longest night of his life in the embassy, not at war. He would hear aircraft, and knew they wouldn't be the RAF.

He fell asleep in a chair.

Woke before dawn to some motion, saw the ambassador at the window. Bryan hastily stood. The ambassador said quietly, "I rang for tea."

"Is there any word from England, sir?"

"The Air Staff have furnished me with all manner of reasons why British aerial action against Germany has not been forthcoming. These reasons were

provided to assist me in answering the Poles."

"Did they give any *real* reasons as well?"

"Mr Catrell."

"Sorry, sir."

"No. They did not." The ambassador spoke from the window, the dawn's first light glimmering in the east. "How is morale out there?"

"Hopelessly optimistic. The Poles seem to think they matter to us."

The ambassador sighed. "Do you remember the referendum in '35? The Peace Ballot it was called. *'Are you in favour of an all round abolition of military and naval aircraft by international agreement?'* I voted yes. As I recall it passed by a margin of six to one."

A distant drone became audible, growing louder.

"They forgot to poll the bloody Nazis!" Bryan cried.

The ambassador reached for his tin hat, and passed Bryan's to him. "Please. Language. There are still ladies in the embassy."

At 9.00 the ambassador announced, "An ultimatum has been issued. To expire at 11.00 this morning."

"I trust it will run out," Bryan said.

"A reasonable assumption," the ambassador said.

"Where is the Colonel, sir?"

"Preparing our evacuation."

Bryan asked the ambassador for permission to return to his unit.

The white-haired gentleman reacted with mild surprise. "According to all reports the Polish Air Force were destroyed on the ground yesterday morning."

"I have reason to believe that that report is exaggerated. May I—"

Just what is it that I think I'm meant to be doing here?

"— assess the situation?"

"Carry on, son. If you think there is any earthly good to be accomplished."

Bryan ran out to the jeep. He drove barely 100 yards when the engine died. He climbed out, found the fuel tank lid on the ground. Someone had siphoned out the petrol.

He siphoned petrol from the nearest embassy car—the Daimler—and set out.

At the airfield, Bryan found some of the men lying outside of the kitchen tent. They looked dead, but they'd only fallen asleep.

Bleary-eyed and unshaven Wlad saluted Bryan with his spanner, and produced a battered pair of cigarettes, his last two. He put one between his lips, offered Bryan the last one.

Bryan snatched the roll-up from Wlad's lips. "Jesus, Wlad, don't light that."

Wlad scowled, then looked at himself. He was slicked with oil and reeked

of petrol. He pressed his tired eyes and shook his head, said a word Bryan was fairly certain meant, "Stupid."

Bryan slid the cigarettes back into Wlad's pocket and buttoned it. "Go to sleep, Wlad."

The burr of radial engines became audible, small numbers of them. The friendly P.11s winged over the trees in four punctured echelons. Their mottled forest-coloured gullwings were tracked with black streaks from their gunports.

Upon landing, Jan climbed down from his machine, shouted instructions to his crews, then strode toward the kitchen tent. The lower half of his face was black.

He took a swig of cold coffee, rinsed his mouth with it and spat on the ground. He hailed Bryan. "Where is RAF?"

Bryan shook his head. He told Jan about the ultimatum. "I don't know what to say."

"Say nothing. You are here."

Jan yelled something to a mechanic, then said to Bryan, "Remember the forward air bases we found for your bombers to land? The Germans have them now."

"Not already!" Bryan said. "It's not possible."

"Tell Germans." Jan set the coffee cup down with a bang, strode out to intervene where something was not being done correctly out there.

The squadron wasn't receiving orders, so Major Jan Bujakowski made some up.

Bryan noticed the mechanics loading only the fuselage guns this time. "Forget the wing guns," Jan told Bryan. "They slow the aeroplane down."

The little P.11 would need all the power it had. After a while a single engine sounded from the sky. Everyone ducked on reflex, then recognized the friendly reconnaissance plane coming in.

The pilot shouted an excited report even as he was climbing from the plane. Suddenly pilots were running to their kites. Bryan glanced at his watch.

11.00.

Jan yelled, "Bryan! You are at war! Take number 3!" He pointed to the machine that Wlad had just repaired. "You with me. Josef not came back."

Bryan strapped on a parachute. He took the helmet Wlad gave him. He scaled the fuselage and vaulted into the cockpit.

The engine snarled.

Brakes off, a few bumps, and he was up.

Bryan formed up with his section and they banked to the west. Toward battle.

He'd thought he would be scared to death, but he'd been scared for so long, he'd reached his limit. The aeroplane was a comfort. Not so helpless, he would meet the enemy with guns this time.

And he didn't care if he had to strafe one on the ground, he owed a Nazi a bullet for Jerzy.

Jan's plane leapt forward and rocked.

Bryan looked ahead. Bombers!

Two kinds closed on an industrial centre. Bryan recognized Dornier 17s for their distinctive thin fuselage. They were twin-engined and twin-finned like the peaceful civilian aeroplane that first brought Bryan to Poland.

The Heinkel 111 bombers he recognized for the cutout at the root of their broad wings and for the haphazard way their bombs spilled out.

Jan led his fighters to intercept the bomb-laden Dorniers.

Jan was a maniac. He chose his target, flew down straight at the enemy cockpit, almost *into* the cockpit. He drilled into it and rolled away.

The Dornier banked lazily and dropped into a spin.

Bryan moved into range of the invaders' defensive guns. Nerves sang and sparked. But self-preservation wasn't his strongest instinct. With insane courage before him, and insane hatred inside him, a sane fear was unthinkable.

He picked a target. Came in high on the beam where the Dornier's defensive fire curved uselessly away from him. He took aim in the bomber's path. Opened fire. He held his breath as his kite shook. Tracers arced down, found the bomber. To little effect.

He was shooting small calibre guns, too few from too far, and now too late. The Dornier out-paced him. Bryan looked for another one within his reach.

And discovered that German bombers don't go forth alone.

From above pounced a sleek, beautiful terror with three ports of flame. Bryan didn't know how to warn anyone.

Messerschmitts!

Like running in a nightmare, the P.11 didn't have the speed.

The only thing to do was to wheel and face them, try to keep his guns toward them. His nimble little gull could do that. The MEs shied away from his pointed guns.

New boys.

Bryan was sweating. His clothes stuck to him. He strained to stay relaxed, to react in an instant, move the stick with the circling sharks. Keep looking. Rudder. Rudder. Rudder.

He rumbled through his own wake and throttled back to let the ME overshoot. Quick glance found the other one. He rolled.

He faced his attacker, pressed the trigger, churned out bullets. His teeth rattled.

The ME flicked its belly toward him and dove away.

He kept maneuvering until suddenly the Messerschmitts broke off.

It could only be that its fuel was running low. There was no other reason that Bryan could see for the fighters to clear off.

The durable *Jedenastka* could stay in the air a long time.

Jan tried to chase the MEs.

After a short embarrassing pursuit, Jan gave the signal to head home.

Bryan formed up with him and Zdzislaw.

His first battle was done and he was still alive. Shaking a little. He had known he would live. Once airborne he didn't think of death as a real possibility.

All the same it was good to be still breathing. When he closed his eyes he saw swirling Messerschmitts mapped on the inside of his eyelids.

He let his heart throttle back to something slower than a blur. Let his brain re-engage. He hadn't actually been *thinking* during the melee.

Polish valour left him a little awed and a little humbled. He didn't think it possible to feel more an outsider than he did here, among a people united in defense of their home.

These men became more than they were.

Bryan's P.11 touched down where he was led. He hadn't scored a victory. He hadn't died either. He brought back the aircraft in one piece. No one was patting him on the back for surviving. The Poles were hot to get back in the air and kill Germans.

Bryan was chagrined for wasting their precious ammunition and fuel. *Give me one more chance*, he thought. *I will do better.*

On his second sortie he had a radio connection. He also made Wlad load all four of his guns.

Recon had reported a fast approaching German column on the ground.

The German column was what the P.11s were hunting now.

Bryan transmitted, "Jan, I see them."

As soon as he said it he thought he'd made a mistake.

Where was the river? They hadn't crossed the river yet. He must have misread the map because those were definitely German panzers up ahead. Bryan had misplaced the river.

Or else the report had misplaced the Germans.

No. The Germans had moved. *Fast.*

Here was the German column *miles* closer than the last report.

Christ!

Reconnaissance was old before the planes could touch back down to report. The Germans were moving like lightning.

In the Great War advances had been measured in yards.

Jan was rocking his wings and pointing down to where a unit of Polish cavalry was breaking ranks, their horses rearing and bolting.

Shadows of wings moved across them.

Bryan had spotted the low flying aircraft earlier. They were fixed-gear bi-planes, and he'd mistaken them for Poles.

Now sunlight picked up the white outlines of black Balkenkreuze on the green camouflaged wings. Bryan made them out now, Henschel 123s – what

used to be called a *Stuka* – divebomber – before the JU 87s took ownership of the word entirely.

The HS 123 was an older design. Bryan remembered it from the recognition models at Cranwell. He didn't expect to find them in the front line among modern German monoplanes of 1939.

The HS 123 was a powerful bi-plane with big aerodynamic struts instead of a clutter of wire bracing.

These Henschels drove low over the Polish horsemen. Bryan heard their machine gun fire over his engine's noise. He thought that was what he heard. But he didn't see any fire from the Henschels' gunports. Horses were bucking and rearing but not jerking from impacts.

Bryan selected a target in the melee, pushed his P.11's Mercury engine as hard as it would go. He was almost too angry to see.

The hammering *Rat tat tat tat* grew loud as he neared. The shots never paused. Did the Hun have *limitless* ammunition?

Suddenly knew. It was the Henschels themselves making that noise, not their guns.

It's their bloody engines!

That machine gun sound was from the bulky air-cooled monstrosity on the Henschel's bulbous nose, running at full revs. Even as radials went, the engine was loud. Its cylinders pounded like heavy cannonfire.

The Germans didn't need to shoot at the cavalry. They just revved it up and terrorized the horses with their sound. The cavalry unit devastated itself with panic.

Bryan had already chosen his target. He drove at it.

His target must've seen him because it changed course. The Germans were running now.

Bryan's P.11 closed on his target. Too slowly.

Bryan lost patience. Fired. Too far away. His shots dropped short. Criminal waste of ammo.

The Henschel rolled away from him. He cursed his own stupidity and rolled after him.

Faster. Bryan was faster. He closed the gap. When he saw no ground, no sky, nothing but Henschel in front of him he fired.

His aircraft shuddered with the recoil of four guns. Pieces of Henschel flew off with a spout of black smoke.

Bryan pulled up. Inhaled. Something released its grip on his chest. Air filled his lungs.

The Nazi spun down.

Bryan was still here. Still alive.

Bryan hoped that grey sky would hold. But the clouds were already breaking up. Great holes formed in the cover.

Refueled and re-armed, Bryan and his Polish fighter squadron took to the air again.

Sunlight streamed down on Warsaw.

Above the scattered clouds Bryan saw them.

"Stukas!"

The P.11s had to get the Stukas before they started their dives. It was impossible to hit a diving Stuka. And Stukas never seemed to miss.

The P.11s drove all out, but they couldn't get the altitude or speed. Bryan felt he was climbing through mud.

Faster. He needed to be twelve times faster.

Too late.

The Stukas nosed down.

O God.

The evil machines stooped like peregrine falcons, howling.

Delivered their loads with horrible precision.

One leveled out directly in front of Bryan, presenting such perfect target it startled him. Not enough to make him forget to take the shot. He squeezed the trigger. The recoil of his guns rocked his airframe.

He watched his victim's descent in perfect disbelief. White parachutes puffed wide and floated down.

It was easy. When Bryan thought back on the nightmare rain on Warsaw on September first, watching them from the ground, the Stukas loomed large in the mind, cruel, merciless. Invincible.

Bryan wasn't helpless on the ground now, and outside of their spectacular dives, these beasts were easy prey. It was time to exorcise a demon.

He closed on another Stuka that was making its crawling getaway.

Bryan's kite came up from beneath where no guns defended the JU 87. The Stuka dipped a crank wing for a look. The Hun saw Bryan coming, tried to turn on him.

Bryan fired.

Streamers of white and black smoke twined as the evil machine spun down.

Stukas can die.

Bryan jinked to the side on reflex. Some primitive part of the brain reacted. He hadn't seen anything coming. But was suddenly aware that he'd been staring after his victim.

Not habit forming.

He jerked the stick, hard, in case something had come up on him.

It had.

Bryan dropped his right wing and threw his P.11 into a spin.

Blur of sky and clouds whirled around him. Heart leapt into his throat, but he felt no bullets.

He jammed on the opposite rudder and put the stick on the dashboard. The world stopped gyrating, but he was pointing his nose down at the ground

like a Stuka. He pulled the throttle open and pulled the stick back, straining, his muscles shaking.

His kite leveled out.

He was just thinking that he'd made it. Suddenly there was a bang and a squeal. Wood and lacquer splintered and spun out, rapped and glanced off the windscreen like bullets. A crescendo whine screeched from his racing engine and the rpms jumped off the dial. Bryan slammed the throttle back, shut the engine down.

Both prop blades were gone. His spinning crankshaft wound down with a descending inertial whine and scorched smell.

He hoped the R/T worked. "Jan! I'm a glider. Are you there?"

"I am here."

"Where's that ME?" Bryan twisted his neck around all directions, looking for his ME. He sighted it. Maybe it was too interested in watching Bryan, because the Kraut shaved a treetop, tottered for balance, then limped back upstairs minus his dignity.

"He is gone. Bale out, Bryan."

Bryan glided.

It was a smooth ride, nothing wrong with the crate except that it didn't have a propeller.

He couldn't bring himself to bale out. The Poles were critically short of aircraft and parts. He wouldn't be the one to leave a good aeroplane to prang. At any rate, he was too low to bale.

"I'm going to put her down. How does the road look?"

"Are you — how you say? Starkers? Roads no good. Take the field."

The dry stubble of a harvested wheat field presented itself to his right. He nudged the stick, spilled air from one gull wing, side-slipping to line up for his approach.

He glided in, dead stick, descending to the rough field, and set down — hard.

The *Jedenastka* was tough. Its landing gear took the shock. It rumbled to a halt, airframe intact.

Bryan climbed on top of his crate and waved up at Jan who circled once and flew away.

Hours waiting passed at a crawl. Bryan kept out of sight, some distance from his aeroplane.

At long last a flatbed jounced up the pitted road. It turned off at the field. The driver jumped out. It was Wlad.

Wlad the mechanic kissed Bryan on both cheeks. Then, so happy to have his aeroplane mostly intact, he kissed him again.

"*Dobry! Dobry!*" Wlad cried, tears in his eyes.

After Wlad convinced a crew of farmers to drop their pitchforks, they all muscled the P.11 onto the flatbed and strapped it down.

On the drive back to the airfield Bryan had to wonder what was happening in the West. When would the British and French assault pull the Germans

away from here? Could the Germans have so many aircraft that they could handle a two front war like this?

By September 5th, the German ground advance was estimated thirty-six hours from Warsaw.

Jan's squadron was ordered to pull back to Lublin, and advised to get its ground vehicles across the bridge before the German bombers could destroy it.

Bryan faced Jan reluctantly. "I ought to report to my embassy before I go with you. Can I use a jeep?"

"I drive," Jan said. He wanted to verify his own orders.

They found the embassy dark, no guards on the steps, the doors locked. Bryan went to the Foreign Office. The great building was deserted.

His last resort was the Hotel Europejski bar. Foreign correspondents were always to be found in the bar of any capital city's best hotel. But a scant few even of those were left.

The hotel was dim, ornate, and hollow. Stale cigarette smoke hung in a nervous cloud after all the people had fled. Thick carpets deadened their footsteps. Bryan looked into the bar. "Where is everyone?"

A news reporter with a gin in one hand, Virginia cigar in the other, inclined his head eastward. "They went. The Germans will be here presently. Tanks. From Prussia. I was going to do a story on it." He took a long draw on his cigar. Blew out smoke. "Changing my mind."

"Is this place on the telephone? I need to ring up the embassy."

The reporter made a big show of doubling over with laughter.

Bryan guessed it had been an overly optimistic idea.

Jan met him in the lobby. Bryan told him, "They're gone."

"My government, too. I see why we order to Lublin. My government go to Lublin."

Jan wasn't happy with his orders. The first real direction he received in this war and it said to pull back. His soldier's soul bridled. It felt like abandoning Warsaw.

Jan said, "I swore to protect my country. Is country the government that run to high ground, or is people of Warsaw who are under panzers in thirty-six hours?"

"Twenty-four."

Jan and Bryan turned as one. The reporter had come out to the lobby. Waved his cigar. "Twenty-four."

Bryan scowled at him, lost. "What?"

"Panzers'll get here in twenty-four hours."

Bryan wasn't sure what to do. He had an idea that if any orders should get through to him, they would be for him to pull out.

It was not what his heart was telling him.

When there were no orders, Major Jan Bujakowski made them up. "You are with us, Bryan. That is order."

Jan slung his arm around Bryan's shoulders and they headed out.

The reporter suddenly made the connection, and ran after them, shouting excitedly, "Hey! Jesus H. Christ! Are you with the RAF?"

Bryan looked back, cold. "The RAF is not here."

Jan's squadron set down at the aerodrome outside Lublin, one aeroplane less than they began the journey. Zdzislaw had been shot down by Polish groundfire.

When there was a moment, Bryan asked Jan quietly, "Don't your anti-aircraft gunners know their own planes when they see us?"

"No."

"Aren't there any recognition guides?"

"There is. Is classified."

Bryan groaned.

"Anything with wings is target. And bent wings? They think we are Stukas."

"But our wings are bent the other way."

"Is all the same. Men on the ground are afraid. And generals are stupid."

There was no telling friend from foe.

And Poles were such bloody good shots.

There were no motor transport vehicles at the base for their use, so they had to wait for their own crews to show up before someone could drive back and collect Zdzislaw, who had managed to bale out.

Some of their unit's lorries hadn't made it over the bridge, so the squadron was badly equipped, with no other supplies waiting for them at their new aerodrome. They walked around their new 'drome, and concluded there had to be a mistake. This place was derelict.

They thought there would be a facility here to work with. There was no fuel, no ammunition, no food.

Some old RWD Herons in need of repair sat in the hangars. The resident crew, if there had been any, were gone.

Jan's aircrews pulled straw off the roofs of houses and used that to hide their P.11s. Their own shelter was inadequate, but, as Bryan said, "Who needs a roof? It's not bloody raining."

Army organization, what there had been of it, was dissolving by the hour.

The squadron vehicles needed fuel and were not getting it. Jan, Zdzislaw, and Bryan drove to Lublin to organise supplies. They met with armed guards outside the town and martial law within. No civilians were permitted to enter the city. The streets were choked with debris from an air raid. A sentry directed them back to a rough bypass road that led to the village of Naleczow, the temporary seat of government. It was also where the British embassy had pulled back to.

They were burning up precious petrol just chasing their tails.

Jan and Zdzislaw left Bryan with the jeep on the roadside outside of Lublin while they went on foot to raise hell with someone about supplies.

It must have rained here. The green grass looked thick and inviting. Bryan climbed out of the jeep and lay in the grass.

There were flowers, and a lake where swans flapped great snowy wings. When the swans took flight, Bryan lifted himself onto his elbows and watched them clear the trees.

Two loud cracks split the quiet.

One white swan folded up in midair and dropped in a crumpled bundle.

The Poles were shooting anything with wings.

Jan and Zdzislaw returned with directions to where to find fuel.

The directions led them to Naleczow's single petrol pump where a long string of cars and vehicles queued up, waiting for a tanker to arrive so they could buy their regulation 40 litre limit.

Jan and Zdzislaw turned to each other with bewildered stares.

"Bugger *that*," Bryan said.

Jan turned the car around. "I get fuel."

Back at the drome, Jan's crew had managed to patch together one of the old Heron reconnaissance planes.

Zdzislaw took the Heron up and followed a railway until he located a train pulling tanker cars. Zdzislaw radioed the airfield with his location.

Then set the Heron down on the railway tracks.

Zdzislaw had chosen a place that would give the train's engineer a very long sight line on a slight uphill grade.

With luck, the train would have time to stop.

Meanwhile Jan drove the petrol lorry like it was a fighter plane to meet it.

The petrol lorry left the ground, banged down, lurched side to side.

Bryan flinched.

Empty petrol tanks were terribly explosive.

Jan glanced aside. "I scare you, Bryan?"

Bryan gritted his teeth. "Drive faster."

They arrived where Zdzislaw's Heron sat on the tracks.

The train had managed to a stop.

The train's engineer, boulder-muscled and neck-less, was the largest humanlike thing Bryan had ever seen. Probably owned a magic beanstalk. He stood next to the Heron blocking his track, his mightily thewed arms akimbo, giant fists planted on his hips.

Bryan expected him to murder them all.

But even as Jan and Bryan approached, the engineer shook a stout finger up at the sky, his eyes beetling, and he roared. "Stop them!"

He had already fueled the Heron.

Now he filled Jan's tanker lorry while Bryan, Jan, and Zdzislaw got the Heron back in the air.

Jan's squadron received no support from other units. They flew their own reconnaissance flights, then added five miles onto the German position they reported.

Blitzkrieg was one word of German everyone was learning in a hurry.

The weather was all on the German side.

The squadron was deathly short of ammunition, and there was nothing Jan could do about that. The fighters were going up with 200 rounds at a time.

"And what are we meant to do with that?" Bryan said.

"Don't miss."

And they didn't. Bullets were in such short supply the men felt compelled to hand deliver each one. They got so close to their targets that Bryan could swear some of those bullets saw no daylight between leaving the barrel and entering the German aircraft.

The German Dorniers then countered with a surprise by adding lateral guns to their armament.

Zdzislaw went down. For good this time.

The Dorniers took out the electrical powerhouse, plunging the entire district into darkness.

The night was utterly black.

Bryan took a walk outside, unable to sleep.

Jan joined him. He folded his arms, looked at the sky, nodded. "Is dark hour."

Bryan knew he wasn't talking about the lack of lights.

A day and a half after leaving Warsaw, the Polish government was on the move again.

The German advance on Warsaw had been stalled, but another German army from the southwest had changed course.

"Is coming *here*."

Bryan learned that his embassy had thought to make for Latvia and the North Sea for evacuation by the Royal Navy, but that route was now cut off, too. Russia made for an unappealing destination, so the Brits were now southbound, along with the Polish government.

Bryan's little squadron held its position at the drome until the panzers were close enough to hear. Then they took to the air and followed their retreating leaders toward the city of Lwow, 150 miles to the southeast. It was a big city. There would be an airfield outside Lwow.

Their ground crew followed in their motor vehicles, their petrol lorry disguised as a boxcar full of hay bales.

Bryan's squadron flew over stragglers. They had to fly high, or else their own armies would shoot them, because everyone knew that the Polish air force had been destroyed on the ground on September first.

One could not even call the troops on the road armies. They were men wearing uniforms, in rout.

"They probably not find their generals either," Jan said.

The aerodrome outside of Lwow was deserted.

The fighters flew one sortie

Nothing the fighters could do could keep the city of Lwow from being gutted. There were so few of them and an eternal fountainhead of German bombers.

Bryan saw the city blaze in an orange and black storm. He thought of London. Could not see it—not even in imagination—like this. This could never happen to London.

The end was written on Sunday 17 September. Early that morning Russian tanks and troops crossed the Polish frontier, sweeping in from the east to meet the Germans.

“The railway,” Jan said. “They both want the railway.”

For the first time Bryan heard someone in his squadron say, “Roumania.”

It was a name no one had been using. It felt like desertion.

But there was nothing to be gained by letting the Russians take them and their equipment.

The squadron was at half strength by now and that only because they counted Bryan as one of theirs. The squadron was down to six pilots and six P.11s.

It was still a long way to the border, perhaps 150 miles to Cernauti in Roumania. By now, they didn’t have petrol to make it.

“Any *sliwowica*? We could probably run on that,” Bryan said. He thought he was joking, but Jan said, “We are out of that too.”

Bryan had harbored a suspicion all along that the stuff was aviation spirit.

There were only two serious options: the pilots could burn the aeroplanes and escape to Roumania with their ground crews now, or they could send a crew out on another petrol raid. From the air Jan had sighted a train off its metals, pulling what looked like tanker cars.

“Is no time. The Russians come. Not fair to make crews wait for us. Get caught. This land, this place here, this is Poland, but these people here not Poles. They don’t like Poles here.”

A heated debate raged in Polish.

Bryan broke in, “I’ll do it.” They all stopped and looked at him. They knew what he’d said. “I’ll go. If I’m not back in two hours, leave without me.”

“I go with,” said Jan. “You meet Polish soldiers, they shoot you. I go with.”

Jan drove like a fighter pilot. There were roadblocks every inch of the way, but no guards, only carts, spent autos, farm equipment. Anything to slow the panzers.

Panzers didn’t need roads.

The petrol lorry was going to burn its own fuel before they could get to the train. The clock advanced.

Jan and Bryan found the train, half off its tracks. The ground was soft. It looked like a dried up bog.

Bryan jumped out and rapped on the tanker car with a spanner. He braced himself for an empty clang.

Met with a miraculous heavy dull thud.

Jan whooped and brought the petrol lorry alongside the tanker car.

Bryan climbed the metal ladder to the top hatch. Encountered the triangular octane rating label and called down. "Jan, this is automobile fuel!"

"It will do."

"It's eighty octane crap!"

"We make it work."

All they needed to do was take off without blowing a cylinder. The rest would be easy level flying to Roumania.

"Wlad can—" Jan made circles with his hands. "How do you say?"

"Back off the engine timing?" Bryan said in English.

"Yes. What you say. Probably." Jan swung the hose around to start pumping fuel into their tanker lorry.

Bryan checked his watch. An hour and a half had already passed since they'd set out.

He listened to the measured thud of the pump. "Can't you make that go any faster?"

"Of course," Jan said, hot. "I make slow to make you angry."

"Sorry. Sorry."

Bryan forced calm. The journey back would be easier. They'd already moved all the roadblocks.

Fuelled at last, they climbed into the lorry, started the engine up, and found that they were stuck.

Jan spun the wheels and dug them in deeper. It was probably the only damp earth in all of Poland.

"Stop, Jan, you'll bury us!"

They jumped down from the lorry and searched for something to shore up the wheels.

"Why does this never happen to panzers?" Bryan yelled.

"*La loi d'emmerdement*," Jan said. "Do you know that one?"

"I do," Bryan said.

It was the law of maximum en-shit-ment. "Sod's Law."

"You have also in England?"

Bryan nodded. "If it can go wrong, it will."

"And at the worst moment possible."

It was a law of nature. It was universal. In America the sod whose law it was had the name of Murphy.

But at this moment Bryan had to rethink the law's universality. "Does it translate into German?"

"Does not look like."

Bryan looked up at the pearl grey sky. "Rain, damn you!"

"No! No! No! Not yet! Not yet!" Jan cried. He pried up some railroad ties,

and jammed them under the lorry's wheels for traction. "Try now."

Bryan started the engine, pushed the lever into gear, prayed.

He touched the accelerator. He was greeted by the thundercrack of the railway ties snapping and splintering.

The lorry lurched forward.

Free.

"Get in! Get in! Get in!" Bryan yelled. "I don't dare stop!"

Jan ran, jumped on, and hauled himself through the window, headfirst, into an upside-down heap on the passenger side floor.

The lorry hit the edge of the bomb crater. Grunts from Jan.

Wheels spun, throwing out loose dirt. Bryan yelled at the lorry. "O Jesus! Go, go, go!"

"Lever!"

He meant *shift*.

Bryan shouted, "I can drive, Jan!"

The heavy tanker crested the rise and barreled free.

Jan's head surfaced. He snorted grit from his wide nose. "Where is road?"

"There!" Bryan hauled the wheel around.

"How much time now?"

Bryan glanced at his wrist. "None."

"Maybe they wait."

"Yeah."

Bryan and Jan saw the smoke before they saw the field.

The aerodrome was deserted, everything smoldering. Bryan stepped down from the lorry, a chill crawling up his back.

Cinders glowed under a layer of charred rubble and ash. Smoke drifted ghost-like over the devastation.

The fires had been deliberately set. This wasn't the random wreckage of bombs. The destruction was too deliberate. This was Polish work.

At least Bryan knew that the squadron had got away from the Germans.

"Jan. I hear aircraft." A buzzing sounded in the clouds, a solitary radial engine. Jan backed the lorry under the cover of a spreading tree.

The aeroplane appeared below the clouds. Jan peered through the boughs, crossed himself.

"German?" Bryan asked.

"No."

Bryan started out from hiding to wave. Jan hauled him back underneath the branches. Hissed. "*Russian.*"

The aeroplane had the flat-faced stumpy profile of a squat fly, with red stars in the recognition positions.

It circled the ruined field, then disappeared back into the clouds.

When the sky was silent again, Jan and Bryan came out of hiding, alone with a wealth of petrol on the field of fire and ash.



GAUZY BLACK PUFFS scudded over the charred grass of the ruined airfield. The slate-coloured sky threatened rain, but the sun was still shining on the Nazi party.

Bryan turned. Met a gun pointed at his face.

Gasped.

Then roared: "*Wlad!*"

Wlad breathed an oath, jammed the gun into his holster and pulled Bryan into a thumping hug.

Wlad the mechanic was the only man left. He had hidden two P.11s in the trees.

He said he knew that Bryan and Jan would come back before the Russians arrived.

Jan and Wlad launched into a discussion on the possibility of re-timing the engines. Bryan followed none of it, except when Wlad threw up his arms, and uttered a spate of Polish Bryan didn't need translated. Wlad gestured at the blackened twisted heaps of equipment smoldering on the burnt field, then gestured at the petrol lorry in disgust.

At the end of the exchange Bryan guessed that Jan had asked Wlad if they should take the low octane fuel back to where they found it.

Wlad, snarling, set to fueling the aeroplanes and re-timing the engines. Jan and Bryan cleared the longest possible runway.

When the two P.11s were ready to go, Bryan was given the one equipped

with the wireless. "You will talk to the Roumanians, Bryan," Jan said.

"How is Wlad getting out?"

"Wlad take the petrol lorry. Wlad speak Ukrainian."

Bryan gave Wlad his revolver. It would be worse than useless to Bryan where he was going.

Bryan and Jan faced each other. Bryan offered a hand. Jan grasped it, hauled him in, threw his other arm around Bryan, and planted a kiss on either cheek.

"See you on other side."

Bryan opened the throttle slowly until the knocking began, then backed off a hair. He released the brakes and started to roll.

The P.11 lumbered across the field, gaining speed slowly. Bryan goosed the throttle. It pinked. He backed off a little, still gaining speed. But he was running out of field.

The *Jedenastka* was on its toes now, wind over the planes beginning to lift. Rolling faster.

A ditch and a row of brambles marked the end of the field. The P.11 kept rolling towards them. The field ended.

Bryan opened the throttle. The *Jedenastka* leapt. It rose clattering into the air.

Bryan backed off the revs, and skimmed the rocky ground at just above stalling speed. He eased the machine up, hammering. Thought he could feel cylinder walls melting.

He pushed the throttle back again to where the knocking stopped.

The wounded bird was flying.

He gathered enough speed to make his turn. He flew back over the field.

Wlad was waving bon voyage from atop the petrol lorry.

Jan had made it up as well.

They both pointed, and turned their kites towards Roumania.

At intervals Bryan and Jan inched up to the low clouds and cruised just below them. When anyone shot at them, they lifted up into the cottony-looking, stinging wet cover.

There wasn't as much shooting this flight. Wlad had painted oversized red and white four-squares under the wings to shout their nationality. Ukrainians might not like the Poles but they wouldn't waste bullets on them. Save that for the Germans.

Farther south, the roads were choked with refugees. Uniforms and mufti crowded together in a solid mass. Bryan looked ahead for the wide river that formed the border.

He dialed through the channels of his R/T, listening in case there would be some Roumanian challenge as they made the crossing. He picked up voices on the high end.

The voice wasn't Jan's. Jan didn't have a wireless. And it wasn't Polish

Bryan was hearing. He couldn't understand the words, but the edges of the foreign sounds were all wrong. He didn't know what Roumanian sounded like but knew this wasn't it. He knew these sounds.

The voices in his headset were speaking German.

Bryan wanted to warn Jan, but Jan had seen them first and was already turning into the attack.

Bryan spotted them on the deck, strafing the road.

ME 109s.

Jan we can't fight those, we'll blow up!

But Jan was already rattling and pinging to the rescue.

O Christ.

Bryan had never envisioned the end like this, giving his life in hopeless battle over Nowhere, Ukrainia, taking a few vain shots at Nazis who were strafing refugees.

But, if not for that, then for what?

He felt suddenly buoyant. He hadn't learned to fly and fight in order to run to safety while the enemy was killing the innocent.

It was an odd feeling, how clear his mind became when he knew he was dead. The physical reality hadn't quite caught up with the facts of the situation yet, but he was already dead.

Bryan banked around to follow Jan.

There were no bombers here, only one pair of free ranging ME 109s looking for something to kill. They'd found it on the huddled road.

A pair. Bryan wondered what had happened to the third plane. Then he realized that he had not seen Messerschmitts fly in vics. Ever.

And though they were fast, these two weren't flying 469 miles per hour.

The voices on the R/T changed tenor.

"Achtung! Jäger!"

One ME ascended to meet Jan.

"Was für ein Jäger ist das? Er ist toll."

Jan turned again, fleeing.

Knowing Jan, he was running to draw the MEs away from the road, and maybe even lure them into Roumania. They were close to the border.

Bryan climbed into the clouds, throttled back to rest his poor cylinders.

He continued up slowly, broke out into bright sunlight. Jan was there. Bryan knew Jan wouldn't stay hidden.

He heard the Germans' excited exchange, sounds of search.

The cloud churned. Thrashing propellers rose from the white sea. Two metal leviathans surfaced into the bare sunlight.

In his headset, Bryan heard a startled, *"Ich sehe ihn!"*

One of the MEs tore at Jan.

Bryan raced, limping and knocking, to Jan's aid. The wingman came at Bryan—and immediately ran out of bullets. He'd already spent his load strafing refugees on the road.

Bryan drove at the ME, cylinders detonating all the way. The ME bolted quicker than Bryan could imagine.

Bryan turned again to where Jan was tangling with the other Messerschmitt. Jan was trying to trap the ME into a turning bout.

No such luck. The Hun knew exactly what Jan was trying to do and wouldn't attempt a turn with him. The German overshot instead and made his turn out of range, then came back on top for a fresh assault.

The Messerschmitt was charging at Jan when a chunk of Jan's engine cowling blew off.

He hadn't been shot. The cylinder heads had blown out. Push pins from the cylinders flopped in space.

The P.11 wavered. The pins stopped, the propeller spun down. Jan had shut the engine off.

And, still pointed at the ME 109, Jan opened fire.

The ME reefed around, shot the P.11's wings off. Pieces rained down.

Jan baled out of the cockpit. The shattered P.11 spun into the clouds.

The voice on the R/T crowed. "*Horrido!*"

"*Viktor. Viktor.*" A second voice sounded.

God.

A white stream extended from the dropping body. The parachute blossomed.

Jan!

Jan descended gently, suspended from his silk canopy. The ME 109 buzzed by, circling like a shark. Jan pulled out his pistol and shot at it.

Laughter sounded on the R/T.

Bryan shouted, "You bloody bastards!" But his wireless was not on SEND.

Bryan raced, limping and clattering, to get this bloodthirsty Nazi off his helpless brother in arms.

"*Achtung. Da kommt einer hinter Ihnen.*"

"*Ich habe ihn.*"

Nearer, the red blot under the Hun's cockpit resolved into the figure of a rampant lion that looked like it ought to be holding an English coat of arms.

Bryan moved in close enough to see the man in the cockpit. The pilot's oxygen mask was off, goggles lifted onto his forehead. Bryan could see a bright white smile in a handsome Aryan face—and a salute, not the lifted-palm of a Nazi salute, but a hand to brow military salute to the maniac Jan dangling from his parachute. Jan was shooting, kicking, and doubtlessly swearing. The ME banked away.

And suddenly the red lion was arrowing at Bryan, points of fire coming from its propeller hub.

There was an ear-slamming *bang*.

The shock rocked Bryan's P.11.

Jesus! That was not a bullet. That was cannon fire.

The damn ME had a cannon in his nose.

"Horrido!"

"I'm not horridoeed yet, damn you!"

Bryan was still flying.

"Ach."

"Was ist los?"

Bryan looked back for the ME behind him. It wasn't there.

Bryan dropped a wing, found him. The Hun was covered with oil. A dirty smear of it blurred the ME's windscreen.

Someone had got him.

A voice on the R/T sounded concerned. *"Herr Major? Löwe?"*

The red lion climbed. The ME looked responsive and healthy.

Bryan looked at his own gauges.

Nobody got the red lion. That wasn't the Hun's oil on that ME.

It's mine.

Laughter sounded in his headset. *"Die Kiste pisste!"*

Bryan was pretty sure he knew what piss meant.

His oil pressure went.

That's it. I'm done.

His engine squeaked, then screamed. He threw the stick forward and ducked into the cloud.

He took a last look back as the mist swallowed him up.

The high-flying pair of Messerschmitts mounted toward the sun effortlessly. Long-nosed, slim, hard, modern. Lethal.

Next time he met one he wanted to be at the controls of a Spitfire.

His engine bellowed, scraped. Burn smell filled his head. He tried to decide if he could land without catching fire. He didn't want to abandon the aeroplane. He didn't know where he was. He'd lost the river, lost the road. He didn't know where—upon whom—the plane would come down if he baled. And he would be an easy target for gunners.

Stench of burning rubber and metal blew back at him from his engine.

The P.11 decided it for him. The propeller ground to a squealing tearing stop.

Bryan shut down the engine.

Shrouded inside the cloud Bryan was quickly losing up-ness and down-ness. Smoke and fetor continued rolling from under the engine housing. Something loose rapped against the crate's belly. He guessed his fixed gear had come unfixed.

He unharnessed, unplugged his R/T, took a breath. Turned the kite upside down.

He slid, then rushed out of the cockpit, sucked by the wind.

Falling.

Clothes snapped then pressed to his skin. Something whipped against his

face. He found the ripcord, gripped it. Waited, counting on the cloud being higher than 500 feet. It had been at 500 feet when he'd gone up.

The vapour thinned. Cleared.

His goggles fogged solid. He tore them off, looked.

He was high enough.

Too high, really. He forced himself to wait. Dropping.

Accelerating. Detail on the landscape sharpened quickly, growing to real proportion.

He held off until the last possible moment – and maybe past it. He yanked the cord. Rustling silk traveled out fold by fold and up in a long white tail. In the accelerated perception of his rushing fall, the parachute was unfolding very very slowly.

The ground flew up at him.

In the instant he was certain he was going to die, the spreading silk filled with air with a *fumph* and a jarring yank at his harness. His stomach felt to continue dropping through the hollow in his being, but his carcass was whole.

Branches and leaves looked huge.

He just had to time guide the parachute away from the trees.

He landed hard on his feet in a pasture. Pain lanced up through his ankles and all his joints, and he crumbled under the momentum, and rolled. Came to a tangled stop, his heart still thundering. He untangled himself from his shrouds and ran back to the trees.

He was bound to have attracted attention, and no one here would believe he was not a German paratrooper. Even if he could convince someone he was an Englishman with the Polish Air Force, he wasn't sure how he would be received. This was the Ukraine.

Maybe.

He wasn't sure exactly where he was.

He crashed through the woods, and stumbled out to a road that was astonishingly deserted.

After he had walked a ways, a dust cloud of a motor vehicle stirred beyond the rise. He stood in the middle of the road and waved his arms.

A wood-sided Ford waggon trundled gamely over the rutted track.

The Ford stopped for him, because the only other choice was to run him over.

"Do you speak English?" Bryan asked.

"I should say so. Permission to board." He pushed open a door for him. "What the devil are you doing in the road?"

"I'm trying to get to the border," Bryan said, climbing in.

"Why should anyone want to go to Poland at a time like this?"

"What country is this?"

"Did you land on your head, old cock?"

"I'm desperately lost."

"This is Roumania."

"Thank God."

The man gripped the wheel, deciding not to pursue further talk with a man who was not altogether there. But eventually he couldn't resist asking, "How can you be in Roumania and not know it? There is a small matter of a large river between here and there."

"I must have missed it in all the excitement. There was a cloud, you see."

The driver's glance flicked toward Bryan's shapeless coveralls of undyed linen. The two stars on the patch on his sleeve had a military look. "Polish Air Force?"

"RAF attaché. Only I don't know where the air force, or the British embassy come to that. I lost them somewhere."

"But they are all here. The embassy arrived yesterday. So did the Polish government entire."

"Oh. Brills."

"And your air force, the Polish one, what there is of it has been interned at the airport."

"Interned?"

"I shall deliver you to someone who knows what to do with you. Maybe they can answer your questions."

There came a splat on the windscreen, then another, more, becoming a patter. Wipers flapped from the top of the windscreen, clearing great muddy drops from the glass. The autumn rains had come.

"Now, *now* you rain, you son of a bitch!" Bryan growled, close to a cry.

The driver fell into a stuffy silence.

Bryan was accustomed to officials not being happy to see him. The legation staff at Cernauti was very very unhappy to receive him. He had no papers. No passport.

"How did you get past the checkpoint?"

"I didn't pass the checkpoint." His muscles were cooling down by now and beginning to feel a stiffening pain from the impact of his landing. His ankles were solidifying. "I flew in a Polish PZL P.11."

Their faces turned ashen. "You did not."

"I did."

"You are not hearing what we are telling you. You did not. You will save us a lot of political questions. This is a neutral country – marginally. The Iron Guard are fascists.

"The Polish government are here. They were promised safe passage. They got rather half of it. They came in safely. They cannot get out. It seems the Russians consider their release a hostile act, and Roumania is very anxious that the Russians should stay on that side of the river. Do you understand this little parable?"

Bryan said nothing.

"You are a civilian. We will organise a passport for you."

"I have my passport."

"You do not. Do you want to be shot?" He put out a demanding palm.

Bryan surrendered his passport.

"We are putting you on the night train to Bucharest. We shall alert the legation to expect you. And we shall arrange a seat on the next commercial flight to Athens."

The director tilted his reading glasses down, peered over the rims to inspect Bryan's coveralls. "We need to lose that kit. Do you have a uniform or civilian clothes underneath that?"

"Neither."

The man actually blanched. They were from an empire that expected her people to set tea in the middle of the desert or on board a sinking ship. This was not on. Bryan had gone native.

To his aide the director said, "Presentable clothes for him." Then to Bryan, "Now. Where is your aeroplane?"

"I pranged it, I'm afraid."

"Just as well. The Roumanians are confiscating all the Polish aircraft which land at the airport. Updating their own airforce. That is how things are done out here."

Out here. He meant outside England.

"What about the pilots?" Bryan asked.

"Being held."

"I want to see them."

"No. That won't do. They are safe enough, I can tell you that. Rather bitter though."

"So am I."

"We shall do everything we can for those boys. First we must get you out. You are worse than no good to anyone if we need to extricate you from some official snag. Just keep your mouth shut until you get to Athens."

"Keep it shut only as far as Athens?"

"At least as far as Athens. We are flying you on Luft Hansa, you see."

Bryan choked, recovered. He could not have heard correctly. "Sorry?"

"Luft Hansa is the largest commercial airline in this part of the world you know."

"It's German!"

"Well yes," the director admitted. He offered hopefully, "It is a direct flight."

"I beg your pardon," Bryan said with exaggerated calm to counteract the urge to kill him. "But have you been informed that we happen to be at war with Germany at the moment?"

"Well, yes, but they've continued service between neutral countries. I shouldn't attempt it at all, if they knew you were in the service."

"I will not step on board a plane with a swastika on it!"

"And how do you propose to get home? Flap your arms?"

An aide offered, "Really, you will be all right as long as they keep to their itinerary. If they decide to 'refuel' in Austria you could be in a spot of trouble. But you would notice soon enough. You would be flying in entirely the wrong direction."

"Splendid. What should I do then?"

The aide gave a blank look as if this hadn't occurred to him. He suggested quizzically, "Jump?"

His director, genuinely trying to be helpful, said, "Really it would help if you looked less military. Look at him, he looks as RAF-ish as they come. Can you do something about that?"

"I ran out of Brylcream a long time ago," Bryan offered dryly.

The man muttered in earnest. "Good good. If anyone remarks on the goggles, you have been driving an open motor car."

Bryan's hand moved unconsciously to his face. Wearing goggles in an open cockpit had left a pale mask on his tanned skin.

"And try not to look so healthy. Could you manage that, do you think?"

"For you, I think it's highly likely."

"Really there ought to be no problem. The Huns are terribly careful about their schedules."

"I haven't yet said that I shall go. My country is at war. I have been shot down, and now you say I can walk onto a Nazi aeroplane and ride off to Athens?"

The director paused a moment, reflecting on this statement, then confirmed, "Yes."

The aide explained, "They are not making war on civilians."

"I shall inform Warsaw."

"You know what I mean – English and German civilians."

"Different civilians altogether. Quite right."

"English and German bombs are not falling on each other's sides, only on the shipping in the middle."

This was too absurd. "I don't understand."

The director's expression softened and Bryan fancied he could see a man behind the cardboard front. He dropped his officious pose for a moment to say softly, "Means you're not insane." He handed Bryan his new papers. "I do understand your feelings. Really I do. You can explain to your superiors once back in London."

Bryan accepted the passport, rephrased, "You mean to my commanders."



BRYAN FLED HIS COMPARTMENT, which was full up with farmers and their goats. Their produce took up all the space on all the luggage racks.

He took to the corridor. It was a narrow passage, smelling vaguely of grease and urine. He slid open a rain-spotted window.

He had taken a nap before boarding. Wakened stiff. He felt like he'd been run over by a tramcar. Everything hurt. He must have landed harder than he thought. He moved now like a marionette, slowly pacing the corridor, loosening as he moved around.

He caught his balance as the carriage swayed.

The legation had provided him with a grey suit, which, while not precisely Savile Row, altered his appearance. Bathed, shaved, and dressed, he'd reported to the director, who instantly went into shock. "Good God!"

"Maybe we should have left him in the Polish bags," an aide said.

Bryan looked like a refugee when they'd taken him in. Here, in civilian clothes, his back held imperially straight because he was in pain and it hurt too much to stand any other way, he looked altogether different.

"He looks like an officer," the aide wailed.

There was nothing for it. In despair the aide delivered him to the train, closed her eyes and hoped for the best.

Bryan gazed out the window at the passing scenery, listened to the wheels on the rails.

In the failing light he saw an aeroplane over the foothills. A bomber.

It was a PZL P.37 *Los*, its rudder striped red, yellow and blue. Roumanian colours.

The Roumanians were trying out their new equipment.

When the bomber flew over, Bryan tried to see if any of the red and white chessboard squares were bleeding through the new markings.

The air blowing in the window was growing colder, the horizon taking on the jagged and forbidding outline of the Transylvanian Alps. He moved down the corridor toward the buffet car. Two Germans were coming the other way, walking as nearly side by side as they could in the narrow passage, one talking over his shoulder to his companion on his flank.

On closing the distance, Bryan moved toward the left like a polite motorist. As the Germans made no indication of resolving into a single file to get by, Bryan slowed, then stopped.

The Germans, instead of moving left, stopped also, leaving Bryan face to face with the one on the window side. Bryan didn't know what exactly they expected him to do with himself, if he were meant to retreat into a compartment or to hinge himself sideways like a door for them to pass.

Bryan turned toward the window, giving no space, and lit a cigarette he didn't want.

The German went around him, kicking Bryan's heel and elbowing his back in passing.

Bryan thought after them in sour impotence, *Yes. Take that. Thus to all enemies of the Crown.*

In Bucharest, the Legation confirmed Bryan's reservation on Luft Hansa. The plane to Athens did not depart until the 21st, so they put him up in the Athene Palace Hotel where all foreigners seemed to collect.

On the eve of his departure he had some Roumanian *lei* to get rid of. He was told he couldn't take it out of the country, so he decided to drink it rather than turn it back in to the Legation. If he got muzzy enough he could almost pretend he was in Paris.

He'd been aware that he was being followed from the moment of his arrival in Bucharest. He sent a drink over to the secret policeman. The man became quite agitated and left abruptly. But not before throwing back the whiskey.

At 2.00, as Bryan was starting out for the airport, there was an uproar in the streets.

"What is it?"

His driver explained, "Lot of assassins broadcasting on the radio saying they have executed the P.M. just now." Before Bryan could react too strongly the driver clarified, "Their P.M., not ours."

Prime Minister Armand Calinescu had been assassinated by members of Roumania's Fascist party, the Iron Guard.

It made for slow going to Baneasa Airport. There were a few hastily thrown together checkpoints to get through. Soldiers with bayonets were in

bloom at all turns.

Bryan thought he would miss his flight, but nothing was taking off on time. He saw the aeroplane on the tarmac as they approached the airport. It was a hulking German built tri-motor with a giant black swastika within a white disk painted on its side.

King's soldiers in full fig were making their presence known. They wore blue and white uniforms with metal breastplates and helmets, thigh-high leather boots, and swords, all in attempt to restore order and confidence. In Balkan nations, regalia bred respect.

Bryan waded through a morass of officialdom to get to his aeroplane. It was necessary for the administrators to do something complicated to prove their worth. One official studied Bryan's documents, making faces as if he *knew* something was wrong with them.

Bryan's lack of luggage was curious. And why did he choose now to leave the country? Did he belong to a Fascist party? What did he know about the assassination of the Prime Minister? Was he carrying any Roumanian currency?

Finally Bryan made it out to the tarmac where the Junkers 52 waited.

It was a big ugly boat, sheeted with corrugated aluminium. It was powered by one reciprocating engine in each wing and a third blunt radial engine stuck on its nose, making the aircraft every bit as lovely as a gargantuan star-nosed mole. The whole thing was grey except for the black trim painted around the engines in a handsome pattern to make their exhaust streams appear orderly.

Bryan walked slowly to the civil aeroplane that didn't look all that civil to him. The JU 52 was the Luftwaffe's versatile flying lorry. It served as a transport, as a bomber in Spain, and here as an airliner.

Guards stopped him again on the steps. An irritated Nazi marched out, pushed guards away from the hatch, shoved Bryan up the gangway, and shouted orders for everyone to clear out and get this aircraft out of here.

The door shut without further delay. A German told Bryan to sit. Bryan seated himself in the last available place out of thirty-two. An Englishman across from Bryan said, "Give that much to the Hun, they certainly have a knack for getting things done." He showed Bryan the time on his pocket watch.

"And knackers they are too," Bryan said but the noise of starting engines swallowed up the words.

Through the radial engines' steady racket Bryan was catching the frightened light gasps of a young woman behind him. He turned and asked if there were anything he could do.

The pale young woman explained in a flat American accent that she had never flown before. She was twisting a wedding band but was quite alone on this voyage. She gasped at every air bump, every scrape of a cloud, every banking turn.

"Cheer up, ducks," Bryan shouted over the roar. "Just bumps in the road."

She cupped her hands around her mouth, leaned forward to speak into his ear. "That wing is broken."

"That's an aileron. It's meant to move. Auntie Ju is as trusty as an old grey mare. This is as close to walking as you can get and still be in the air." Which was an accurate estimation of the Junkers' speed as well. "This crate can fly with bullet holes in her. Believe me it takes a purposeful effort to bring one of these down." He had personally emptied his entire 200 round load into a JU 52 and it barely noticed him, plodding determinedly onward.

She was slightly reassured.

A German, who evidently understood English, glowered across at them in belligerent pride that what Bryan said was true enough and glad that he recognized that truth, but wondering at the same time how did the Englishman know a JU 52 could fly with bullet holes in it?

The young woman introduced herself as Pamela. Bryan called her PaMELa. She forgot her fear for a moment. Confused. Her expression asked him why was he doing this to her name. PaMELa.

"Greeks accent all three-syllable women's names in the middle," he said. "Since we're bound for Greece I thought you had better get used to it. You will be PaMELa from the moment we touch down."

That tugged a smile out of her, and got her thinking about something besides the airplane possibly falling apart. "TerEEsa, MaRIa, SoFIa. You're right. MeLISsa."

Bryan talked with her the rest of the trip, receiving stern looks of disapproval from across the gangway. He was afraid he might have hung himself with that talk of shooting at Junkers 52s, but the plane flew straight to Athens without a diversion to Austria or anywhere else.

The Junkers turned at the Saronic Gulf and made its approach from the water.

The runway's narrow strip crouched between the azure water and the rocky Attic rise. As the Junkers circled in, Bryan could see another aeroplane taking off.

At the far end of the tarmac the assembled aeroplanes wore military colours, wavy camouflage of drab Mediterranean olive and sand, with white and Hellenic blue roundels. He recognized the fighters at once.

Polish PZL P.24s.

Bryan wondered which one he had given its test flight.

"Oh! Bryan, look!" PaMELa cried.

He flinched, alarmed. But she was only pointing at the ancient Acropolis rising from the midst of the jumbled urban maze of gray buildings and tile roofs.

The rocky hill wore its ancient temples like a crown.

"They've brought us in the scenic route!"

Bryan kept his eyes on the P.24s on the tarmac. He murmured faintly, "Yes,

I imagine they're taking pictures."

On arrival, Bryan booked passage on a cargo boat bound for Marseilles. It wasn't due to embark until morning, so he had dinner in a taverna with Pamela in Athens.

It was dark when they set about organizing lodging for Pamela.

Labyrinth was a Greek word. It described the streets. Pamela and Bryan were navigating on their second bottle of resined wine, so that didn't help, but they were in no particular hurry. They wandered, accompanied by wheeling swifts and scents of autumn flowers and somewhere the sound of bouzoukis. They sat on sun-warmed stones and watched the moon rise.

At last they secured a room for Pamela. Bryan said goodnight.

"Where will you sleep?" Pamela asked.

"Oh." He shrugged. He hadn't organized anything for himself. "I'm trying to quit."

She pulled him inside and he stayed. The wedding ring spent the night in a drawer.

James Aycock, now Group Captain, looked as if he'd seen a ghost. "I thought I'd seen the back of you!"

"I gathered that, sir," Bryan said.

No one knew what to do with Bryan Catrell, so he had been palmed off several times until he got back to Aycock like piss in the wind.

Bryan asked as levelly as possible, "Why are we not bombing Germany's munitions factories?"

James Aycock looked shocked. "That is private property you know."

Bryan couldn't talk.

"And point of fact our bombers *are* over Berlin."

"Berlin! We're bombing *Berlin*?"

"They're dropping leaflets."

"Who is?"

"Our bombers. On Berlin. Thirteen tons worth."

"Oh," Bryan said. "We shall crush them to death with leaflets."

"No. The men have express orders to untie the bundles first so no one is hurt."

Bryan's mouth opened and shut.

"See here. If we bomb Berlin, the Luftwaffe will bomb London. Simple as that."

"With respect, are we or are we not at war?"

"Yes. Once we make the German people realize that Hitler is a madman, we are counting on the sane populace to chuck him out. It's a much more reasonable way of deciding issues than dropping bombs. Do you know what a horror bombing is—?"

Then apparently realizing where Bryan had been, he said, "Young men are so jolly eager to shed blood."

"Watching the allies I've promised to help be butchered before my eyes is very exciting," Bryan said, nodding. "Carrying my friend's body out of the dirt on my birthday was more exciting than I can convey. I confess I am jolly eager to shed Hun blood."

Aycock appeared embarrassed for him. Shifted uncomfortably.

"You are over-wrought —"

"Yes, sir! Yes! Sir! And why not! What of the Hurricanes? Poland had a promise of ten Hurricanes."

"They were sent."

"They did not arrive."

"They got as far as Gibraltar when Hitler invaded."

"No one thought that Poland could use the Hurricanes then?"

"Hitler has Poland. You want us to give Hitler ten Hurricanes?"

Bryan couldn't answer that.

"Ah. You see, don't you? There was nothing for it. That feeble little airforce was destroyed on the ground in the first hours —"

"We were not!"

Aycock's eyes bulged. He was appalled, not by the shout but by that word "we."

"Pilot Officer. Stand down."

What to do with Flying Officer Catrell.

Group Captain Aycock wanted him bowler hatted. Searching for a lever to effect that, he conferred with Group Captain Greyson.

Grey Greyson looked like a Welsh pirate, with curly wiry hair of greying copper, one eye green-brown, an eye patch over the other. He'd kept himself fighting trim. James Aycock didn't like men who tried to be boys, and the black eye patch was too rakish for his taste.

And Group Captain Greyson was no help at all. He said, "Catrell is one of the few actual combat veterans we have."

"Combat!" Aycock echoed, then assumed a sweet smile. "Where does it say that?" He held up Catrell's service record.

"Say? Whatever the record says or doesn't say — we *know* —"

"We know he says he flew a Polish — what is the name of that tomato crate?"

"PLZ P.11 *Jedenastka*."

"That one. He took a French leave with it and pranged it in a neutral country. Catrell is *lucky* that that escapade doesn't show on his record. Demned lucky! Theft of a Polish aircraft does not count as combat experience!"

"Of course not," Greyson said.

"I don't want him near a Hurricane. And I don't want him even breathing on a Spitfire."

"Give him to me."

"Where will you put him?"

"Eighty-ninth Squadron."

"What are they?"

"Gauntlets."

"If I must put him somewhere."

"I'm afraid so, sir."

"The eighty-ninth then, if it must be somewhere. I simply feel that Fighter Command needn't scrape the bottom to find pilots. The war is so very far away."

Going home on leave, Bryan had never seen the West Country so populous. Children were everywhere, sent inland from the Channel coast. This was thought to be a safe place, out of range of bombers.

For now, it was.

Bryan's homecoming was subdued. Margaret was more relieved than truly happy to have him back.

His room was like a boy's room, cluttered with things, his and Vicky's childhood things.

Margaret had taken in a lodger, so the brothers' beds were crowded into this room. Bryan and Victor were seldom home at the same time. Vicky was away at Oxford at present.

Strange how far away Poland seemed here. Not just the distance. Timewise, it felt far removed. It had happened to someone else in another lifetime on another planet, and Bryan had never been away.

He smelled baking. Margaret was cooking as if to feed the county. Asked what he wanted to eat, he'd told her anything without cabbage in it. So she was making everything else.

Bryan stayed up late, reading with the light on. Margaret's guest asked if he should not be careful of the lights. Wasn't he afraid of the Germans?

"I know something about the limited range of aircraft," Bryan said.

There came a pounding on the door.

"But you know nothing about the Home Guard," Margaret said.

Bryan answered the door in uniform and stocking feet. The policeman told him to mind the light.

Bryan didn't argue. "I'll see to it at once."

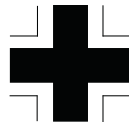
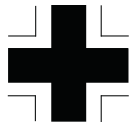
At least they were taking the war seriously here.

Bryan returned to the bedroom, killed the light.

When he was a child he had dreamt of leaving here. And that was what all this had been. A dream.

He left the window open to a mild breeze of St. Martin's summer. He heard the soft patter of rain on the grass, the rains that had not come to Poland.

God, what can you intend by this?



PAUL RITTER SAT IN THE BERLIN nightclub, drunk. The telephone on his table rang.

He took the receiver off the hook, dropped it in his beer stein, and ordered another. Beer, not telephone.

The first beer overflowed onto the tabletop.

Ritter spent a lot of time drunk these days, withering on the home guard. The world was at war without him.

From somewhere he heard the martial strains of *We March Against Poland*. If the radio played that one more time he was going to shoot it.

Poland had been invaded without him, and taken quickly. Already the Wehrmacht were pulling units out of Poland and sending them west.

Everyone was in it now. Britain and France had declared. They weren't doing too much yet. And they weren't doing it in Berlin where Ritter was posted, bored to tears and drunk off his ass.

He had gone to Spain to be baptized in fire. For what?

Who knew Poland would fall so fast? Who knew France and Britain would be such faint-hearted allies for the Czechs and the Poles?

Ritter had been posted to JG 2 "Richthofen" to protect Berlin. Ritter thought it wonderful at the time. He was braced for the promised retaliation from Poland's allies.

It had come tumbling from the sky, tons of it. Propaganda fliers.

The English bombers came at night with their leaflets. The German

fighters failed to intercept the bombers, failed to see them until they were on their way home.

The air raid alarm hadn't even sounded in the city.

There was no excitement in Berlin. The war was a bust. There were no invaders for Ritter to drive off. There were only people complaining about ration cards, lack of gasoline, and taxes. Beer and cigarettes cost dear. They were available to Ritter in limitless supply only because Hermann Göring stinted for nothing for his Luftwaffe.

It was cold. Winter was going to be evil if this was any indication. It was barely October.

Ritter wore a non-regulation black leather coat. The coat looked so sharp that it was becoming regulation. Everyone in the Luftwaffe liked it, wanted one.

Outside, there were no streetlights. Cars negotiated the streets with slitted headlights, drivers squinting to see the whitewashed curbstones.

A woman glided to Ritter's table. She was pretty for her type, her dark hair arranged softly. Her lips and nails were blood red. She wore a nice dress, but last year's shoes.

"Your phone doesn't work," she said.

"It's had too much to drink." Ritter nodded to the receiver in his stein.

She touched a long red fingernail to a propaganda leaflet on the table, "What is that?"

"A British bomb."

"Aren't you supposed to protect us from attack?" She was laughing at him. He picked up the leaflet and used it to mop up the beer he'd spilled on the table. "Dangerous work," he said. "They train us for years for this."

"Is this what they call Blitzkrieg?"

"Sitzkrieg," Ritter said. He kicked out a chair for her. "Sit."

She slithered onto the chair.

"Where are the Polish bombers?"

"I shot them all down."

She ran a finger along the edge of his leather coat. "I don't have a winter coat."

"That's because you bought a dress."

"I needed the dress. You don't like it?"

"I think you would look fine without it."

"Give me your coat."

"I could let you wear it home."

"But then you would have to come home with me."

Ritter nodded.

"There is no heat in my flat. They give you brave boys everything for the war effort."

"Do you want some? Heat?"

"How sweet. You're offering me your coat."

"That's all you want? My damned coat?"

She nodded. "That's all. What else?"

She was making him angry. He wanted to be angry. He smiled at her, with teeth.

He opened his gold cigarette case for her. She took one, an English Oval. "I see you've conquered England too."

Ritter lit the cigarette for her. "All by myself."

"You bombed a cigarette factory?"

"I'm not a bomber. I'm a fighter."

"Oh." She sounded disappointed. She regarded the bright glowing end of her cigarette. "Why is there a blackout? What am I supposed to do in the dark?"

"What do you think?"

"I think this is done so I can't see and I have to believe what you tell me."

"Tell you about what?"

"About anything in the dark."

"Shall we go to your cold dark apartment?"

"For what? What do I do when you take your coat back?"

"Well, not everything is rationed."

"And you naturally are in abundant supply of luxuries."

"That's right, darling."

A deck of cards dropped on the table between them. Ritter and the woman jerked back, looked up.

Fritz von Soden stood over them. He challenged Ritter to a card game.

"The lady and I are having a discussion," Ritter said.

Fritz tossed some money at her. "Get lost."

Her eyes darted to Fritz's armband and she left the table. Here in Berlin, Fritz was a Nazi again.

"Fritz, if I could stand up, I would hit you."

"If you can't get up, what use have you for her?"

"The lady's apartment needs heating."

"Here." Fritz pushed the cards at him. "Deal."

"Don't want to." Ritter put his hand over his head, lowered his eyes.

Fritz had probably done him a favor by sending the woman away. He couldn't back up his talk anyway.

He focused on the pamphlet that was plastered onto the tabletop. It depicted a caricature of a hulking Gestapo officer, his cap pulled low over glowering eyes, a whip and pistol in hand, a flaming city behind him and heaps of bodies strewn in his wake.

Ritter looked at it sideways. "I don't know, Fritz. They've drawn you rather fat." Ritter peeled the pamphlet up. "Here. We are to hand any of these we find over to the Party." He offered the soggy pamphlet to Fritz.

"Never mind the idiot leaflet." Fritz grabbed it—tried to. It didn't even exactly tear. It separated quietly. Fritz tried to throw it. It stuck to his fingers.

"Deal the cards."

"Go away."

Fritz dealt the cards. Five each.

"Come on, pick up your cards, Ritter. Don't you want to see your hand?"

Just to get rid of him, Ritter picked up the cards, spread them with his thumb. Each and every one was an ace of spades.

Joke. Of some sort.

"I don't get it."

"Your new assignment, Ritter."

Ritter frowned in drunken thought. Ace of Spades. The ace of spades had been the emblem for the fourth Staffel of Jasta 88, his unit in Spain. The unit was no longer in existence. But veterans of the Condor Legion, proud of their past, preserved all the heraldry of J/88. They carried all the old badges into their new units.

So which unit wore the Ace of Spades now? Ritter thought a moment, his mind gone spongy. "JG 56," he said at last.

"On the western front," Fritz said. "You can stop crying about missing Poland."

Ritter let the cards drop, disgusted. "Hitler just declared friendship with Holland today."

"Ritter, you're such an ass. That's just talk. We have struck the word pacifism from our vocabulary."

We was the Nazi party.

"The RLM is re-ordering and re-numbering all the fighter wings," Fritz said. "You don't consolidate forces in preparation for peace! The war is here. The only question is which front, west or east. My guess is west. That's where everyone is going."

"Are you in JG 56, Fritz?"

Fritz glanced around the club as if distracted. Overly casual. "No. He didn't ask for me." His gaze fixed on Ritter, searching for something. "You, Ritter, have command of the seventh Staffel."

There were three Staffeln to a Gruppe. The first three Staffeln comprised I. Gruppe.

The next three Staffeln comprised II. Gruppe.

The seventh Staffel would put Ritter in—

Ritter let the cards drop. It *was* a joke after all. A bad one. "There is no third Gruppe in JG 56! I'm drunk, Fritz. I'm not stupid."

"There is a third Gruppe in JG 56 *now*," Fritz said. "And the new Gruppenkommandeur of the new third Gruppe asked for *you*, for some reason that is absolutely beyond me. Maybe I should be a real bastard. That seems to be the way to get anywhere."

"I'm sure you could manage it, Fritz," Ritter said, becoming more irritated with this game. He would rather trade darts with the woman than with Fritz. Where did she go?

Ritter twisted around in his chair.

There she was. Sitting in the lap of some other man, a coat over her shoulders. She waved at Ritter.

"Shit." Ritter turned back around.

"I think it's shit, but there it is." Fritz produced the real orders.

Signed by Major Erwin Halle, Gruppenkommandeur III./JG 56.



20



FLYING OFFICER CATRELL REPORTED to 89 Squadron. He immediately recognized another Flying Officer who'd been at Cranwell with him, two years behind.

Sir Percival Desmond Lovejoy was the kind of gentleman you would expect to find in the AAF, but the aeroplanes weren't simply a hobby with Percy.

"Addicted to the kites, I'm afraid. I shouldn't like to imagine doing without."

Percy Lovejoy was tall, lanky, white-blond, with big white teeth like Bryan's except that Percy's teeth were straight. Percy always looked like he ought to be in tennis whites.

Percy Lovejoy was surprised to find himself of a rank with Bryan Catrell.

"What did you do to blot your copybook, Bry?"

Bryan told him.

"I didn't know we had anyone in Poland," Percy said.

"Nobody who was anybody was," Bryan said.

"Keep your pecker up. This is just what you need—a good war to shake things out."

Bryan shook his head, staring bleakly at the bi-planes on the airfield. He knew they belonged to his squadron, the 89th.

Gloster Gauntlets.

His P.11 had been better aircraft than those.

He'd let slip that he would give his left one to get his right one in the cockpit of a Spitfire. *Someone* had arranged the farthest thing from it. And had him reporting to a stuffed shirt of a Squadron Leader, Reginald Wright.

Bryan's first mission with his new squadron was to fly the Gauntlets to an airfield in Wick.

From there the pilots would proceed by train to a drome in Wales that was as far from anything as anything could possibly be.

"Couldn't they find any place more remote than that?" Bryan said. Felt like he was sinking in mud.

A ranker called Collie Lloyd said, "You don't know?"

"What am I meant to know?"

"It's an OTU."

Operational Training Unit.

Bryan brightened. "Really?"

Big nod from Collie. "We're being sent to train on Spitfires."

The Supermarine Type 300 had been christened *Spitfire* by the Air Ministry.

"Just the sort of bloody silly name they would choose," Collie Lloyd quoted its designer.

"Could be worse," Percy Lovejoy said. "I never considered Gloster Grebe or Sopwith Snipe names to strike terror into the hearts of the King's enemies."

"The Yanks get to fly Helldivers and Hawks," Collie said. "Yeah! I want to fly a *Helldiver*."

"What do the Germans call their Messerschmitt 109s?" Flight Sergeant Padgett asked.

"Messerschmitt *ein hundert neun*," Collie said.

"Oh, you are a clever dick, you are."

The pilots of Bryan's squadron waited at the edge of the airfield at the Operational Training Unit. The clouds hung low, so the men were listening more than watching for the new aeroplanes.

A rumbling rolled in the clouds like uneasy thunder. Padge glanced upward. "Hope it's one of ours."

"It's not Jerry," said Bryan, who was familiar with an assortment of German engines. "Sounds like Hurris."

"Well, it might," Percy said.

Hurricanes weren't the only aircraft that flew with a Merlin engine.

Suddenly, they were here.

Spitfires.

Three of them broke from the clouds and closed into a tight vic to swoop down. The rounded wings and sleek lines were unmistakable.

The Numbers Two and Three aircraft broke right and left into rolls while the Leader pointed its long nose up for a loop.

With the opening throttles, the sound of the Merlin gripped Bryan, got

underneath him, ran along his nerves out to his fingertips and down to his balls.

The three Spitfires came in for perfect three-point landings.

"And *that* is how it is done," Percy Lovejoy said.

"If those blokes are so good, why are they civilians?" Padge said.

"Ease off," Collie said. "It's a requirement to be ATA, you have to be unfit for service."

The ferry pilots climbed down onto the wings of their kites.

"They look jolly fit to me."

The leader of the trio was an older gentleman, a flamboyant cartoon of a man, sporting a '14 - '18 War vintage leather helmet, a long white silk scarf, and goggles.

The other two pilots were fit young women. Jolly fit.

The Chief Flying Instructor set about the old gent immediately, "You will never stunt with my aircraft over my drome again. Is that clear?"

"Yes. Quite. Next time, you may come to Castle Bromwich and collect the kites yourself."

The old gentleman gave a cavalier toss of his long silk scarf over his shoulder and called to his harem, "Come along, old things."

The Number Three pilot had Bryan spellbound. Watching her was what it must have felt like to see the Lady's hand with gleaming sword rise from the Lake. This Lady had stepped down from the clouds and brought him a weapon with which to slay real dragons.

She was shaking out her short auburn hair.

Her face was more or less heart-shaped, her mouth small, her lips full. There was a dash of freckles on that little nose. Her clothes could not have been worse—trousers, a mannish shirt and tie, leather gloves and deck shoes—but who cared about that. Her walk drew his gaze.

The Number Two pilot was an impossibly blonde luscious creature. Causing an epidemic of whiplash among the boys, she was, too.

She sat on the wing root of her Spitfire and changed her shoes from rubber-soled flats to high heels. She untucked her shirt, pulled it tight around her chest and tied it in a knot under her breasts, leaving a flash of skin at her taut little waist.

Then she walked.

"Someone ought to fix that rudder trimmer before there's an accident around here."

"You mean someone might prang."

"Not a chance. She's too fast, that one."

The erks, who had seen this act before, told the pilots her name was Gert. "But she only answers to Emmeline."

"What about the other one?" Bryan asked.

"Don't know, sir." Then, as if noticing for the first time, he said, "You know, she's not bad looking."

She was smaller all the way around, and she walked with a country-bred, stride-through-heather gait.

And she was getting away.

Bryan hesitated, torn between the Spitfire and the girl as the one parted from the other.

The girl, the aeroplane, the girl, the aeroplane.

The aeroplane was sitting there, come to stay awhile. The girl was nearly to the bus that had come to collect the Air Transport Auxiliary pilots.

The girl, the aeroplane.

Bryan chased the one that was running. He caught her up and fell into step with her.

"Bryan Catrell."

Her eyes, they were an amazing shade of gray. They glanced aside, up and down quickly once, then straight ahead where she was going. She didn't introduce herself in turn.

"May I walk with you?"

She glanced again from under auburn bangs, maybe about to say something smart to the effect that he already was walking with her. She said, "I suppose so."

Her voice was soft, a touch of a Scot in it.

He blurted, "You're the prettiest girl I've ever seen."

She gave a cock-eyed smile, patted his shoulder. "Needs practice."

"I can't practice it. I've already said it the only time I'll ever say it."

She had arrived at the bus. He leapt ahead to stand in her way. "Will I see you again?"

"I hope not," she said softly and slipped around him with too too much regret.

He took her wrist, "Then you do like me, don't you?"

"I'm trying not to." She gently disengaged her wrist and joined the bus.

A fitter snorted. He stood with hands thrust in the deep pockets of his dark denim overalls. "Worst approach I've ever seen, sir. Seen a lot of blokes prang over those two, but you'd think a pilot could handle a bird better than that."

Percy Lovejoy had to agree with the erks. "I say, Bryan, you *can* do better than that. You have done."

"When I really want one, I seem to squib it."

"Then do us all a favour and stay with women you don't fancy," Padge said. "That was embarrassing, sir."

Bryan wasn't listening except to the rumbling in the sky.

More Spitfires dropped out of the clouds.

"Your eyes are glazed over, Catrell."

"I am certain."

The Spitfire was the cleanest machine he had ever seen. No struts, no

bulges over breech blocks for after-thought cannon.

She was smaller than a Hurricane and not as stout, a thoroughbred next to a dependable workhorse. The wings took their strength from their spars constructed of square-section concentric tubes, which telescoped down from the thick wing root to the thin tip. It was hard to believe those wings could hold eight guns.

The Spitfire's streamlined cowling housed the massive Rolls Royce Merlin III 1030 horsepower engine. High-set exhausts of the upright vee were positioned to aim rearwards. Ejector nozzles would add an extra seventy horses to the engine's thrust.

"Gentlemen," the flight instructor announced. "You are looking at the best, fastest fighter in the world."

"Fastest?" Bryan said. "What of the Messerschmitt that clocked four hundred sixty-nine miles per hour?"

"That was a racer. One of a kind. Did nothing but fly fast. It was built just to set a record. Wasn't a fighter. And I understand it has already pranged."

Standing there, the Spitfire had the same haughty high-nosed attitude as her nemesis. But the landing gear in the Spitfire joined to the fuselage and retracted outwards. The shock of landing wouldn't be taken on those beautiful wings.

As it was, the oleo legs could take quite a pounding—and had done from some louts in training.

Bryan found the cockpit a tight fit, especially next to the Hurricane. The Spitfire was the smallest kite they could possibly build around that engine and those guns. Any smaller he thought he would be slipping his arms into the wings as sleeves.

The mechanic raised the hinged access panel at Bryan's left to close him in. The catches clicked into the first of two positions, leaving the panel ajar. "In case of a muck up in take off or landing the canopy won't slide forward on you."

Insulted, Bryan brought the panel fully up and locked.

The Perspex blister canopy was locked open and back for takeoff. It slid back like the chamber of an automatic pistol. And like the automatic, it could jam if the fuselage was stressed, so there was a crow bar within reach on his left, clamped on the access panel just in case.

In front of him was a tidy arrangement of instruments, with clear white markings on black faces, all smooth and new. He inhaled a blend of machine smells. New paint, lubricants, fabric, oil. Rubber hoses and seals.

He plugged the lead from his leather helmet into the R/T, turned the selector through the four channels then back to the Controller who was on channel C. He found the oxygen socket, also high on his right, where the connection would be out of his way.

Red patches on the leading edges of his wings covered the gun ports to keep dirt and moisture out until they were called to action. There were eight

fixed, forward-firing .303 Browning Mk II machine guns in the wings, wider spaced than in the Hurricane. These were all set outside the propeller arc, so there was no danger of mistimed interrupter gear and no need to slow down the guns' rate of fire.

The specification had called for as many guns as possible. Eight had seemed excessive when it was first proposed, but the fighter could only count on being able to hold an enemy aircraft in his sights for two seconds at a go, so Fighter Command needed a machine that could deliver a killing blow within seconds.

Bryan ran through the preliminary checks. His fitter waited by the starter battery. Bryan opened the throttle a half inch, primed the engine with the Ki-gas pump. Five strokes ought to be enough in this weather.

He held the stick back, gave thumbs up. Got a thumbs up from the fitter.
"Clear! Contact!"

Bryan pushed the starter button. The prop turned. The engine fired and roared. A sudden surge of power took hold of the aircraft. Smoke and flame jetted from the exhausts. The engine settled into an even firing of a throbbing idle. Bryan screwed down the priming pump and ran through the warm-up checks quickly as the coolant temperature crept upwards. He had been warned, if the glycol climbs over 100 degrees before you begin taxiing, you won't make it.

Erks pulled the chocks away.

Cleared to taxi, Bryan released the brake. Brakes were on the spade grip, which was good. Meant he could stand on the rudder bar without fear of inadvertently locking the wheels and pitching his Spitfire onto its face.

He rolled out on a jagged course to see his way forward, steering with brake pressure. The rudder was nearly useless at this speed. He listened to his own breathing and the engine's sultry pulse.

He turned into the wind, ran through the take-off drill.

Radiator shutter fully open. Temperature climbing nonetheless.

Airscrew speed control fully forward.

Flaps up.

Trim tabs — elevator one division nose down. Rudder to starboard. Mixture rich.

Both fuel cock levers on.

Coolant temperature crept up.

The voice on the R/T pronounced, "You may scramble now."

Careful now, he remembered another warning: the prop is a long-bladed affair. Clearance from the ground isn't much once the tail goes up.

And don't forget that the normal throttle was the reverse of what Bryan had grown accustomed to in Poland. That mistake could be embarrassing.

He opened throttle toward the gate marked RATED boost, released the brake. The Spitfire gave a sexual growl and sprang, pushing him back in his seat. *O Jesus*. It took off like something out of Buck Rogers.

A gale of propwash blew past his cockpit. The aeroplane accelerated across the field. Bryan pushed gently forward with the stick. The tail came up, the long aristocratic nose cleared, and the horizon hove into view as the Spitfire hurtled down the flare path, blades beating barely higher than the grass. In his peripheral view, things whipped past him in a blur. The Merlin bayed at full song. Bryan had to adjust and re-adjust the rudder to keep the kite on a straight course. She felt light and eager. He'd been warned: don't force her up. Force her up? He didn't have much to say about it. She was off the ground.

He quickly retracted the gear – or thought he had. He gave a quick shove on the pneumatic lever and returned his hand quickly to the stick, but the red light had not gone on. He gave the lever another hard push.

Now the red light declared UP.

His spat with the gear cost him precision, but the aircraft was flying without him. No one was going to be terribly impressed with him this flight.

He changed pitch and throttled back to climbing revs. The coolant temperature had stopped creeping upward now that the wheels were clear of the intake.

He was shocked how far the aeroplane had carried him already. He moved the stick to make his lefthand turn. Ailerons were so light he wasn't sure they were connected until he saw the ground to the left and the sky on the right.

Overdone, I think.

There hadn't been a ghost of a stall. The broad wings carried him around the steep turn.

He slid the hood closed. The spring catches locked it. The view of the upper hemisphere was perfectly clear through the polished bubble.

When he'd climbed high enough, he throttled back to cruising revs, glanced at the tach grouped with the other engine instruments on the right side of the panel.

2650 rpms.

At this speed, the resistance on the stick gave a nice touch. She was all brute power and refined response.

The Spitfire was sensitive yet forgiving. She would give you what you commanded of her, but she wouldn't kill you if your request was unwise. Not immediately anyway.

She wasn't like a Hurricane, which must be flown at all times in case it decided to dive or climb. Spitfire flew of her own will. Bryan trimmed the elevators and took his hands off the controls. She kept her level course.

The bleak mining countryside took on a beauty at this height.

Bryan tried a roll, ended up barreling toward the ground. The aeroplane had felt so light he'd forgotten to account for the enormity of its engine. She recovered splendidly, having a nearly limitless ability to get herself out of trouble. The Spit must have been thinking – if Spits thought – get this clot out of my cockpit. Bryan tried it again. Lifted the nose thirty degrees first, then

rolled through.

He took her to her rated altitude. Bryan wanted to unleash the horses and see what she had, but a small wire across the gate was there to keep him from doing just that. He pushed into a dive to see what 400 miles per hour felt like in a Spitfire. In a moment he was flying faster than he'd ever gone.

There was only one word. Spitfire. Spitfire. Spitfire. How had he ever thought it a bloody silly name?

She was tail heavy in the dive. He trimmed, tried to turn, but the ailerons had become so heavy the stick felt frozen. He wedged his elbow against the side of the cockpit and levered the stick slightly to the side, eking out a gradual turn but he was losing altitude at a tremendous rate. He returned to center and hauled back hard.

Sinking heavily into his seat, head bowed, blood retreating, he leveled her out. He remained conscious through the recovery, but he had to fly straight and level for a moment to let some blood come back to his brain.

He eased up on the throttle, and the Spitfire's perfect manners returned. He had a new respect for her power.

Docile and devastating.

He was startled by how soon he had to return.

But I just got up here.

He flew back to his station, flashed his letter.

A voice on the R/T greeted him, "Welcome back, Flying Officer. Get lost?"

Bryan asked if he was cleared to land.

"You were meant to fly a circuit and bump. You have been cleared to land for quite some time."

Landing had been the last thing on Bryan's mind up here.

"It was a large circuit," Bryan said.

He opened the radiator flap, throttled back, changed the pitch to fine. He slid the canopy open, locked it back, raised the seat so he could see over the long engine as he brought her in for his first landing. He was lined up perfectly. With his right hand he reached for the lever to lower the undercart.

It wouldn't go.

The red light remained on. He continued to throttle back. The klaxon blared directly behind him, loud enough to hear over the Merlin engine.

The voice in his headset said, "Hear the horn? It's for people like you."

"I hear the horn. Works fine. It's the undercart's gone U/S." He pushed the lever down again. Nothing. He quickly jabbed at the button behind the throttle to kill the horn. The aeroplane rocked as he changed hands roughly on the stick.

"Hold the lever forward. You have weight on the locking pins no doubt."

Bryan pushed forward and pulled back again. "No joy."

"It's new. Talk to it."

"This is not a conversation fit for broadcast over the R/T."

"Follow your manual."

"Yes, I have it open right here on my knee – WHAT DOES IT SAY?"

"Give it a bash."

Bryan slammed the lever forward hard, jerked it back down hard. "Damn!"

"Go around again. You've balled up this approach."

With another quick change of hands on the stick, Bryan throttled forward. The Spitfire sprang upward with his wrath, her responses immediate.

Sorry. Sorry.

The kill button on the klaxon popped out, in position to scold him again.

"She's new, Catrell. She needs a little running in."

He circled.

Weight off the wheels. Weight off the wheels.

He climbed, tightened his Sutton harness.

"You're going to be high, you don't think?"

Bryan snapped the Spit over onto her back. Did it fast, so the carburettor wouldn't starve, and he pulled the lever hard.

Then he rolled upright.

The word DOWN glowed a lovely green on the control panel.

In case the light failed, mechanical indicator rods poked up red through the wings, just above the wheel wells, to tell him that the landing gear was in fact down. He already knew. He could feel the drag underneath him

Flaps down, he throttled back. No horn blaring.

God save the King.

The Spitfire flared, tiptoed down, and settled into a rumbling roll.

Bryan knew not to jam on the brake or he would find his kite on its spinner and himself in Wick flying Gauntlets.

He taxied back to the hangars, climbed out. The aeroplane was down safe. Bryan was still sky high.

The other pilots greeted him with slow applause and abuse.

"Need a map, Catrell?"

"Uh. Bryan? That way? That way is what we call *up*."

They were impressed as all hell.

The youngest chap, Teddy, screwed up his face like a cartoon Holzauge. "How many flying hours do you have, Catrell?"

"I'm not sure."

"You don't keep your log up to date?"

"I misplaced it," Bryan said. *Somewhere between Lublin and Cernauti.*

The Chief Flying Instructor said, bland, "Flick maneuvers are not to be done, Flying Officer Catrell."

Bryan stared at this prosaic person as if he were an alien being. "Sir."

"Any other difficulties, Flying Officer?"

"The controls are heavy at high speed."

"That is to keep men like you from tearing the wings off."

"It would be nice to be able to steer."

"And no flick maneuvers."

"I won't do it again." He'd banged his head on the canopy the first time. He backed away from the Spitfire. Gazed at her.

His oxygen hose and the R/T lead still dangled from his helmet. An erk moved in to help him out of his parachute. Bryan murmured, "Is that not the most rousing thing alive?"

The erk blinked vacantly. "It in't alive, sir."

"The hell you say."

Bryan remembered Berlin. The Olympics. Under a high flying Messerschmitt, he and Paul Ritter had talked of contest.

Bryan had said, "In the original Olympics there was no second place. There was no silver or bronze. You won or you did not."

Paul Ritter had nodded. Said he knew that. He reminded Bryan that it was Germans who had uncovered the site of Olympia.

"This is artificial. The ancients knew better," Ritter had said. "Real contest is like War. You win or you do not. That is all. There is only one best."

Nothing needed saying after that.



AT GRANDFATHER'S HOUSE at the edge of the Cotswolds, the Catrell family was gathered together for the holidays, all except for Bryan. A wilted disappointment lingered under the Christmas cheer. Maybe he'd been denied leave. Or maybe the weather was just too bad. It was bitter cold, as if the wind had frozen into ice daggers and the air itself would crack.

The throaty bark of an aircraft engine split the brittle air.

It was an odd sound in such a peaceful place, so no one knew right away what they were hearing. Vicky twigged first. "It's Bryan!"

He ran out the door. Margaret's voice behind him, "Victor, wear a coat!"

Vicky charged across the snow, out to the open field near the streambed where a thousand summers ago the brothers used to chase salamanders.

He found it in the sky, flying ahead of its burring roar, a wonderful bird with low round wings tearing over the white field. A powdery layer of snow fanned out and raced across the frozen crust ahead of the Spitfire's stormwind.

The blister canopy slid back. A white scarf streamed from the cockpit. Vicky couldn't see much of the face except the smile.

Bryan saluted.

Vicky jumped up and down, waving his arms. The prop wash hit him. Tiny ice crystals spattered and stung like thrown grit and forced his eyes shut. The Spitfire lifted away. The canopy slid shut.

The Spit executed a roll, rocked its wings over grandfather's house and disappeared over the horizon.

It was evening by the time Bryan showed up at the house.

Uncle Rhys opened the door to the young officer wearing his service

greatcoat. Rhys marveled, "Good God, he looks like Cat in that kit! Margaret, don't you think?"

"Hullo, Uncle Rhys," Bryan said.

Margaret ignored any reference to the uniform. She embraced her son and asked if he had eaten.

Bryan kissed his grandparents, said all his hullo, and gave chocolate to his little cousins behind his aunts' and uncles' backs.

He asked if everyone liked his new hack.

Vicky was dazzled.

A little cousin was tugging at Bryan's trouser leg, demanding to be picked up, so he obliged. The crowned wings over his left pocket were the object of fascination.

The Catrell cottage had a lot of visitors.

Grandfather said he had no idea there were so many girls in the Barringtons. Throughout Bryan's stay, girls called for a whole range of reasons. And carolers—this house never had so many carolers. And of course it was devilishly cold outside, so the family must invite them in.

One did not talk about Poland in front of Margaret. Bryan had made the mistake of telling her too much when he'd come home the first time on leave.

At the mention of anything airborne the room chilled to twelve degrees of frost.

"I am trying to explain to Margaret that if I *hadn't* been in the aeroplane I would be learning to decline my articles right now.

"Just in case anyone offers you an article," Uncle Rhys said.

"Care for an article, Uncle Rhys?"

"*Nein, danke*, I'm all full up."

"Just so," Bryan said.

Margaret set the platter down more loudly than necessary.

The men retired to another room.

"We shouldn't torment Margaret so."

"Why not," Victor said. "It's the only sport I can go in for these days."

Victor had gone up to Oxford. Somebody in this family had to be a gentleman.

Victor was lighting a pipe.

"What the devil is that?" Bryan said.

"*You* started it." Victor pointed the pipe stem at him.

"Vicky, you look ridiculous."

"Bryan."

"Yes?"

"If you persist on calling me Vicky, I shall be forced to take drastic measures."

"Really, it's a term of endearment—"

"Very well. By-By."

"A thousand pardons, Victor."

"Did you learn any Polish?"

"Not much. Yes, no, thank you, cheers, and a few impolite words. Oh yes, and 'There I was...'" He posed his hands into aerial dogfighting position.

"I'm thinking I shall run away and join the BEF," Victor said.

"You will not."

Victor gaped in betrayal. "You're in league with Margaret. So it's your duty on this Earth to keep *Vicky* from going anywhere or doing anything, is that it!"

"France will be a bad place to be when spring comes.

"War *is* what I had in mind."

Uncle Rhys stood in the doorway, shaking his head. "There won't be a war. Not in France. There is the Maginot Line. And the Ardennes? Nothing can get through the Ardennes. Hitler won't make any attempt on France. If he does anything, he'll turn on his 'natural enemy,' the Bolsheviks."

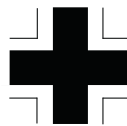
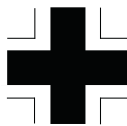
"France," Bryan said. "In the spring."

"But *I* shouldn't go out and meet the enemy," Victor said.

"I won't let you go, Vicky. Sorry. *Victor*. You must've seen the newsreels. And I know we're not sending any Spitfires abroad."

"And what do you imagine that means?"

Bryan moved to the window, tipped back the blackout curtain to glimpse the starry peaceful sky. "It means that I and at least somebody else think we shall be needing them *here*."



THE FIELD SPANIEL LAY with its head down. Its silky ears became part of the carpet. Paul Ritter sat back in a leather chair, cognac in hand.

The hunting lodge served as their group quarters.

An orderly emptied the ashtray. Ritter let his magazine fall closed on his knee.

The dog lifted its head, looked toward the entrance, and gave a little woof.

The door opened. The Adjutant stepped in smartly, brought his heels together with a loud rap so that Ritter and everyone else looked up.

“Staffelkapitäne to the Gruppenommandeur at once!”

Ritter set the magazine aside. Exchanged glances with the huntsman and the other Staffelkapitäne.

Glanced at the clock. It was late.

What was Major Halle doing at HQ at this hour?

Ritter and the other Staffelkapitäne followed the Adjutant out to where the Horch staff car stood, idling.

The winter had been long and savage. The pilots lived in fear of icing. Ritter often came down peering through his clear-view, the rest of his canopy frosted solid white inside and out.

And once, after a rough takeoff, he'd circled the field only to see his Wart running—chasing Ritter's tail wheel, which had snapped completely off. The tail wheel made a break for it like something with a will.

Then the spring thaw left the airfield a lake.

Erwin Halle had taken a kite up. Coming back, he made his approach nicely enough, then the Messerschmitt's legs jabbed into the mud and the airplane pitched onto its face and flopped into a most excellent nose-over.

That had ended operations for weeks.

Come April, German forces moved into Norway. Even then the bombers got all the action. The short-winged Messerschmitt 109s of Ritter's Ace of Spades Jagdgeschwader 56 were left behind, inland, at the Maginot Line.

The driver opened the doors of the staff car for the Staffelkapitäne. Ritter climbed in with the others. Overhead glowed a clear starry sky.

Flying weather.

Riding past the airfield, Ritter tried to spot the ME 109s. He knew they were under camouflage covers. Some of them lurked in hangars that looked like farmhouses and barns.

Delivered to headquarters, Ritter found Major Halle at his desk. He was on the telephone.

Erwin Halle still looked like an altar boy, his hair in regulation buzz cut. There was a Spanish Star at the bottom of his right pocket, and an Iron Cross First Class on the left.

Halle hung up the phone. His grey eyes looked bright. "This is it."

He outlined the objectives for this assault. The procedure for securing victory had been refined after the operations in Spain and Poland.

The first stage: Attack the enemy's air forces and airfields and key industry in France and Belgium and the Netherlands.

Second stage: Destroy the commanders and the main headquarters.

The last stage would be the pursuit and destruction of the beaten enemy.

Halle gave his captains the times and rendezvous points to meet up with the bomber Geschwadern over France. The MEs would be flying top cover and taking out any enemy aircraft that managed to get airborne before the bombers could take out the enemy fighter bases. The Panzers would be advancing precisely where they were least expected, not against the Maginot Line, but south of Namur, through the Ardennes. The forest there was thought to be impenetrable.

Halle briefed them on what kind of aircraft they could expect to meet. "Mostly French. And there might be British Hurricanes still in France, but most of them pulled out of after we took Norway and Denmark."

"Can we expect any Spitfires?"

"None."

"I need a Spitfire," Ritter said.

"Not today. Wake up is at 2:00. Breakfast at 2:30. Final flight briefing is at 3:15. Cancel your plans for this evening. Go to bed now."

Ritter flung his arm to the side, turned his head on the pillow, eyes open in the dark, alert. The window was open to a cool breeze. He could hear the distant bark of an engine coming to life. He reached to the night table and

turned over his watch. He couldn't read it in the dark. Knew it was almost time.

Another engine crackled in the morning quiet. Its roar from here was muted to a distant drone, as welcome and cheering as the first birdcalls.

An orderly's knock on the doors advanced up the hall. Ritter threw off the blankets and turned on the light before the orderly could reach his door.

The pilots assembled outside of operations, still cradling their coffee cups in their hands. Halle arrived. Ritter tossed away his cigarette.

The stars were fading. Mist lifted from the airfield. The day would be glorious.

Halle motioned the men inside. They gathered around the map.

They would be flying to the limit of their aircrafts' endurance so they synchronized watches down to the second.

Halle sent them out with a cheery, "Break your neck and legs."

Ritter could hear the bombers from other bases already climbing and mustering in the east, rising with the sun.

The Messerschmitts were assembled on the field, warmed up and waiting for their pilots.

The MEs were painted with dark greens above and sky blue below. The Ace of Spades emblem painted on the plane's cowling signified that it belonged to JG 56.

The vertical white stripe aft of the cross said it belonged to the third Gruppe in the fighter wing. The cross was an old style Greek cross with narrow white borders instead of the fatter Balkenkreuz, and the numbers were white, which were also signatures of III./JG 56.

Unlike in Spain, victory marks were painted directly on the rudder itself, because the rudder stem was taken up by a swastika now.

Ritter's airplane had three victories painted on the rudder. Spanish victories didn't carry forward, so even Erwin Halle's rudder had only nine victories on it.

The victories were black now. Halle had his dated and marked with a small French roundel over each. Halle was always methodical.

And he had his victories painted very narrow. He expected to need the space.

The airplanes were ME 109E-3s. The new powerplant was a formidable Daimler Benz 601 Aa 1150 horsepower engine.

Ritter's old ME 109E-1 in Berlin had been armed with machine guns in the wings. When Ritter had first come to this Staffel and seen this ME 109E-3 with bulges under the wings, he'd cried, "My ME has broken out in mumps—What have you done!"

But the bulges were from shell drums and a reservoir for the spent shell cases of its 20 mm wing cannon. A third cannon was mounted on the massive inverted vee engine and fired through the spinner hub. There were also the familiar 7.9 mm MG 17 machine guns mounted on the engine crankcase and

firing through blast troughs in the cowling. The three cannon and the two machine guns mounted over the cowling made the ME 109 E-3 the most heavily armed crate in the sky anywhere.

Ritter climbed into the cockpit. The phony war was ending now.

His Wart stood on his starboard wing and hauled the magneto crank around. A reluctant muddy moan began, rose in pitch to a whine that became nearly a scream. Ritter pulled the ignition. The prop convulsed. Exhausts coughed a blast of smoke and fire, then the engine caught and spun with a purring roar. Needles of gauges climbed around dials like alien eyes winking awake.

"Good morning, Fräulein."

Ritter's Wart climbed onto the port wing, looked in to make sure all was well. He closed the canopy over Ritter, gave it a double pat and jumped down.

Flags marked out a dry path into the wind this morning.

The Messerschmitts waited, propellers spinning, engines barking.

At the signal, they sprang forward.

The Daimler Benz snarled. A short run carried Ritter into the air. He heard the satisfying double thump of landing gear rising and locking into place. He throttled to climbing revs. The propeller Adjusted itself for the ascent.

His Staffel joined up with the airplanes of other units. The roar of their mustered engines resounded like the inside of a titanic bell.

Bombers flew down below, the stepped up Schwärme of fighters above, rising like a staircase to God's doorstep. It was the biggest airshow he had ever seen.

We are magnificent.

Here, up high, contrails spun off his wingtips.

Over Belgian fields the Stukas pitched into steep dives with an unholy scream. They had added wind-driven sirens to their spatted legs. They sounded even more demonic than before.

As soon as the Stukas were clear, the Do 17s dropped their clusters of bombs.

Columns of smoke welled up where they hit. Clouds like thick gray trees sprouted with the red and yellow plumes of petrol tankers going up. White flashes of gunfire shot up from the ground. Grey puffs of Ack Ack dirtied the sky.

No one came up to challenge the Luftwaffe in Ritter's corner of the sky.

The bombers dropped their loads, undisturbed.

Someone sent on the radio, "Does anybody see any enemy fighters?"

"Not a tail."

"Dammit, I'm going to start looking for partridges if I don't find something to shoot."

"Achtung. Aircraft."

"Civilian."

"I think he's at the wrong party."

"Falke 1 to Falke 2. Let's go visit," Ritter said.

"It's a civilian liner, *Herr Major*."

"Falke 1 to 'Wooden Eye', I see that. Follow me." Ritter peeled off his Schwarm and moved in.

The aircraft was a large Belgian Sabena airliner, not just bearing neutral orange markings but the whole damned DC-3 passenger plane was painted international orange with huge bold white letters declaring: BELGIQUE.

It screamed neutrality.

Ritter moved alongside close enough to see frightened faces in the windows. His Rottenkamerad had fallen in on the other side. Between the two fighters, this bright orange Gooney Bird looked like a big party balloon.

The Belgians knew the Germans weren't supposed to be here. If they didn't know these were hostile skies, then this crate would not be so very orange.

Ritter ignored the radio demand for them to back off. He despised neutrality. Last time he met a DC 3 it was in Spain. It had outrun him.

He had over 160 km/h on this crate now. "Let's shake them."

"With you, *Herr Major*."

The two Messerschmitts bolted ahead, stirring up a rocky wake for the airliner to bounce through.

Ritter's canopy fogged on the way down to base. He rubbed off the film with his glove. The day had grown hot here below.

The sky was a clear blue, the mist entirely burned away. Mayflies plastered his windscreens.

His tires squealed at first contact, then rolled. He taxied in quickly and left the airplane for his crew to refuel. To the Waffewart standing ready with more ammunition, Ritter waved him back, disgusted. He hadn't fired a shot.

He found the Gruppenkommandeur.

"Where is the enemy?"

"Destroyed on the ground, a lot of them."

"Can't you call up the bomber commanders and tell them to *miss* a few! How is anyone supposed to get in any shooting around here?"

"The day has only begun."

The shooting picked up. So did the advance.

Most of the enemy fighters the Germans met were Morane Saulnier 406s made of plywood, fabric and aluminium. A Morane was an automatic victory unless you were new, stupid, or hungover.

But it didn't do to sneer at any of them. They all had guns and any of them could kill a smug or careless ME 109.

In no time the bases moved forward again, and the Ace of Spades Jagdeschwader 56 was flying out of Belgium, from an airfield the Panzers had captured for them. It didn't have any bomb craters. It had been abandoned without a fight. Not even any attempt at sabotage. The speed of the German

advance was unbelievable. The Belgians hadn't believed it.

Ritter was seldom on the ground. And when he came down he couldn't sleep, all his nerves sparking.

The supply staff arranged entertainment for the Luftwaffe pilots and ground crew. They'd packed reels of recent German films.

His Staffel told him to come with them.

Ritter had taken down his seventh victory today. Was pretty sure he'd killed the pilot. How was he supposed to sit and watch a movie after that?

"No. I don't want to see Kristina Söderbaum drowned again."

In these Nazi approved pictures, inevitably the heroine, sullied by some disgusting slobbering cow-eyed Jew, did the right thing and killed herself. If Hollywood was so degenerate, why did they produce *Gone with the Wind* while the Reich produced this dreck?

Ritter drove into town and found a girl to keep him company. He dragged himself back to base after hours, found his men playing cards and passing around a bottle of Armagnac.

Ritter sat, poured himself another glass. "How was the film?"

"Kristina Söderbaum drowned."

Ritter was still wide awake.

The men of his Staffel said there were two places to find Paul Ritter, in a cockpit or in a bottle. He drank or else the engine oversped.

Life was never so intense as when two men met knowing one would die.

Within days the battlefield moved out of range again. The whole Ace of Spades Jagdgeschwader 56 packed up and moved into France.

The roadsides down below were littered with abandoned vehicles that had run out of gas. There was furniture, which the countrymen had determined first to take, then dropped. The roads themselves were clogged with refugees. They cringed as the MEs flew over.

The ground crews had trouble catching up with their Staffeln.

The fighters' logbooks were becoming catalogs of English and French aircraft—and one American fighter in French colors.

Ritter added another Morane to his list before he found anything new to collect. He didn't have anything Dutch, and it was too late. The Netherlands surrendered five days after the attack began. There was still hope of catching a runaway Belgian airplane operating from a French field.

He was missing a prize trophy. He hadn't even seen one. No one had.

By week's end they had moved forward again, farther into France.

On the captured field lay charred skeletons of Hurricanes that had been unable to refuel in time to get aloft. They smoldered in black piles, torched by their own crews in the face of the Blitzkrieg.

The German pilots were living like kings. Rationing had never really touched the boys in the Luftwaffe, and now they had plenty of everything.

Ritter was sending home food packages, real coffee, silk stockings, French perfume, tobacco, champagne, cognac, sugar, wine, and all the fruit he could

buy. He had no love for Herr Ritter and Jutta, but it was what a dutiful son was expected to do.

"Did anyone get a Spitfire?" Ritter asked at the end of every day.

"No one's seen one. Rumor has it there aren't any."

"What do you mean, there aren't any?"

"They must all be in England."

Britain was holding back its air force.

Ritter stalked outside, climbed a low bluff and scowled at the western horizon.

It was dusk. The station guards didn't challenge him. They recognized his silhouette. He was almost always alone. He paced the rise, his gaze fixed toward England.

Well, my darling. Here I am. Come out and fight.

"Hey, Ritterkreuz, wait."

Ritter turned. There was Klaus waving, and jogging to catch up with him. Ritter waited. Klaus was making some kind of play on his name.

Ritterkreuz. Knight's Cross.

"I don't get it."

"Ritterkreuz," Klaus said. "It's a new medal. It's the Blue Max of the Third Reich."

The Blue Max was what they used to call the *Pour le Mérite*, the medal of highest honor. Those who won it were never seen without it, men like Baron Manfred von Richthofen and Oswald Boelcke. To this day Hermann Göring displayed his own Blue Max under his chins, even though the award had been discontinued with the dissolution of the second Reich in 1918.

In its place now was the Ritterkreuz, the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross.

It looked like any other Iron Cross but it was worn around the neck on a ribbon like the Blue Max.

Klaus unrolled the latest issue of *Signal*. On the cover was a Panzer division commander wearing the Ritterkreuz.

"Damn Panzers are getting all the glory in this campaign," Ritter said. "What about us?"

"Don't give it a thought," Klaus said. "The Fat One will take care of us."

Panzers drove a path across France to the coast at Abbeville, cutting off the British Expeditionary Force in the north from the French army in the south.

Ritter's Staffel, with the rest of the Gruppe, flew sorties out of a base situated in between the divided Allied forces. The German fighters kept the sky over the Panzers clear of enemy bombers. The Panzers were poised to capture or kill a half million British fighting men.

The Adjutant announced, "Here you go, Kerls. The Fat One has said that any fighter pilot to score twenty victories will be awarded the Knight's Cross! That's the mark."

"Twenty?" Ritter said. He had eleven. "Is anyone close besides Halle?"

Erwin Halle's score stood at seventeen.

"Yeah," The Adjutant said. "A Gruppenkomandeur over in JG 23 just hit eighteen yesterday. Major Johann Löwenstamm."

The race was on.

21 May 1940.

Halle's men mobbed him at the morning briefing. "You can't let Löwenstamm win this. You can catch him, Halle!"

"I intend to pass him," Halle said, and had to pause for the huzzahs.

By sunset, Halle had two more victories on two separate sorties. He rang up Löwe's camp to see how his rival was doing.

Löwe had bagged one. Halle and Löwe were tied at nineteen.

22 May 1940.

At the end of the last sortie of the day, Halle set down without a fly-by. He reported to his disappointed crews, "I hope I'm not ruining anyone's wagers—" He sniffed. Scowled at his wingman. "Klaus, have you been drinking?"

"No. I took up a bottle of champagne. I was ready for your twentieth. We hit nine thousand meters and it blew."

Klaus was dripping champagne.

Halle turned around. "Someone ring up Löwe—"

"I took the liberty, *Herr Major*," the Adjutant said.

"And?"

"Couldn't reach him. He's gone on a *Freie Jagd*."

"Oh, he has, has he!" Halle looked at his wet wingman. He grabbed Paul Ritter instead. "Ritter. Get a crate ready."

Erwin Halle and Paul Ritter took off as the sun was sinking. There was scant hunting in the north where the British foot soldiers were pulling back toward the coast. It looked like England was going to abandon them. In a couple days that battle would all be over.

Halle and Ritter headed south.

"*Achtung*," Ritter sent. "Half left. Friendlies I think."

Two aircraft were silhouetted against the westering sun. They looked like ME 110s, *Zerstörer*.

"French," Halle said.

Ritter was flying close enough to see Halle cross himself. Halle always did that before battle. *Twit*, Ritter thought at him. This man had to be the oddest fighter Ritter knew.

Erwin Halle and Paul Ritter closed on the two aircraft. They had the sunside. They should be able to see the Messerschmitts coming. The reverse angle was nothing but silhouette.

Almost in range, the aircraft were taking no evasive action. And their dark shapes against the twilight sun still looked like friendly ME 110 *Zerstörer*.

"Erwin, I think they're ours."

"They're not. Take the one on the left. The one on the right is my number

twenty.”

These aircraft had twin fins, tapered wings, duel engines, blistered noses, thin fuselages, and long canopies over two-man cockpits. They were the size of ME 110s, the shape of ME 110s.

Red tracers flashed from Halle’s aircraft. Bullets hammered into his target, all down its fuselage.

“*Horrido!*”

The second aircraft flashed under Ritter’s ME. Sunlight on its wings showed red, white, and blue roundels.

French!

The gunner was shooting up at Ritter from the rear of the cockpit. Ritter heard clatter on his armored underside. Should’ve trusted Halle.

Ritter veered off, curved back in low. He flipped his safety off.

The enemy was running, pitifully slow despite its two engines. Ritter moved up under its tail.

It knew he was down there. It jinked.

Ritter pressed the trigger, all guns selected. His ME rocked with the combined force of guns and cannon. The great mass of the Daimler Benz engine stabilized the recoil.

His target disintegrated. Perforated wings flew off. No parachute showed among the falling pieces. Ritter swerved to avoid the debris.

Those two flaming lumps were its engines – radials now that Ritter could see them.

Friendly ME 110 engines were inline.

The rest of the kite dropped in shreds. Overkill. Ritter wished he’d only used the guns.

A movement at his flank startled him. He flung his ME to the side even as realized –

“It’s me,” Halle said.

Ritter straightened out again. He felt a prickle under his tongue. His face burned. *Back to the recognition models.*

A voice in his headset. “Did you see it?” Halle was asking him.

Ritter snapped back to attention. “What? Yes. Yes!”

He’d witnessed Halle’s number twenty.

Johann Löwenstamm set his ME down hard at his airfield in the gathering dusk. Angry with himself.

Stripping off his gear, he stalked into Ops, bellowing, “How is Halle doing?”

The Ops Officer answered with his hand over the receiver of the field telephone, “Doing his fly-by right now.”

“*Verdammt!*”

As Ritter taxied in, he could see the men jumping up and down, crowds of them at the field’s edge, pilots, Warte, staff. Everyone.

Overhead, Erwin Halle rocked his wings.

Ritter climbed out of his cockpit. The boys were shaking champagne bottles as Halle made his approach.

Anyone who could leave his post did. Mechanics waited with flowers and champagne. There were also clusters of PR people. Every news reporter who could get on base was here, and everyone who owned a camera had it ready.

Halle set down. He didn't dare taxi. As soon as his wheels touched, people broke the boundaries and ran out to meet him. Halle shut down the propeller as quickly as he could.

The mob arrived around the ME.

Halle's Wart scampered onto the wing to open the canopy and be the first to grasp Halle's hand.

Corks came out of their bottles like a cannon shots "*Horrido!*" White froth rained down on the airplane.

Halle ducked.

Cameras flashed. Halle shouted, "Somebody telephone Löwe!"

"He's already on the line, *Herr Major*, waiting to congratulate you."

The voice on the phone shouted. "Halle! You bastard. You turncoat. You French dog. You son of a whore." Might have been laughing.

"You honor me, *Herr Major*."

"Get fucked!" Löwe roared. Definitely laughing.

23 May 1940.

Major Halle had headache. He'd tried to keep up with all the toasts the night before.

"Frau Halle's dumb kid," he mumbled from under a bag of ice.

He was summoned that afternoon to Generalfeldmarschall Göring's train, *Asia*.

Halle's chauffeur drove him out to where *Asia* was sheltered in a railroad tunnel.

Asia was there. The Generalfeldmarschall wasn't.

Halle waited. He should've suspected something, but didn't.

At last, an Adjutant told him that something had come up. Halle should return to his airfield.

It was a warm day and Halle was riding with the top down, almost falling asleep. The driver slowed as they entered the gates to the airfield. Halle stood up in the car.

On either side of the access road, the entire Geschwader stood formed up in ranks, pilots, their Messerschmitts, motor vehicles, officers, NCOs, enlisted men—1600 men—at attention.

Banners that had been constructed in secret festooned the way. Halle's Messerschmitt was positioned apart, cleaned and decked with bouquets and a laurel crown. The most artistic of the Warte had painted a Ritterkreuz with its black, red and white ribbon, and the numeral "20" within a wreath on the ME's rudder.

Halle was supposed to say something to this assembly, but for several minutes he couldn't talk.

The Reichsmarschall bestowed the Knight's Cross on Erwin Halle with his own hands.

There was an even bigger reception the next day. A banquet worthy of Napoleon was held in the best chateau that the German army had liberated so far. Halle was toasted with rivers of French wine.

The media presence doubled. Erwin Halle was suddenly a national hero.

Congratulations continued to pour in from Party officials and Luftwaffe commanders. And from girls—lots of girls, French and German—by scented letter, by lingerie, and in person at the airfield gates.

Halle retreated to his headquarters to coordinate tomorrow's offensive.

Paul Ritter had an un-German disdain for medals. It went with his un-German disdain for authority. But this, the Ritterkreuz, was somehow different. Maybe because of its looks. It looked like the *Pour le Mérite*. Things in the past meant more than things in hand now.

Or maybe it was because he first saw it at Erwin Halle's throat. Paul Ritter had to have one.

And it had his name on it.

The British Expeditionary Force, cut off from their allies and surrounded by German Panzer brigades, retreated to their last available port of embarkation—Dunkirk.

The Panzers paused that morning. That was only to give the infantry time to run forward and close the gap.

In the headlong chase after the retreating Tommies, the spearhead got ahead of the spear.

The port of Dunkirk itself was ablaze. Recon pilots came back shaking their heads, their faces grim. "It's burning like I've never seen a city burn. Almost feel sorry for the bastards."

And the Tommies would be setting fire to their supply stores. They knew Dunkirk would fall. England could not possibly get all those men out of there before the German columns overran them. It would happen soon. Maybe even tomorrow the way the Panzers were charging.

At 12.45 the order came over the radio. STOP.

"What?" Dieter said.

"Why?" Ritter cried.

"That 'stop' isn't for us," Klaus told Ritter. "That's for the army, so those damn Panzers don't get all the credit. The Fat One wants the Luftwaffe to finish it from the air."

Ritter was summoned to Halle's quarters. Not his to headquarters at the airfield, but to his private billet in the chateau.

Ritter thought Halle must be ill.

Ritter tapped on Halle's door.

After a moment, getting no response, he pulled the door open.

Halle was packing a bag and setting out his two favorite hunting rifles. There was a stiff set to his shoulders. He collected his things with quick jerky motions.

"Herr Major?"

Halle motioned Ritter in without a word as if not trusting his voice. He closed his suitcase. Set it on the floor. "You have command of the Gruppe for the next few days."

He stared off into nothing for several moments. "Make that indefinitely."

"Herr Major—"

"The staff is already aware that you are the worst administrator in the whole Jagdgeschwader. They'll mind that part. You just lead the men out to fight. I'll be back—" Halle took a shaky breath. "I'll be back in a few days. Probably."

"Where will you be?"

"I don't know. Home, I think." He looked about distractedly, picked up his rifles. "Maybe I'll go hunting. Do you suppose the eighth Staffel would let me borrow their dog for a while?"

Ritter whispered, "Erwin, what the fuck is going on?"

Halle stopped fluttering around like a wounded pigeon. He stood still with his hunting rifles. "I questioned the Generalfeldmarschall's orders, so he says I don't need to obey them. I have been given an indefinite leave."

He set the rifles carefully down.

"He said the Luftwaffe will make the final heroic drive to the beach. There will be special medals for this campaign and I am not to have one. He said he wished Löwe had got the Ritterkreuz first. I told him I thought the idea of the Luftwaffe advancing to Dunkirk alone was ridiculous. I didn't know it was his idea. He's the one who changed the Führer's mind."

"Herr Major, I'm not a strategist but—"

"I am!" Halle cried, then checked himself. He sat down, shaking. The Knight's Cross at his throat picked up the tremor. His eyes looked enormous. He stared, gazing at his torpedoed career. *"Gott. Gott!"*

When he could speak without crying he said, "We have been moving like clockwork, each part in its place. Now he wants to cut off the wheels and the legs. Panzers can't fly and aircraft can't win an infantry battle. He's going to let all those Tommies get to Britain—" He stopped. Stood up, rigid. "Forget everything I just said. It's fifth column bullshit." He picked up his bag. Strode briskly to the door.

"Halle."

"What?"

"Rifles. You want those."

"Right."

He gathered up the rifles. Picked up his bag again.

“I hope I see you in four days when you’re making your victory fly-by over the captured British Expeditionary Force on the beach at Dunkirk.”

25 May 1940.

It was hard to get lost. That black pillar of smoke was Dunkirk. Dark slicks lay on the water. Thousands and thousands of men were backed up to the docks and the beaches.

Stukas bombed the destroyers of the Royal Navy, which had come to evacuate the Tommies.

Ritter searched the clouds for targets. He didn’t want to look at what was floating in the water.

His Messerschmitts had been ordered to fly high cover while the bombers pounded the Tommies into submission. For the first time he was operating within range of British fighter bases in England, and Ritter had been told to watch for Spitfires and Hurricanes.

He thought he saw someone over the dark water, a silvery glint. He took his Staffel out over the Channel. They flew halfway to the white cliffs, but met no one.

His fuel ran low, and he turned his flight homeward with a sense of just missing his game.

Someone had been there.



BRYAN CATRELL AND PERCY LOVEJOY were on their way out the gate when they were turned around. “New orders, sirs.”

Percy looked to Bryan and shrugged, “Has to be better than what I have lined up.”

Reg informed the squadron that they were to fly into Manston airfield to-morrow at daybreak, refuel, and from there to fly patrols over Flanders.

“Splendid!” Bryan cried.

Percy couldn’t believe it. “We’re moving to France?”

“No. When our patrol is done, we return to Manston.”

Collie muttered aside to Bryan, “Well, that’s a little closer to the war than we have been.”

When Reg dismissed them, they broke into a chorus of *We’ll Hang Out the Washing on the Siegfried Line*. Unleashed at last.

It didn’t occur to him that something must have gone catastrophically wrong.

Because there had been some confusion in France regarding recognizing friends and foes, the Spitfires were wearing new markings. A big yellow circle ringed the roundels on the fuselage, with red, white, and blue flashes like a French flag on the tail fins. As the Spitfires were new aircraft over there, they had to make jolly sure their colours were friendly.

At daybreak the squadron flew into the coastal station at Manston. As the

pilots dismounted for a final briefing, Padge pointed toward the hangars.

"Cor! Look at the Hurryboxes!"

Tattered Hurricanes had seen action. Crews tended them. Manston was the nearest field to the Continent.

"Bryan Catrell!"

Bryan turned. He knew the voice, but it couldn't be.

A big man, squarely built, charged toward him. Waving his brawny arms, the man looked like a stampeding tree.

"Jan!"

Jan Bujakowski caught Bryan up in a bone-crushing hug. "Bryan Catrell!"

"Put me down you bloody nit!" Bryan yelled, then repeated it in French so Jan would understand.

Released, Bryan stood back. "Look at you!"

Jan Bujakowski was rigged out in regulation RAF uniform but for the brown scarf.

"I was afraid you'd packed it in!"

Jan roared. "Hah! I see hell. The devil see me and say, 'No, no, don't let him at me.' I am here to kill German. Many many German. We form a squadron. Polish squadron."

"Are you flying to-day?"

Jan shook his head. "We learn English first. For wireless."

A purple-faced NCO huffed across the grass, screaming at the errant Pole who cheerfully refused to understand that all that bellowing was meant for him. "You see how that sergeant talk to me?"

At the same time, someone else bellowed, "Catrell!"

Jan nodded Bryan off. "I go. You go. Leave for me some German to kill."

"I'm not leaving anything for you!" Bryan pointed back at Jan as he ran to his summons. "Get up there and start shooting!"

Bryan heard engines in the air. Merlins. Sick ones. Another squadron was coming in. The Spitfires that appeared were shot ragged.

"Jesus Christ!"

Battered wings bore black cordite streaks and bullet holes. They'd gotten some rounds off. But they'd taken some. One came in with a steaming engine, metal panels flapping loose. There was a quick grating squeal as tyres touched down.

The Spits taxied in with their familiar disdainful posture, arrogant despite their wounds.

Bryan had never seen a Spitfire not looking whole and bright.

89 Squadron took off, ordered to patrol the coast at Angels 16 and keep the German bombers from interfering with the shipping. The duty sounded familiar, except that it was the French coast instead of the English coast this time. The orders did not explain what was meant by "shipping."

The only word of caution was on their endurance. "You will have forty

minutes over target if you don't meet Jerry."

"And if we do meet Jerry?"

"Much less. Hitler will thank you if you drop that kite in Channel because you weren't watching your fuel."

"Understood."

Put to the firewall, the Spitfire would drink 98 gallons in an hour. Of course she wouldn't withstand maximum boost for more than five minutes. And the Spitfire only carried 85 gallons between its two tanks anyway.

They flew at squadron strength this morning, Squadron Leader Reg Williams leading A Flight as Red Leader. Bryan was Yellow Leader with Collie and Teddy behind him as his 2 and 3. Percy Lovejoy was Green Leader.

Reg Williams was thirty years old and bound between covers of stiffest leather. If it was written in a book, it was as if it came from the Bible.

All autumn long, Reg had run his men through the highly structured attack drills.

Now they crossed the Channel in tight vics on a course toward a column of ugly dark smoke that turned out to be Dunkirk.

"Cor! Look at the bleedin' boats!"

Bryan dipped a wing to see down below. White wakes dashed the dark Channel water. He thought they were white caps. They were not.

Boats. All the boats

The moment took his breath away. Each and every white mark was a boat. It was an armada of all sizes of boats. Yachts, cargo liners, ferries, skoots, trawlers, tugs, minesweepers, fireboats, dredges, mailboats, launches, sailing barges, *row boats* for all love. A long white streak of a fast moving cruiser passed some boats that barely made a wake at all, all coming or going the long way around the mine fields and shoals to Dunkirk.

Bryan's section strayed over the beach east of town.

Reg on the R/T: "Close it up, Yellow Section."

Bryan did, but not before he had seen things that could never be unseen.

It was an evacuation.

He didn't say it on the R/T, though he was fairly sure he was the last one within hearing distance to know.

I think we might have been told.

He had thought the allies were fighting a war over here.

We are covering a rout.

They were covering a slaughter.

He wondered where the front was. His skin crawling, he looked around.

We're it.

"Tally ho," he sent. "This is Yellow Leader. Bandits at Angels fourteen. Look right, you can't miss them."

Teddy: "How do you see these things?"

Percy: "Who needs RDF? We have Catrell."

A mass of black dots on the southern horizon was resolving into shapes of twin-tailed aeroplanes with long slender fuselages. Flying Pencils. Dornier 17s.

Bombers. Bombers were coming here.

They are not!

Reg, now. Giving orders. "Crossbow Leader to Crossbow aircraft. Attack number 2! Attack number 2! Yellow Section, get in line!"

Bryan brought his vic into line astern, 200 yards back from Red Section.

At Reg's order, Reg's section broke right. Bryan's section broke left, very smart, very tight.

Reg's trio came up beneath the hindmost Dorniers. The Dornier hadn't drilled on Attack Number 2 and didn't cooperate. The Dorniers gave a totally wrong reaction. As Reg was closing, suddenly the bomber was *up*, and the gunner from the next Dornier was shooting at Reg.

Bryan struck his Dornier from behind. Must have hit armor plating, because it didn't mind.

Teddy took out the starboard engine, but the Hun kept going on its port engine.

The R/T had become a jumble of voices.

"Die, for God's sake!"

"I got one! Burn, you sodding Nazi!"

"Mind my bleedin' wing!"

"Sorry."

"Come back here, you swine!"

"Damn this for a joke!"

"Re-form. Re-form."

And somewhere amid the yelling: "*Achtung! Schpitfeuer!*"

Bryan heard it with a feeling of unreality. He thought someone was being funny. Then came the awful dawning that it was the voice of a real Hun and *he's on our frequency and he sees us!*

Heartbeat quickened to drumfire. He squinted into the sun, couldn't distinguish a thing. "Crossbow Leader, this is Yellow Leader, bandits upstairs."

"Green Leader to Green Section. Attack Number 2. Attack Number 2. Line astern. Go."

Toward the horizon, at a distance above the Dorniers, Bryan made out a different profile—sleek little fighters, which might have been Spits, but they were too angular, their tail planes a little too high.

Bryan glanced back at his section just as the wing beside his broke into perforated tracks.

"Teddy, break! Collie, break!"

Teddy dove, an ME 109 glued to his tail.

Bryan pushed down after them. In the sudden reverse of gravity, his carburettor quit for a deadly moment that could stretch into eternity.

In the instant's hesitation while his engine was sucking air he could hear

a Daimler Benz engine close above him, the thumping of a cannon firing. Tendrils of smoke rifled past him.

His engine barked back to life at the same time as a shattering bang shook his kite. One of those 20 mm shells hit home.

The explosion made him jump, but he was still flying, downward in a screaming dive.

He pulled on the stick hard with both hands. He sank into the seat, blood draining away, tunnel closing before his eyes. The Spit groaned as if something were buckling. Wings juddered from the force. The Channel water filled his narrowed view then lifted to the horizon. He felt to be hurtling down broad side, but his ship held together. He leveled out. The tunnel widened—and into it, miraculously, the ME appeared.

Bryan saw it with disbelief. He knew in an instant what had happened. The ME also had trouble coming out of its pursuit dive.

It levelled out lower than Bryan, and ahead of him. The tables had abruptly turned.

Bryan slammed the throttle wide. Closed the distance. His breath came short and fast. Squared-off wings filled his reflector sight. There was a convulsion from the Messerschmitt as it saw him, but Bryan was already taking the shot, ruddering with its turn.

The Spitfire shivered. Fire leapt from eight ports.

Orange flashing lines reached out along a staccato path. Smashed into a black cross.

In a shattering moment the Messerschmitt died. The tail section tore off. Its swastika cartwheeled away with the splintered bits.

Bryan released the trigger. Heard his own gasp.

He pulled up. Felt as though he had broken through some very high cloud where the sun was so bright the sky paled and he could soar in a tranquil dream place.

He wrenched out of it. Looked left, right, up, down. Two small shapes darted in descending circles off to the right.

One was Teddy chasing his tail. The other was a Messerschmitt intent on staying with him.

Bryan throttled again to the firewall, pushed the override. He lined up a deflection shot.

If the ME would just come around again.

Bryan tore into range.

Hang on, Teddy. Come on, Teddy, move, move, move.

Bryan squeezed the button on the spade grip. Tracers lashed out. Starboard guns arrived a split second late but port guns caught the Messerschmitt right behind its engine. Pieces flew off its fuselage—

Then the mighty hammering of Bryan's guns gave way to pneumatic hissing and the empty rattle in the Spitfire's breechblocks.

NO! Bryan beat at the Perspex. NO!

The Messerschmitt flew on, but not pursuing Teddy. Not on any course that would mean anything. In a moment the ME listed, dropped a wing and lazily fell out of the sky.

Teddy straightened his Spitfire out of his tight turn. "Who's there? Where's that ME?"

"Yellow 3, this is Yellow Leader. I made him go away."

Bryan passed through a pall of oil smoke and bomb dust.

Far away Bryan glimpsed through clouds another Spitfire spouting black smoke, its beautiful wings folding.

"Hullo, Yellow 2, this is Yellow Leader. Collie, where are you?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"Say again?"

"I'm in between a bloody 109 and a bloody 110—Oh! . . . Bugger this. . ." Mumblings, breathing, a grunt. "Got one! Anyone see that?"

"Yellow 2, this is Yellow Leader. We are off-buggering. Care to join us?"

"Pleasure."

Retreating over the water, Bryan realized he'd lost Teddy. He sent, "Hullo Yellow 3, go to angels five."

"Tally ho," Teddy sent. Then, "Sorry. I mean I see you. Don't shoot. I'm closing in from five o'clock."

Bryan looked over at his Number 3. Teddy had his canopy pushed back. He was slumped in his seat, only held in place by his harness. "Wake up, Teddy. Either re-trim your elevators or lighten up on the stick. You're in a shallow dive."

The head lifted. "Am I? Oh. . ."

"He's—" Collie drew level with Teddy's port side. Whistled. "Look at you!"

"Sorry?" Teddy said.

"You have a big sprogging hole in your fuselage."

"Do I?" Teddy said.

"No. Catrell! Yellow Leader."

"Do I?"

Bryan's kite didn't feel as smooth as she ought. A hole would explain that. Teddy was slumping again.

"Teddy, can we get some altitude here?"

"I feel queer. It stinks."

"Stinks of what?"

"Looks like glycol," Collie answered for Teddy. "Teddy's engine's packing."

White steam hissed from under Yellow 3's cowling, billowed over his cockpit.

"I can't make it," Teddy said. "Sorry."

The smoking Spitfire made a graceful split-ess, and disappeared behind the others in a descending glide leaving a white vapour trail.

Bryan and Collie circled the splash site until they spotted Teddy's Mae West bobbing on the waves, then, low on fuel, they headed back to the Kentish coast.

Bryan flashed his letter over Manston. He saw the fire tender and ambulance at the perimeter road inching forward, ready to roll.

"Hullo, Control, this is Yellow Leader. Is anyone due behind me? I might mess up the field a bit."

"Do your best," said the Controller. "Good luck, sir."

"By the way, do I have a tail wheel?"

"Just a tick." There was a pause on the R/T. Someone with binoculars was checking. "No, sir. You do not."

Bryan set down on two wheels, then lowered the tail. The scraping grinding noise enveloped the aeroplane. Set his teeth on edge.

When he stopped, the ground crew ran out toward him. He pulled the cut out, tried to slide back his canopy but it wouldn't budge.

Jan Bujakowski, who was not where he was supposed to be, bounded onto the wing and muscled the canopy back. "How many German you kill?"

Bryan unclasped his harness. Climbed out. "Messerschmitts. One for you, one for me."

"Is start," said Jan, who expected squadrons.

Collie had already reported Teddy's position to search and rescue. Bryan went to debriefing.

"It's a new breed of Messerschmitt, I can tell you that."

"You mean the ME 110." The intelligence officer nodded.

"How thick do you think I am? I know what a 110 looks like. I mean the ME one-oh-bloody-nine! They're shooting out of every hole except their ass, and they're immune to negative g. I'm sucking air, and there's the Hun, bunted over head first and down and none the worse for it."

Intelligence informed him this was the ME 109E. "E for Emil."

"E for Einspritzung," Bryan said. "The damn Messerschmitts have to be *fuel injected*. We're not!"

"Language, sir. Any joy?" the Intelligence Officer asked.

"Two. Messerschmitts. Where is the German line that we're meeting Messerschmitts over the Channel as if they have all day?"

"Number of enemy aircraft sighted?"

"Bags."

"Can we be more specific?"

Sir Percy Lovejoy stomped into Operations, his fair face blotched red. He threw down his helmet. Reported, loud. "Lovejoy, Percival. Flying Officer. By the grace of God, *sir!*"

"89 Squadron, where is your Squadron Leader?"

"Gone for a Burton," Padge said at Lovejoy's side, sniffing, his nose running blood. "Don't wait up."

"Report. What happened?"

Percy Lovejoy answered savagely, "We followed the bloody book!"



THE SKIES CLOUDED OVER DUNKIRK, and the Stukas couldn't see the English destroyers to hit them. The British soldiers were slipping away, boat by boat by boat.

On the 26th of May the stop order was lifted and the panzers rolled again. And Erwin Halle was back in command of the Ace of Spades JG 56.

In Halle's absence, the fighters had stumbled into some new English airplanes.

The Messerschmitts had come up behind a formation of Hurricanes that were not Hurricanes. They were slow, and the Messerschmitts caught up with the British aircraft quite quickly – and received a face full of .303 bullets from power-operated four-gun rear turrets.

The two-man Boulton Paul Defiant was armed with a rotating turret aft of its cockpit. The Defiants ripped through Ritter's Staffel before the survivors learned to watch for the top blister on certain "Hurricanes."

Ritter's current base lay in the wide path that the panzers had slashed across France to the west coast at Abbeville. To the south, across the River Somme, was still French-held territory. Due north lay the shrinking English pocket around Dunkirk.

As Ritter led his Staffel over the Northern front, he could see the ground through patchy clouds.

He thanked God he was not in the trenches. War was godawful in the trenches. Nobody was counting your kills and your death didn't count either.

Ritter felt sorry for the Landser and was sure they didn't want his pity.

When he looked up again he saw fighters.

He moved the safety catch off. Friend or foe?

He was seeing them head on, the least informative view of an aircraft and its most dangerous. Unless it was a Bolton Paul Defiant.

Ritter couldn't see if these had turrets or not. He thought he remembered Defiants as having their aerial masts on their bellies. There were none on these.

What is that?

He thought it was a Hurricane but in a moment he noticed the stable flat middle that made the Hurricane such a steady gunship was not there. This one's smaller wings were angled like an ME 109, but the exhausts were set too high. Hostile.

Just as he realized that the radiator scoop was only under the starboard wing, the kite was shooting at him. Eight red flickers tore from the wings.

Spitfire!

Overly anxious Spitfires. They were opening fire too far away to be effective.

Ritter loved and cherished enemy rookies. They'd jacked too quick, and thank you, Tommy, Paul Ritter was still alive.

Ritter barked a warning to his Staffel, and opened the throttle. His Messerschmitt responded *now*. He showed his armored belly and darted out of the path of those guns, then tried to get on his attacker's beam. He felt a tightening in his throat as he discovered that it was not simple. He was turning hard. His crate's leading edge slot opened with a bang. But the Spitfire had already turned around and *this thing has me!*

Ritter pushed the ME's nose down. "*Scheiße!*"

The sudden negative g heaved his stomach up into his throat. Shoulders jerked against the straps.

The Spitfire lagged off the starting block. It was still behind him but the gap widened.

Suddenly the Spitfire had had enough, gave a neat half roll and headed away for home.

Scheiße!

"Bauer! Let's at him!" Ritter wrenched his ME into a climbing turn and gave chase at full throttle.

Suddenly tracers went whizzing past his plane. That kite behind him was not Bauer.

More Spitfires!

An engineer had told him once that a pilot needn't worry about rearward visibility in an ME. This ship was too fast ever to be attacked from the rear.

Then what is that? Holes popped in his wing. Ritter swerved, cursing.

Had he imagined that they were all out to *tea* in England?

An inner voice scolded. *I don't care if airplanes ever go the speed of sound,*

there will always be someone gaining behind you.

He was pulling the stick into his lap and he shot upwards, flicked over at the top of the loop, and straightened out behind a Spitfire.

It seemed unaware.

He moved in, thumb over the trigger, cannon selected. The spread of elliptical wings broadened in his sight. It was truly elegant-looking, and it had given him such a close call he was almost sorry to take it. He pressed the trigger. The Spitfire flicked out of his sight in a flash of sky-colored underwings as if he'd tried to close his hand on a minnow. His cannon shells spun into empty space. *Verdammt!*

He hauled the stick to the side and made after the Spit. He throttled into a vertical turn. His limbs turned leaden. His controls were bricks. His face sagged and something sat on his chest making his breath a grunting rattle.

The tunnel.

He peered through the greying blur but found no Spitfire. Where could he be? And, *Herrgott*, those were bullets!

Rapping, pinging. A sharp pain. He let go the stick and gasped.

He lost the turn, and stalled. Dropped, blessedly, into a cloud. Smelled smoke. Throttled back.

In the swirling grey cloud, he grabbed the stick. Had to rely on the instruments to find which way was up. He was sure he didn't know.

He straightened his machine. His vision widened.

Something was still wrong. He felt the wind drag at his underbelly. His air speed indicator was reading too too slow for these rpms. He knew his landing gear had fallen out.

He croaked, "Falke 2, this is Falke 1, requesting *viktor*. . . Bauer?"

No one answered him. Somewhere along the way all the yelling had quit.

He turned southward, took a deep breath. Pain caught, froze his chest, felt like an ice pick in his left shoulder, spreading pain in a clawed starburst. He hissed, exhaling.

Sweat trickled down his skin. He was wearing a fleece jacket for some stupid reason. He climbed to find colder air.

He cleared the clouds, climbing, southbound.

Waking up, as if he had been out. He must not have passed out entirely because someone had been flying the aircraft. He must have just lapsed for a second. He looked for the airfield. He recognized nothing.

Alone in the sky. *Where is my Staffel? Where is my wingman?*

He tried to turn to look. Pain seized again. He closed his eyes until the pain passed. He opened his eyes.

Jolted as an ME appeared off his port side. Where had he come from?

Ace of Spades on the nose. Ritter tried to speak but his mouth had dried up.

Not his wingman. There was a personal badge under the cockpit, of a black and white fork-tailed bird of prey carrying a snake in its talons. Behind

that on the fuselage was the double chevron of a Gruppen Kommandeur. On the rudder was the Knight's Cross. The only noise was the steady loud burr of the Daimler Benz. Ritter checked his radio. The connection was loose. He plugged back in.

Halle's voice sounded in his head. "Ritter, how goes it with you?"

Ritter croaked, "I'm hit. I'm headed home."

"You are headed away from the line."

"I know."

"You are on the wrong side of it."

Ritter fell to confused silence.

Halle ordered, "Follow me."

The Gruppenkommandeur's ME jumped ahead and turned. Ritter turned with him, wider.

Is all this blood mine? Someone is bleeding in my cockpit.

"Erwin, what is going on with my undercarriage?"

"It's no good, Paul. Don't try to land that crate."

Ritter looked around for Halle's wingman.

Found him. There. Riding way up high.

Ritter gazed at the cloud patterns around the high kite. Felt wet, sticky.

Who is bleeding in here? Damn you, Bauer. . .

He lapsed again. Next thing he knew, Halle's voice was bawling at him to get out. The words reached him only half-aware, "Ritter. You are leaking glycol. You won't make it home. Get out of there."

Glycol? But it's red and it's all over. . . .

Erwin was swearing at him. It was an odd sound. Ritter had never heard Erwin Halle swear before. *You shouldn't, Erwin. You really don't do it right.*

"Get out of there, Goddammit!"

My sweet airplane has turned on me. The cockpit had been built wonderfully draught-free. The smell of glycol gathering within it was sick making.

Ritter fumbled for the hinge pins of the canopy, pulled them out. He unlocked the canopy. It lifted off with a swoosh like a great sheet of ice suddenly flying off the warmed hood of his car in winter.

He pulled back the T hook to release his harness, tried to lift himself out. Couldn't. Hurt. He flopped back into the bucket seat.

Erwin's voice. Ritter looked at the radio and oxygen connections in confusion. He took off his helmet. Released his harness He turned the airplane over. Rolling, he heard, felt, a thump on his aircraft's belly—landing gear flopping back into the bays.

Don't throw up upside down. You'll choke yourself.

His blood was running up.

He slid headfirst and down, oozing at first, then out all at once sucked out with a rush.

Fresh air slapped him, whistling in his ears. He scrabbled for the D ring. Where was it?

Scratched, clawed. Found the ring. Pulled.

There was the rustling of silk, then a plumping sound and a jolt as the silk spread. An uffff forced from his lungs with stabbing pain, and he swayed under the white canopy.

Halle's Messerschmitt circled him. More airplanes moved above Halle.

Moranes.

Erwin, look out.

Eardrums pushed in as he dropped through thicker air.

He came down hard, crumpled in pain. He didn't know on which side of the ever-changing line he'd landed.

The wrong side of course.

A bayonet on the end of a French rifle jabbed at the air before his swimming eyes. "*Haut les mains.*"

Ritter thought the soldier had told him to put his hands up, but that would be an idiotic thing to say to a broken bleeding man.

Then again, the soldier could actually be an idiot.

Ritter hurt too much to feel any fear. He had heard that the French were very bad to German airmen, which had prompted Hermann Göring to warn the French that for every German flyer shot, he would shoot five French prisoners. And if the German pilot were shot while parachuting, fifty French prisoners.

God bless our Hermann.

For his pilots, Göring applied rules of honor from the Great War. A pilot was fair game only inside his aircraft. Shooting a pilot outside of his aircraft was — or should have been — unthinkable.

The Generalfeldmarschall did his best to make it unthinkable.

Ritter hoped that, if he were shot, his death would be reported as done while parachuting. Better yet, he hoped that someone here was familiar with Göring's threats.

And soon enough another French soldier pushed the rifle barrel aside with angry words.

The soldiers unfastened Ritter's parachute harness and dragged him out of it. He yelped in pain, startled at the stab in his left arm. Then he resolved not to make any more sounds. He clenched his teeth until his jaw was in pain as well.

He heard an airplane engine in trouble.

In a moment a flaming streak whined over the trees, choking in smoke, hurtling down like a comet. Erwin! *Lieber Gott, Erwin!*

Higher up, a white chute slowly followed the plunging wreck.

In a moment, the victor buzzed by the parachute. The victor was a Messerschmitt.

Its markings flashed — the double chevron and vertical strip of the Geschwaderkommodore, the Ace of Spades on the nose, Knight's Cross on the tail. The ME waved its wings, then joined with another squared-wing

shape up high and vanished.

Ritter gave up his hold on consciousness.

There was nothing else to be done. It was okay to pass out now. He was either dead or a prisoner of war.



25



BRYAN WAS AWAKE AT 3.15. Breakfast wouldn't go down. Wouldn't have stayed down anyway. He had some tea. Then it was into the kites to join up with three other squadrons for patrol over Dunkirk. Fighter Command would not commit any more Spitfires to the operation, so they used the ones they had in bigger lots. The Spitfires crossed the water in four squadron strength to-day.

Four diminished squadrons.

89's new CO was a veteran of the battle of France who had been sent home wounded and was raging now to get back.

He was an old man—he was twenty-seven—but his similarity to Reg ended there. This chap was almost too big to be a fighter pilot. His cheeks were scarred from a bout of small pox. He barked like a crusty old soldier. His name was Jasper Garret, D.F.C. Everyone called him Asp, which was convenient. If one were irritated one simply failed to enunciate.

Asp was scarcely acquainted with his new squadron before he led them back to battle. He'd had only a brief introduction to Flying Officers Bryan Richard Catrell and Sir Percival Desmond Lovejoy, Baronet.

"Cranwell and Eton," Asp said. Didn't sound impressed. "You're gentlemen then."

"Not actually, sir," Bryan said. "Actually, no."

"Glad to hear it. I can't stand them myself." Turned on the gentleman.
"Lovejoy."

"Yes, sir. Guilty, sir."

Asp warned Lovejoy there were three words he never wanted to hear,
"Not our class."

"No, sir," Lovejoy said.

"Catrell, why don't you have your own squadron?"

Bryan had too many hours, too many victories and too much experience flying against the enemy not to have more responsibility.

"I'm difficult, sir."

"Good."

And one of the first things Asp did as Squadron Leader was to take out his Colt .45 and shoot the training manual. It was, he said, the humane thing to do. 89 Squadron had flown their last vic.

"Questions?" he snarled.

Eyes alight, on the verge of laughing or crying or kissing the man, Bryan said, "Will you marry me?"

"Is there something I should know about you, Catrell?"

Grinning like an imbecile, Bryan said, "Messerschmitts fly in wide pairs."

"So does this squadron in future. No vics and no Charlies."

An arse-end Charlie used to weave behind the sections in France to guard the rear.

The Charlie was usually the first to go down. "The late Charles, I always called him," Asp said. "Everyone watch your arses. Keep your eyes open and your fingers out."

They set out to meet the smoking dawn.

German ground forces had advanced near enough to be shelling the beach at Dunkirk.

The Spitfires flew in high. They wanted to intercept the Stukas before they sighted their targets. Also, any aeroplane that flew too low would come under fire from the beach. It was like Poland. The men on the ground were afraid of anything with wings.

Near to the port, the squadron sighted boats foundering from the Stukas' last visitation.

"Tally ho. Tally ho! Hitler's latest folly in retreat."

"Just give the bugged heading without the editorial, if you please."

"Messerschmitt 110s at two o'clock, angels 9."

The Messerschmitt 110 Zerstörer was a two-man long-range fighter powered by two of the same engines that moved some of the 109s. The 110 wasn't twice as fast as a 109. It was only as fast as a Hurricane, and it didn't accelerate to speed worth a damn.

Bryan had learned in Poland that the 110s were heavily armed but sluggish on the controls, and they turned wide.

The Zerstörer's single virtue was its endurance. It carried truly vicious armament in front—two cannon and four machine guns—but staying out from in front of a 110 was easy.

The 110's speed and its single rear machine gun manned by the radio operator in the rear cockpit were thin protection against fighter attacks.

The Destroyers must know their own weakness because they formed up a defensive circle at the Spitfires' approach.

Bryan chose a target, approached high, from the quarter. The 110s' swiveling rear guns raked the air to find him. Their tracers started up toward him, then curled away and down.

Closing in to 300 yards, Bryan gave a quick squirt, caught the 110 high on the beam. The port engine spewed orange flame. The 110 turned, snapped into a spin around its flaming engine, and drilled earthward leaving a black spiral behind it.

The defensive circle broken, the rest of the 110s were eaten alive by Bryan's flight. There was no escort of ME 109s to rescue this lot. The 110s were out of range of help. The 110s were meant to defend themselves.

On the next sortie of the day the Spitfires met no one. They spent forty empty minutes over Dunkirk. Red lamps came on before they could engage anything. No one wanted to go back. They knew Jerry was here somewhere. "Just look at the bloody beach."

The day had been bright and clear. The only clouds bellied up from the battered ground. It was good weather for Stukas to hunt their prey. This time the Spitfires caught them at it.

"Pull your fingers out. Choose your targets and weigh in."

The Spitfires firewalled and pushed the boost control cutout. Rich smoke streaked behind them as they raced in to intercept the laden bombers. The boats had arrived at dusk to resume picking men off the beach under cover of gathering darkness.

The Spitfires were still a half-mile out when suddenly the Stukas pitched into their hideous dives.

Hell take you, not the boats!

Bryan, who had never hated anyone, knew hate.

As he closed, the Stukas disappeared into the black cloud that surged up from a burning dump. Bryan flew around the churning oil mist, stalking, lying in wait along the Stukas' expected path.

The Stukas did not come up. And did not come up.

Bryan glanced farther to the east and saw Stukas. They had turned inside the cloud and escaped low. Bryan had been given the guy.

He flew at them as an avenging angel with wings of fire. At full boost, Bryan's Spitfire overhauled the Stukas. In level flight the demonic kites waddled. Bryan throttled back to line up a shot. He had already adjusted the parallel lines of his reflector sight for the span of a JU 87. He took out two.

Metal shreds of them gashed his wings, cracked off his windscreen. He had his sights on a third when his guns hissed empty.

When he climbed out of the frenzy there were no friends in sight. His warning lamp glowed red. He didn't know how long it had been on. His fuel gauge read too low to get him home. It had to be lying. He checked his watch. The hands had leapt across the face of it.

He'd been twenty minutes over target.

He turned toward the Channel. Sighted black dots in straggly lines above him – the inevitable ME 109s descending on his tail. And he was low on fuel and out of bullets.

He turned at them.

He drove straight at the lead ME. Its tracers flashed past him. Then holes erupted in his wings. Something struck with a crack, and a small silvery blob flattened on his new bulletproof windscreen, directly in front of his eyes.

The ME shied upwards and Bryan executed a split-ess to turn around. He made full throttle for the Channel, grinding and belching smoke as flew.

He looked back. The 109s must have considered him a kill, because no one was in pursuit.

When he neared the harbor, his engine starved, quit.

He glided awhile, his altitude slipping.

Nearing the height where he would need to decide whether to bale out or ditch, he considered riding the Spitfire down.

He looked for a safe path for his kite to go down without swamping any of the rescue boats.

He puffed a few breaths into his life vest and baled out.

As he sailed down under the silk, he watched his Spitfire ST-Q right herself and descend in a gentle curve. She glided just over the waves. So beautiful. Then she took a chin full of water in the intake and disappeared in a chilling flash.

Bryan's parachute drifted down in sight of several boats. He heard a small double crack. Someone was shooting at him.

He hauled in his risers and dropped quickly.

He splashed down under the icy water. Bobbed up to open air, gasped. He released his harness, and swam clear of the canopy.

His Mae West flopped him onto his back. Its floating mounds pressed up against his face. The armholes tugged at his armpits.

He shivered.

The sun was sinking below the horizon when a twenty-four foot cabin cruiser nudged slowly alongside him. The name on its hull read *Finally II*. A Scottish voice called down, "What are you?"

"RAF."

Two men hauled him out of the water.

"Ooog, he weighs a ton!"

Bryan flopped over the rail onto the teak deck like a seal.

A voice sounded above him. "Hullo! I found our air cover."

They must've thought there was none. Here it was, falling from the sky.

"Are you sure he's not a Jerry?" And to Bryan, "How do we know you're not a Jerry?"

Bryan answered, teeth chattering. "Yes, of course, it's a new tactic to drop German paratroopers wearing RAF flightsuits into the Channel. You must be an intelligence officer."

"Cheeky sod."

"He's ours."

The cabin cruiser was bound back the way Bryan had come, to Dunkirk. Smoke of burning fuel dumps drifted over them in veils with the greasy stench of oil and acrid burning rubber.

They arrived in the company of an entire fleet boats of every imaginable kind. The dinghies and smallest boats scraped up to the beach itself and ferried men farther out to bigger yachts and cruisers, and out still farther to the very deep water where a majestic destroyer waited to take on British soldiers.

The little *Finally II* pushed slowly through the black shallows of churning muck. The surface was coated with an oily film. A jetty built of jeeps and lorries extended out to water deep enough for the cabin cruiser to pull alongside. A line of haggard, hollow-eyed soldiers climbed aboard.

Dogs barked at the sky. Then came the droning.

"Jesus not again."

Before anyone even saw the crank wings and spatted undercarriages, Bryan and everyone here recognized the sound of Junkers Jumo engines.

"Stukas."

"Where's the bleedin' raff?"

Bryan checked his watch. *We are between patrols now.* Jerry had the sky to himself. By the time the Spitfires could turn around it would be totally dark. His had flown the last patrol.

The Stukas swarmed over them, then peeled off from their formations and came down screaming.

The men hunkered low in the boat. Bombs hit the sand with a muffled boom. The soft ground dampened the blasts. The earth bubbled up and came down in a stinging rain of sand. More bombs hit the water with mighty splashes and swells.

Shock waves rocked the boat against the jetty.

The whining howl was everywhere, punctuated by bomb bursts, the crack of infantry rifles, and heavy pounding of the big guns of the destroyers.

When, after an eternity, the assault wave passed, the *Finally II* resumed boarding until she listed, riding low in the water.

The Stukas had been louder than Bryan remembered. The Lärmgerät on their spats augmented the shriek. It was a terror tactic, nothing more. *Works,* Bryan thought.

But the Germans had the idea that they could win through terror. And that was a mistake. As the *Finally II* pulled away from the jetty it maneuvered around a little dinghy, *Bluebell*. A people who sent out *Bluebell* to rescue its fighting men did not scare into submission.

There was considerable coldness to Bryan on the boat.

"We could have fit another good man on board if we hadn't fished up glamour boy here."

"Ease off that one. He's 'ere, int 'e?"

"For all the good 'e's done."

Bryan sat with the infantrymen, squeezed close together, but very much alone. Wind felt cold in his wet ears.

Twenty minutes over target. Twenty bloody minutes over target.

The *Finally II* motored out cautiously from the shallows to the waiting destroyer *Malcolm*. Bryan climbed aboard.

After nightfall, the loaded destroyer set out for England. The blackness couldn't blot out the shapes of all the men still left on the beach.

On board the *Malcolm*, the RAF flightsuit attracted wrath that had nowhere else to go. Bryan endured it for a while, finally had enough abuse and he pulled rank, told them all to belt. He carried himself like an officer, and the whole lot of them backed down. His shave and haircut were still good. The bedraggled soldiers seemed grateful for a firm voice shouting orders and looking and sounding in charge. Even drenched and sandy, Bryan carried himself like an officer, though he didn't feel altogether like one.

Twenty bloody minutes over target.

The *Malcolm* put in at Dover six hours later, creeping to keep its white wake from betraying it to bombers and roving Schnellboote in the night.

Disembarking, Bryan felt an instant's confused horror that they must have done a large circle. This could not be England.

He still smelled Dunkirk burning.

The smoke carried all the way across the Channel.

From the expressions that greeted him at the airfield, Bryan realized he'd returned from the presumed dead.

"Gone into the export business, have we, Catrell?" Asp said.

Bryan had come home without his Spitfire.

"Depends on to whom you assign sovereignty of the Channel," Bryan said.

"That was an outstanding aircraft you dropped in the ditch. Anything to show for it?"

"Two Stukas."

"Not a fair trade."

"I know that, sir."

"We shall have to do better," Asp told everyone. "Jerry will be coming here next."

"Over my dead body."

“Rather likely, considering your combat style.”

Collie protested, because Bryan couldn't. “The Huns are hurt! We took a rattling big bite out of them.”

“But there are more of them. Four or five times as many of them,” the Asp said. “We cannot afford to be as good. We have to be ever so much better.”

Bryan dragged himself back to his barracks, pulled off his flightsuit and fell face first on his cot.

Over 350,000 British and allied fighting men were evacuated by the boats before Dunkirk fell into German hands.

It wasn't exactly a victory, but it was a miracle and it gave Hitler his first taste of something like defeat.

One bright spot in that last miserable sortie—Bryan had learned, pointedly, that the short-windedness of the fighter aeroplane was a major liability.

When Jerry came over here, those ME 109s couldn't be carrying any more fuel than the Spitfires had, and the Channel was equally wide in either direction.

If the Hun should come to England, it would be the Hun hurting for fighter cover, and the Hun dropping into the water with empty fuel tanks.

And the Messerschmitts, which had reigned unrivaled in the sky, had been given the first real look at their own blood.

At a cost.

At the current rate of loss, with only 331 Spitfires and Hurricanes left on the front line, Fighter Command would cease to exist within four weeks.

Wars are not won by evacuations. But there was a victory inside this deliverance, which should be noted. It was gained by the Air Force. . .

May it not also be that the cause of civilization itself will be defended by the skill and devotion of a few thousand airmen?

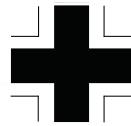
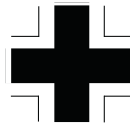
. . . these young men, going forth every morn to guard their native land and all that we stand for, holding in their hands these instruments of colossal and shattering power . . . deserve our gratitude . . .

I have, myself, full confidence that if all do their duty, if nothing is neglected, and if the best arrangements are made, as they are being made, we shall prove ourselves once again able to defend our Island home, to ride out the storm of war, and to outlive the menace of tyranny, if necessary for years, if necessary alone

. . . Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous States have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi

rule, we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.

—Winston Churchill



PAUL RITTER WOKE IN A FIELD HOSPITAL. His shoulder was wrapped and immobile. The voices around him were all French.

Ritter, who had never been sick in his life, outside of hangovers, had never felt worse.

A doctor with a granite expression stood over him. Ritter knew this man loathed him. He would not give the patient blood. That was fine by Ritter. He did not want this man putting anything in him.

The physician performed his examination with a look of such disgust as in Ritter's experience was normally reserved for Jews.

All the while, a *gendarme* asked questions. Ritter refused to answer most of them. The *gendarme* said at length, "The doctor says you are drugged."

"What did he give me?"

"No," the *gendarme* said, curt. There had been a misunderstanding. "You are drugged by the Germans. All Luftwaffe pilots are sent up drugged. That is why you are like this."

"I am not drugged. I've been shot. Tell the doctor I think he's a *Quacksalber*."

Ritter closed his eyes to shut the man out.

Sometime later, a *clump*, step, *clump*, step approached his cot. Ritter opened his eyes. A man on crutches, in a cast up to his hip, said brightly, "*Bon jour*."

"*Bon jour*?" Ritter said guardedly.

His visitor put his crutches together and dropped himself into a sit on the

corner of Ritter's cot. He was a bubbly youth with reddish hair. He wore a hospital gown and, over his shoulders, a flight blouse adorned with French pilot's wings. He glanced around shiftily, then produced two cigarettes, lit them and gave one to Ritter.

"Thanks," Ritter said.

After some picture drawing and pantomiming, Ritter figured out that the young pilot wanted to know how many air victories Erwin Halle had. Everyone had heard of the German ace, Erwin Halle.

Ritter took the pilot's pen and wrote the numeral 22.

"Ah, *vingt-deux*," said the Frenchman, pleased. Apparently, if he were going to be shot down, it had better be by someone good. He pointed to himself cheerfully, "*Vingt-trois*."

Ritter thought the braggart was claiming twenty-three victories, then realized the Frenchman was cheerfully admitting that he was Erwin Halle's twenty-third victory.

Ritter almost smiled. *Vingt-trois*. If Ritter ever got out of here, he could confirm the victory for Halle. Unless Halle's wingman saw it. *In which case who needs me?* Ritter was feeling thoroughly and absolutely useless and sorry for himself.

The pilot kept talking. He was very impressed that Halle hadn't shot at his parachute when he'd baled out.

"Of course not," Ritter said, irritated. *Only Frenchmen do that*. He didn't say that part out loud.

The French pilot asked who had shot Ritter down. Was it a great French pilot or ground fire that took him down.

"*Schpitfeuer*," Ritter said.

The Frenchman's face lost some of its cheer. He said soberly, "*Anglais*."

Ritter closed his eyes again, repeated faintly, "*Schpitfeuer*." The nationality seemed a non sequitur. The name Spitfire was enough. It was an allegiance in itself.

Ritter drifted off.

From passing conversations in the hospital ward Ritter gathered that Dunkirk had been a great victory for the Germans. On June 4 at 0900 the town surrendered. Thousands of British soldiers in the expeditionary force had been captured and the rest, hundreds of thousands, had been pushed into the icy waters of the Channel. That was what everyone said.

The German Army would turn this way now.

I am missing the war. That troubled Ritter most.

Erwin is going to give my Staffel away.

Outside. Moving. Clattering of trucks. Grumbling low voices. Stink and cold. Ritter shivered. He thought he was cold because he was dying of infection, but the other prisoners were cold too. He struggled to wake up fully. He

was in his own uniform and his own blood-encrusted sheepskin jacket. His eyes felt gritty. He could see little but the slats of an open truck. It bounced hard over a bump.

"What's happening?" he rasped. "Where are we going?"

"Don't ask," a German voice said, then told Ritter to pass back out. "It's better that way."

Every time he opened his eyes he was moving. He pieced together images. He'd left the hospital in a cart with other German prisoners. The French pilot's was the only kindness he'd been shown in captivity. From the other Frenchmen came harsh barking words, slaps, and shoves.

The French pilot had left Paul a half pack of British Woodbines, but someone took them from him.

Now Paul lay in the back of another truck, his head resting on the corner of another German prisoner's coat, which softened some of the slamming bumps.

"We're not going anywhere," said the owner of the coat that was Ritter's pillow. "The French are running. Our army is advancing. Sooner or later this truck will run out of road. We'll be back in the fatherland."

"Wake me up then," Ritter said.

"Will do."

From there the journey bled into a long fevered nightmare, constantly moving.

Ritter's comrades woke him to eat and to shit on the roadside. He didn't want anything. They told him to eat. "It's rotten enough without you dying on us!"

The speaker sounded ready to cry, so, to humor him, Ritter ate.

A voice on the other side of the truck said through chattering teeth, "If he dies I get the jacket."

Finally the rolling and banging stopped. Ritter rested on a hard pallet. He still felt rolling, but when he opened his eyes he was in a spartan barracks. It was somewhat clean, and it was motionless. He closed his eyes and slept for a long time.

At long last he came out of delirium and sat up. He'd been washed of mud and blood and God knows what else.

His clothes had been cleaned. They lay neatly at the foot of the cot. He unfolded them in wonder, finding the bullet holes around his left shoulder. The bloodstains had not come out. He took off the dressing around his shoulder and found the wounds. The holes were small for all that. He still felt drained, but almost alert for the first time—once the dizziness of sitting up passed.

He and the other German prisoners were settled into an officers' prison camp.

The next morning he rose at 7.30 with the rest of the prisoners and walked

outside for exercise. Some of the officers were fliers—bomber crews. The bombers talked to him, shared their stories. Ritter didn't feel like giving his story. He only wanted to know the way out.

Beyond the barbed wire perimeter, mountains loomed to the south. Ritter asked if those were the Pyrenees. They were. Ritter was surprised. This camp wasn't far from the Spanish border.

Ritter took exercise with the others. He needed to get his strength back if he intended to climb. Within minutes, he had to stop. He sat on the ground. Gazed at the mountain.

Friendly, fascist Spain was right *there*, on the other side of that mountain.

After breakfast each day, the prisoners gathered to listen to one of them read from the latest French newspaper. Through the optimistic jingoistic words reported by the French, Ritter and his compatriots pulled out the facts and plotted the advance of the German army on a makeshift map.

The panzers were advancing like lightning.

Ritter stepped outside and faced the mountain. If he remembered anything from Spain—back when the Nationalist army had pushed the Reds against those very mountains—it was that passes were few and high. And heaven help him if he met a Basque while trying to cross.

One of the other captives read his mind. Clapped him on his good shoulder. "Sit and drink your tea."

Ritter nodded. Guessed he could wait for the German army to come to him.

The wait was not long.



FRANCE SURRENDERED. But Hitler didn't press his drive and strike at Britain's aerodromes while the RAF reeled from its losses.

The Blitzkrieg was mysteriously on hold.

Through June and into July, German bombers attacked British ports and all shipping, sending tons of it to the bottom. Perhaps they intended to walk across the Channel on the sunken rubble.

The out-numbered RAF would not be lured into a war of attrition. Fighter Command refused to squander fighters over the Channel in fighter duels. Controllers would not scramble Spitfires and Hurricanes to meet ME 109s. Interceptors were sent only to meet bombers.

And while the war was confined mostly to the water, both sides used the time to build their forces. The Spitfire was a bitch to build, a dream to fly. The ME 109 was said to be a bitch to fly but designed for mass production. MEs could be cranked out by the trainload.

Germany was cranking them out by the trainload.

More dire still was Britain's need for pilots.

France had taken 400 German pilots prisoner. Britain had asked that the German prisoners be sent to Britain for safekeeping but, at the armistice, France sent the German pilots home to Germany.

Those were 400 experienced Luftwaffe pilots the RAF would meet again.

89 Squadron was short a Flight Commander after Dunkirk. The AOC asked the Squadron Leader who he wanted.

"Catrell," Asp said. So Bryan became a Flight Lieutenant.

Percy Lovejoy, who was not at all happy with being passed over for the position, took the slight with a dignified pout. "After all, I have not managed to hit anything, not so it noticed anyway."

"You need to get closer to your target, Percy," Bryan said. "It's no good lobbing bullets at the crate from regulation distance."

"I recognize that, but I'm not certain I fancy flying up Jerry's nose the way you do, Cat."

"Then fly up his arse. Get closer."

Three foreign Pilot Officers brought Bryan's flight up to strength. Two of them were South Africans—Harry Witt and Rutger Burrows.

The third was a lone Yank, smuggled in under a maple leaf, whose real name was, honest-to-God, not making this up: Randy.

The squadron had bags of laughs on Randy before Bryan took pity on the Yank and enlightened him.

Randy thought Bryan was having him on. "I've never heard that."

"Well what do you say in America?"

"The word is 'horny.'"

"Your name, I am sorry to say, means 'horny.'"

Randy frowned. His Flight Commander didn't look at all sorry. Bryan Catrell was on the verge of laughing out loud.

"Well Jesus Christ, call me something else!"

"I think Randy is a marvelous name." Bryan *was* laughing now.

"We could call him arsehole," Harry Witt said.

"What's wrong with just calling you 'Yank?'" Bryan said.

But Randy, being from Atlanta, Georgia, bellowed, "*Ah am not a Yankee!*"

"Your call, mate."

So Randy remained Randy.

Harry Witt was called a lot of things. He was as subtle as a Stuka and as loud. He was allergic to silence. He played the harmonica, or lacking access to that, he whistled, an African inhaling whistle as loud and clear as a flute. He talked loud and had a distinctive (loud) laugh.

Witt was never happy unless he was making himself heard, and the only way to belt him up was to shove a noggin in his face. That would buy you a few seconds of peace. He could not be silent, not even sleeping, as he snored like a Merlin engine.

The other half of Harry Witt's act was Rutger Burrows, smaller, quieter by necessity, better mannered but more devious. Burrows sported a full RAF mustache and smoked a pipe. One usually found Witt with his elbow resting on Burrow's shoulder. Rutger Burrows was part of the composition, like that post the ancient Greeks used to leave attached to their marble statues to hold up the stone figure's weight. If Rutger Burrows should ever go away, no one was sure how Harry Witt would stand up.

And the squadron had a mascot now. Squadron Leader Jasper Garret's dog, a stand-offish three-legged Alsatian who had got out of France in the back of a Hurricane in place of a radio and an oxygen tank. In polite company the dog was called Maximilian. His real name was S.O.B.

Asp quickly forged the squadron into a working unit.

Asp's parents had met in a factory, so Asp was accustomed to viewing the world as boot soles treading on him. He didn't take to the egalitarian Yank the way you might expect. Climbing was easy in America. Randy could not possibly know what it was like.

Asp didn't need to explain anything to Bryan, who was a ridiculous middle class boy, himself.

Asp didn't explain anything to anyone. He'd taken to Bryan immediately. Bryan had attended Eton, but that was all right, because Bryan, in Asp's view, "didn't really belong there." Asp saw it as Bryan storming an elite bastion and making them take him in, an idea that was very dear to Asp's heart. Asp confided to Bryan over one too many pints, "I want to be a goddamn knight."

89 Squadron was soon restless. They were stationed too far north to see much action. They flew patrols over convoys as they passed off the coast but the pilots were dying to get stationed down in 11 Group. When *der Tag* came, 11 Group was where the Hun would hit hardest, the Southeast corner of England where the Channel was narrowest.

The weather had turned unnaturally cold and rainy. Lone enemy aircraft were reported now and then in the murk. A lone interceptor would be scrambled to meet it. Asp reserved most of this hunting for himself. The pilots were all aching to take shot at the invader but it was too cloudy to form up sections. In the foul weather they were more a menace to each other.

Released from ops for the rest of a stormy day, the pilots of A Flight drove into town. Under a low soggy sky many people were walking. No one drove except taxis and drunken RAF boys with cars powered by questionably obtained petrol of dubious octane.

It was discovered that Randy was wealthier than the rest of them put together, excluding Percy, and they decided to hold a Fourth of July celebration—all drinks were on the Yank ("But Ah am not a Yankee!") They got quite pissed at his expense.

Bryan spent most of the evening at the dartboard. The pub was crowded. A lot of pilots were in here, but he recognized no one except a ferry pilot, the luscious Emmeline, holding court at the bar.

"She's a Jerry ace," a spurned hopeful grumbled. "Shot down more British flyers than anyone Hitler ever sent up."

Bryan prowled the other rooms to see who else might be here. He found her at a table, nearly lost in the midst of big men.

His favorite ATA pilot. She was under siege by the bomber barons of 112 Squadron. She wasn't in mannish costume this time. She wore a flower print frock and she was heart-bursting pretty. She had her auburn hair curled. Her

nose was powdered. Hid her freckles. Bryan liked the freckles. Her pretty hands loosely caged a half pint on the table.

Bryan moved closer in time to hear one bomber pilot tell her in creative detail about his squadron's daring raid on a "Messerschmitt factory that built carburettors for the 109s."

"109s don't have carburettors," she said.

Bryan wanted to give her children.

"They don't *now!*" said the bomber.

Bryan cocked his head to his mates. His companion fighters moved in on either side of the bomber hero.

"This bloke's a virgin. He's never been across the Ditch."

"Couldn't find his own arse with a map," Rutger said.

The bomber muttered aside to Bryan between gritted teeth, "I was rather more interested in relocating John Thomas if you know what I mean. So push off."

"Map wouldn't help," said Witt. "Those tiny plots never show up."

The bomber leapt up to take a swing at Harry Witt. Chairs scraped back. 112 Squadron scrambled to its collective feet.

Bryan slipped in low and asked the ferry pilot if she was ready to go.

She glided out of her chair and went with him.

Outside was dark. What light escaped at the edges of the blackout curtains shone blackly on the wet streets. The girl had taken his arm. Bryan guided her. He didn't know where they were going. It didn't matter as long as she didn't let go of his arm. "I hope none of those blokes was your boyfriend."

"No," she said. "I didn't know anyone back there. Is Rhett in your squadron?"

"Rhett?"

"The American ginger with the marvelous accent. Buying all the drinks."

"You mean the one who sounds like an extra out of *Gone With the Wind*? His name is Randy."

"Go on! His name is Rhett."

Rhett was he now? Bryan guessed the Yank's fortunes would improve with the women now. It used to be fun watching him go up to a girl and say, "Hi, I'm Randy."

They passed a window. A shaft of light leaking around a badly placed blackout curtain fell across the ferry pilot's face. Bryan had thought the dark patch was a shadow before, but he saw now that she had a black eye.

Bryan was primed to kill someone for that. He gently traced the edge of the bruise with his thumb. "What happened?"

"Rugby game."

He knew the girl flew Spitfires, but this was a bit much. "You play ruggar?"

"No, no. I was in the stands. I don't know if you know this, but the war is actually between Hawker and Vickers. There was a match between the factories. I was cheering for Vickers when this little old lady, looked a lot like my

mum, bashed me along side the head with her knitting bag. Maps and flying notes for a Hurricane fell out everywhere. Rafferty's rules after that."

"You *didn't* hit her back."

"No. I scattered her Hurricane notes to the four winds. I'm ashamed of myself really."

"Who won the fight?"

"If it was Hawker you wouldn't hear it from me."

"The war is not Hawker versus Vickers." Bryan corrected her. "The war is bomber versus fighter. We invited the Germans but they haven't come yet."

"Are you envious?"

"*Envious?* Of the Germans?"

"Of the bombers."

Bryan sputtered a bit. Astounded. "Why would I envy those poor sods? I'm flying the most beautiful machine in the world."

"Yes, I think so too. But I thought a bomber pilot was the glamorous thing to be."

"I'm sure the bombers told you that. In a fighter you know exactly who you're against. There's no chance that you might aim at the factory – the one that makes carburettors for ME 109s – and instead accidentally drop a bomb on a baby.

"I might have trouble with that. As it is, I have only to worry where my Stukas and Messerschmitts fall down. I might drop a Daimler Benz through someone's roof. That does worry me, but not as much as what those engines will do if I don't take them down. As a fighter you can be sure the man you're shooting at has consented to be up there, to be shot at, and is trying to shoot you. Up there it's not a war in the bloody awful way of wars. It's a duel every time. No one is innocent up there."

"Ever ask yourself why you consent to be up there and shoot at your fellow man?"

Her face was tilted up. Grey eyes held curiosity, not some kind of judgment. She was simply asking a question.

"Besides that he's a Nazi?"

"Yes, besides that. Ever ask yourself why you go up to shoot and be shot at?"

"No." The question never occurred to him. "It's what I'm meant to do."

The skin on her bare arms roughened. Her light summer frock was very pretty but she was freezing in this weird July cold. He took off his tunic and settled it around her shoulders. "You're warm," she said, then looked embarrassed. Lashes shaded her downcast eyes. "I should go in."

She was shy of him, he didn't know why. Not to let her get away he said, "No, I brought you out for ulterior motives."

Her lashes lifted, eyes wide, guarded.

"You must tell me how you know that ME 109s don't have carburettors."

She smiled, relaxed. "We caught one last November in France. Rather we

appropriated it."

"We? Vickers?"

"We the allies. Our side in this war. The French before they fell. The Messerschmitt landed at a French aerodrome by mistake."

"Very accommodating."

"I thought so. The French ran their tests. After that the 109 was brought here. I wanted to fly it."

"Did you?"

"They wouldn't let me. Everyone wanted to take it up. But we only have one ME and the boffins don't want a civilian breaking it. They fly it over OTUs for recognition training now. The evaluation revealed it has direct fuel injection, no float carburetter."

"You're telling me negative g doesn't affect it."

"It does not. Not in the slightest."

"I wish someone had told me that before Dunkirk."

"The French evaluation also said that the 109 has a hard time climbing to the right."

"I'm glad no one tried to tell me *that* before Dunkirk."

"Well, our tests didn't show any such thing."

"Neither did mine."

"Now you're just showing off. The ME climbs and turns quite well. Of course its climb is nothing next to a Spit with a constant speed prop."

"Wait a minute," Bryan stopped walking and turned her to face him. "I don't have a constant speed prop."

"The bombers got all there were. I'm sure the Spitfires are on priority now. We—we England—didn't get at the ME 109 until May. The evaluation was only just done this spring."

"And information isn't shared around here. Not at squadron level anyway!"

"Doesn't seem to be, does it? I suppose it's meant to keep the Hun in the dark."

"It's keeping those of us who need to know in the dark. You're keeping vital information from me."

"I am? Such as what?"

"Such as what is your name?"

Her lips drew together in a cupid bow, then a slight smile.

"Maud," she said softly. Then more softly still, "You are Bryan Catrell."

"You just won me five quid."

"Hullo?"

"I wagered Percy you would remember my name."

"You have a lot of money to throw around."

"No. Percy does, and I knew I had this one."

A sudden twelve degrees of frost crept into her voice. "What else did you wager with Percy?"

"Nothing. I wouldn't do that."

"You would lose."

"Percy, being a gentleman wouldn't take a wager like that."

"Bother Percy. What about you?"

"I was wondering whether I might interest you in a bit of larceny."

The fighter pilots stood at the cab rank in the drizzling rain. They couldn't remember if they had been abandoned or had hopelessly misplaced the motorcar.

They couldn't remember whose car they'd brought. "Maybe we took mine," Collie said.

"You don't have a car."

"Precisely the state we are in now," Percy said.

"I know we took my car."

"We had a car."

"I never had a car in my life."

It was with a mixture of relief and irritation that they saw slit headlights round the corner. Their mottled sand and green coloured car pulled up to the cab rank.

"It's camouflaged!" Percy said.

"Who would do that to a car?"

"We did."

"No wonder we couldn't find it."

When they saw that Bryan had a woman beside him in the car, the feeling turned entirely to irritation. "Bloody hell!" Witt said.

Burrows asked what the two of them had been doing. It was rather obvious what the rest of them had been doing. Randy's face was swollen and turning lurid colours. Harry Witt leaned on Rutger Burrows who was not a steady support. Witt's tunic was wet, but didn't smell like alcohol. It was water. He'd rinsed out the blood before it could set.

The boys had mixed it up with the bomber squadron.

"Was your trip necessary?" Collie Lloyd recited in his stuffiest voice.

"Vital," Bryan said. "We hit 112's drome." Bryan tilted his head toward the back seat where lay 112's squadron's flag and the bombers' mascot, a sorry looking Heinz hound, which sat in Maud's lap.

Lucky dog.

Bryan, instantly forgiven, accepted his men's applause.

"How did you get past the guards, Cat?"

"Maudie used the name of our hero of the bombing raid on the ME carburetter factory. Looselips even gave her the password to get past the sentry."

From there, Bryan and Maud found the mascot under a sign that read: Beware Vicious Dog. Bryan had unsnapped the chain. Maud, in the car, slapped her thigh twice and the dog bounded into her lap. No faulting him there, thought Bryan who would have done the same with less encouragement.

Bryan grabbed the squadron standard, posted ransom demands, climbed into the car, and they made their escape.

"What ransom?" Percy cried.

"Beer."

"What brand?"

"Three X, naturally."

"Naturally."

"What will you do if 112 tries to take revenge?" Maud asked.

"Revenge how? Steal our mascot? I'll *give* them Asp's dog. And no one can pinch 89's crest, because, being a rather newish squadron, we don't have one."

Crests were designed by the Chester Herald of the Royal College of Heralds and then approved by His Majesty.

In the lack of official heraldry, 89 Squadron had thrown together a provisional one. 89's crest consisted of a crowned XXX Beer barrel fixed with a spinner and sitting on a bullet-riddled swastika, subscribed with the Motto: How About The Other Half?

Bryan walked Maud back to the pub where he'd found her, then returned to the car. As he climbed in, Percy said to Harry Witt, "I told you."

"Told them what?" Bryan asked.

"That we should wait for you. Witt said you wouldn't be back."

"Here." Rutger Burrows bundled the dog at Bryan to make room for him to sit.

"Where did 112 get this mutt?" Randy said. "This is pitiful."

"It's even worse than Asp's dog," Percy said. "And this one has a full complement of legs."

"Being pitiful has its advantages," Bryan said. "The dog rode here in Maud's lap."

"Lucky sod."

"Have you been so lucky to-night?" Witt asked, checking the hour.

"Bog off."

"That was a no," Rutger Burrows translated.

The next day they heard engines in the clouds. The duty officer immediately got on the phone.

"Have you a plot on that?"

They didn't trust the early warning system entirely, and the RDF was no use once the E/As crossed the coastline. After that they were dependent then on visual reports.

Group assured them that nothing had crossed the coast.

"No hostiles on the radio plot. Observer Corps report only friends in the air. Blenheims. Passing over you momentarily. Objective unclear. They have not been so polite as to announce their intentions to *us*."

The Ops Officer lowered the telephone to advise the squadron. "Only friendlies. Blenheims."

Friendlies? *Blenheims*.

"Christ! It's 112 Squadron!" Bryan yelled. "Take cover!"

The roar of one low flying bomber passing over the field shook the Nissen huts.

The Blenheim's bomb bay opened and down dropped rolls of toilet paper and left-over propaganda leaflets written in German.

And, swinging down at the end of a parachute, came a crate marked with a Red Cross, which turned out to be filled with cans of dogfood. Humanitarian aid for the prisoner mascot.

Both squadrons were on the mat straightaway. They were reminded by a beet-faced official, "There is a war on."

"So we've heard!" Witt had yet to set eyes on an E/A. "And we're all jolly eager to get in it!"

Eight Spitfires skimmed the tattered white shelf of a cloud. In his mirror Bryan could see Percy's section behind his.

'A' Flight had been scrambled after a suspect plot, "probably Dorniers," heading toward a convoy in the Channel.

The Controller's voice sounded in Bryan's headset. "X-Raid, two miles. Any joy?"

"No."

Bryan scanned the wide sky. Above was nothing but blue. Down below, between the bright edges of clouds he glimpsed white dots of sea gulls sailing above the waves.

"Bandits descending. Angels 12. . . Angels 11. . . leveling out at Angels 10."

"That will take him into the clouds, Orchard. How certain are you of those Angels?"

"He's turning. Orbit please."

"Crossbow aircraft, turning right."

"Plots coinciding. Any joy?"

"No."

"Vector two-nine-zero. Any joy?"

"Sweet F-all." Then, in a moment, "Ho! Tally ho! Crossbow Leader calling. Bandits. Downstairs."

Their green-gray and black-green backs scarcely stood out against the turbid green Channel water. Sunlight picked up the white-limned black crosses on their small tapered wings.

Harry Witt sent, "Emil wants us to come out and play!"

"Hullo Orchard. Your 'probably Dorniers' are definitely Messerschmitts. Some clever Nazi Dick. We've been had."

Even as he spoke the MEs were breaking out of the bomber-style vics that had foxed the Controller. Now they were reforming into their own characteristic wide open foursomes as they climbed rapidly.

"Crossbow Leader. Orchard calling. Do not engage. Return to GANGSTER and pancake. I say again, return to GANGSTER and pancake."

"Say again."

"Return to GANGSTER and pancake. Do not engage."

"Say again. I cannot read you."

The Controller jumped through that hoop once more before he, an old pilot himself, said, "Message received and understood."

Someone's chuckle sounded on the R/T.

Orchard recognized the futility of ordering fighters with the foe in their sights to disengage. "Good shooting, gentlemen. Do be careful."

"Crossbow Leader to Crossbow aircraft, let's tap in. Choose your targets."

The MEs had gained some height by then, but the Spitfires still had the superior position, and they pounced.

Square-tip wings filled Bryan's sight. He kept closing. When the ring sight itself sprouted wings, he gave a short burst but the Messerschmitt jerked away at the last instant, catching only a few bullets on the wing. Pieces shredded off but the ME didn't drop.

The R/T had burst into a jumble of yells and orders, warnings. A cool announcement of triumph from Percy Lovejoy as chunks of Messerschmitt flew past him at very close range. Harry Witt was whistling. A jubilant cry that had to be Randy sounded as an ME caught fire, "Hoo ra!"

"Yellow 3, watch your tail!"

"Sorry."

"Cat! On your arse!"

Bryan reefed it in hard. G forces pushed him into his seat. The flight mechanics had taken a page from the Messerschmitt's notebook and had raised his Spitfire's rudder pedals. With his feet closer to his head, Bryan still had some blood left in his brain under the heavy pull. The turn brought the ME's flank into his sights.

In a blink, the ME dove. Bryan rolled the Spitfire onto her back and plunged after the ME.

The ME pulled out of its steep dive just above the waves. Bryan pulled out of his dive, hit the boost cut-out control and gave chase.

He was overtaking the ME by creeping steps when the ME turned.

Bryan put a bead on its engine and angled off. He checked the turn and bank indicator for skidding. The needle was spot on. He gave a burst.

Tracers arced into the Messerschmitt's path and hammered into its nose. Bryan had the new De Wilde bullets loaded into two of his guns. Flames from those twinkled yellow on impact.

White smoke issued from under the Messerschmitt's engine housing.

Bryan looked around him. Shocked to see the waves breaking white on the green coast of France. He hauled around and streaked westward.

The sky was empty and the R/T eerily quiet. "Hullo Orchard. Crossbow Leader calling. I'm lost."

No one answered.

He flew toward England. As he neared the English coast and its emplaced

guns he tried again, "Hullo Orchard, please be there."

"Crossbow Leader, I presume. This is Orchard. How is your fuel?"

"I'm in a bit of trouble."

"Vector three five zero."

"Three five zero."

"You should be able to see LUXOR. Can you?"

"Yes. God bless you."

"Can you make it?"

"Yes."

"I shall let them know you are calling."

Bryan arrived late at his own 'drome after refueling on the coast. Asp greeted him, "Having trouble with your R/T reception, Catrell?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where did you go, you pillock?"

"France."

"And did you have a good time?"

"Probably. No witnesses."

Asp sent him in to be debriefed by an Intelligence Officer, then he was released. A celebration was already in full swing in the officers' mess. Everyone in the flight was safe home, and Percy, Randy, and Harry Witt were newly blooded.

"Any joy, Cat?"

"Ish. I got what will probably remain a probable."

"But definitely a Messerschmitt."

They had been drinking a while so this was funny.

"I want to know how you *saw* them, Catrell."

Collie answered for him, "This man is a flying cathode-ray tube."

"Where's Percy?"

Percy Lovejoy had brought down two ME 109s.

"Sir Percival had to send a message to Adolf Hitler." Randy pointed in the direction of the loo.

Before Bryan could get too drunk, he stepped out to shed a few pints.

As he cut across the yard he tripped over someone.

Percy Lovejoy.

Percy smelled strongly of gin revisited. The victim of too much celebration, he had lost the way to the loo and found his way into the bushes.

Bryan pulled him up, slung his arm across his shoulders. "Up you go. You just walk. I'll navigate."

Bryan steered Percy out toward a dispersal area, intending to throw him into a shower.

"There's a lorry," Percy said.

"No, we're walking."

Lovejoy apologized for the mess. "In the words of Teddy, sorry, sorry and

sorry." He babbled. He said he'd got honking drunk because he was afraid he would cry anyway. "This way I have an excuse. But I've spoilt it haven't I, by confessing, haven't I?"

"Really you didn't need an excuse. No one would have thought badly of you. You're a bit disgusting as is."

"Everyone else is nothing but proud and happy. Harry is *whistling*."

"Perhaps," Bryan said. "That *is* the form. But I think one might be permitted to feel a little something else for having killed a man."

And at that Lovejoy set to bawling.

His long blond bangs stuck to his face and matted around his wet eyes.

"You need a haircut," Bryan said.

Percy must have tried to say, "I'm such a clot," or "I'm a twitch," but what came out was, "I'm a twot."

"Believe me, you're not."

"I'm not on."

"Not now, no. It's all right. I'm sure the others have their doubts. I just caught you is all."

"What about you? First one. I'll wager you didn't cry."

"There wasn't time."

Percy had grabbed a fistful of Bryan's tunic in the middle of his back and was hanging on it, so that Bryan's collar was up against his throat. "Percy, you're strangling me."

A voice barked from the darkness. "Who goes there?"

Bryan gave the password and said, "We're pilots of eighty-ninth. Get that torch out of my face."

The Corporal moved the light from Bryan's face to the badly flagging Percy. "You need a medic, then?"

"No. The Flying Officer has had one over the eight is all."

"If you don't mind my saying so, sir, the Flying Officer has had quite a few over the eight."

"As a matter of fact I do mind, Corporal," Bryan said, cold. "This is our top scoring ace for the day."

The sentry's expression changed and he saluted. "Sir!"

Percy returned it none too smartly with a none too clean hand.

Bryan dragged him on to the bathhouse and dropped him into a shower, uniform and all.

When Percy emerged, he felt better. He pushed wet bangs out of his face, blinked bloodshot eyes and sighed. Crying, he concluded, was rather like being sick. He dreaded doing it, but once got rid of, he felt better. "I think that's quite enough now."

He walked out of the bathhouse under his own power, wet and squishing with every step. "You know, Bryan, you might at least have taken my shoes off."

"You don't want to know what your shoes looked like."

Percy lifted his head, gave one of his familiar jaunty gestures. "So. What are you going to tell them?"

"That you can't hold your gin worth a bloody damn. What else is there to tell?"



PAUL RITTER LEFT THE BERLIN hospital with another medal on his uniform, the Iron Cross First Class, and a wound badge, which he didn't wear. He considered it a badge for being stupid. He had a scar to remind him of that. Always vain, he thought the pinched scar under his collarbone ruined his looks. Looks were everything. He used to like to go shirtless in the summer.

He had another set of gold pips on his shoulders and another set of wings on his yellow collar tabs, those of a Hauptmann. It all meant nothing. Someone else was in command of his Staffel in JG 56 now. There was no place for Paul Ritter in the Ace of Spades Jagdgeschwader. He'd been a prisoner for over four weeks, and spent another week in a real hospital recovering from anemia.

His new orders had him reporting to JG 23, no Staffel specified.

With tightening throat, he thought, *Lieber Gott, I don't want to be on the staff!* They were *not* going to tie Paul Ritter to a desk just because he'd been dented by a bullet!

No one met him as he arrived at the JG 23 staff headquarters. No one had a moment to take notice of the newcomer. They all had places to be and they moved briskly to get there. Ritter recognized the activity of a major move, equipment being packed up, airplanes pushed out of their hangars.

Ritter passed one ME 109 that wore Gruppenkommandeur's markings and a red lion painted on its cowling.

There was no one manning the front desk. Ritter let himself inside the

inner office.

There, behind a mammoth desk, was Major Johann Löwenstamm.

Löwe didn't look up. He held a cigarette between his middle and ring fingers, and a pen in the same hand. Ritter waited for him to try to smoke or write with the wrong one.

Löwe was always doing more than one thing at a time. The only time one thing commanded his full attention was when he was dogfighting or maybe when having sex. Knew for a fact that he could be distracted during the latter. Sex didn't quite have that brink of death urgency.

Ritter advanced from the doorway with Prussian stride, rapped his boothheels together, saluted. "*Herr Major.*"

Still not looking up, Löwe flipped him a sloppy salute, the cigarette and pen still between his fingers. Hailed him with a Bavarian, "Jo!"

Jo?

Löwe finished what he was writing with a heavy audible scribble that had to be his signature.

Berliner blue eyes lifted from the sea of paperwork. Löwe offered no personal greeting. He was just suddenly on his feet and talking fast, staccato as automatic fire. "Good. Good. Clear this desk."

It was an enormous mahogany monstrosity, and, rather than go around it, Löwe stepped on the chair, walked across the desktop and all the papers, jumped off the front and made for the door. He yanked his coat off the coat tree. Paused only to fasten his gun belt on.

Ritter moved to the window and turned the big fan toward Löwe's desk.

Edges of papers lifted, fluttered, and glided off the great desk until the wide expanse of mahogany was bare.

Löwe turned at the door. He stared at Ritter, at the vacant desk. "You insolent swine."

Ritter waited in silence.

Löwe said, "You make a lousy Adjutant."

"Yes, *Herr Major.*"

"A staff appointment doesn't appeal to you?"

"It does, *Herr Major*, somewhere between drowning in the English Channel and burning alive."

Some men hated combat. None of them would admit it. But that answer was definite enough.

And cutters of Gordian knots didn't belong behind desks. "Come along then. I'll take you to your airstrip."

"Thank you, *Herr Major.*"

"Don't thank me. You can explain to Oberleutnant Nachtigall when he arrives what happened to his command of the ninth Staffel."

"A mix up of paperwork I'm certain."

Löwe shook off a paper that had affixed itself to his boot heel. "No doubt."

Outside, the sun looked brighter than when Ritter had gone in. He and Löwe headed for the staff car, a long, black Mercedes.

Löwe reached the driver side first. "I'll drive."

Löwe threw the car into gear and peeled out as if attempting a liftoff.

"How *are* you, Ritter?"

"My throat hurts." Ritter tapped the empty place below his own neck where a Ritterkreuz graced Löwe's collar.

Löwe's hand found the Ritterkreuz at his own throat. He fingered the decoration possessively. "I've felt that ache."

"Is it all over? It's all decided, isn't it?"

Germany had France and Poland and Czechoslovakia, and a pact with the Bolsheviks. Spain was neutral and Italy was an ally. England stood alone.

"There's no reason for England not to stay on her island and sue for peace. I've missed it, haven't I?"

"You'll have your war," Löwe said. "East or west. You'll have it."

"I don't want East. I don't want to fight Ivans. But Hitler doesn't want war with England," Ritter said. "We let so many Tommies get away at Dunkirk."

"Not that many," Löwe said.

"England claims they evacuated over 300,000 soldiers. That's what the French told me."

"Oh, *bullshit!* You should have seen the beach when it was all done. What a mess! What an unholy mess. I was *ill*, Ritter. You should have seen it. But don't worry. That warmonger Churchill won't leave it alone. You will have your battle for Britain."

On July 15 the German press announced that German troops were standing ready to attack Britain. To make good on that threat, another fighter Geschwader was moving to the coast—JG 23.

"About time," Ritter said.

Right now, there was only one fighter wing at the coast—Erwin Halle's Ace of Spades JG 56. The coast was target-rich, so Halle's men had more victories than any other unit.

"The only pilot getting victories these days is Halle—and he doesn't need any more!" Löwe growled. "We should have driven him over a cliff when we had a chance, Ritter."

Löwe brought the Mercedes to a lurching to a stop at the third Gruppe's airfield. Ritter climbed out of the car.

Löwe beckoned him around to the driver's side window. Looked him up and down. "You're out of uniform, Ritter."

Strictly, they were all out of uniform, what with the polka dot silk scarfs and non-issue sweaters and windcheaters. Ritter's service cap was worn at a serious rake, but then Löwe's didn't have the spring peak in his either.

There were certain infractions that were winked at and some were not.

The point of objection this time was the Mickey Mouse pin. He wore it like a medal below his left pocket where his wound badge should've been.

"Off with the Mouse," Löwe said.

Ritter unpinned the non-regulation decoration and placed it into Löwe's palm. Major Johann Löwenstamm appraised it a moment, then pinned it on his own uniform.

"Son of a bitch!" Ritter breathed. And to Löwe's widened eyes Ritter said, "Son of a bitch, *Herr Major*."

Ritter's Staffel, 9./JG 23, and the Jagdgeschwader's Staff were stationed just north of Luftflotte Headquarters at Cap Blanc Nez, immediately south of Calais, the closest seaport to England. Ritter figured his Gruppe would be on the bleeding edge of the attack if it came. And it must.

Ritter could walk to the beach from his airstrip and watch the German E Boats on the water. And when the sea mist wasn't too thick, he could actually see England's white cliffs across the Channel. The Channel was only 34 kilometers wide at this point. With field glasses he could see the houses of Folkestone. And the masts at Dover.

Ritter's Gruppe was setting up a station in sight of England.

The English might start bombing here at any time, so the Luftwaffe ground crews camouflaged their bases.

Hangars were netted over. Some of them were disguised to look like houses and barns. Messerschmitts hid within sandbag piles and under canopies of netting and grass, or else nestled amid trees.

There were no concrete runways. The ground crews made the airstrips look like cultivated fields—and they made cultivated fields to look like airstrips with full-sized model airplanes sitting in the grain.

Taxiways followed the borders of farmland. Frenchmen were German allies now under the Vichy government. They erected gun emplacements and tied sheaves of wheat around the sandbags.

Ritter had for his chief Wart the incomparable Otto Braun, the Bavarian bear. Otto did not much *like* Ritter, unless snarling indicated affection, but Meister Braun had been put on planet Earth to keep Ritter's airplane in the sky.

At the moment, Otto Braun was watching the painter put the final touches on *his* Messerschmitt. It was Otto's Messerschmitt by his own reckoning. Otto the Bear just let Paul Ritter fly it.

The painted red heart gleamed wet. It was the unit badge for the ninth Staffel of Jagdgeschwader 23. Now Ritter's victories were going onto the rudder. His tally stood at fourteen.

Someone else was watching the kill badges go on. A pilot. He was tall, thin, a Hauptmann's pips on his wide shoulders. His very blond hair was shorn close and he wore a red armband blazoned with the swastika. Not too many of those in the Luftwaffe.

Ritter moved in close behind him.

The Hauptmann turned. Flinched. "*Donnerwetter!* Ritter, you are like a cat!"

Ritter gave an approximation of a smile. "Fritz."

Pale blue eyes darted over Ritter's uniform, taking inventory. Found nothing he didn't have himself, so Fritz smiled. "How have you been?"

"Shitty," Ritter said. "But you know that."

"I didn't know you were coming. I thought the new man was supposed to be Nachtigall."

"He's the Gruppen Adjutant, I understand," Ritter said.

"Did you know that two men from your old Gruppe got the Ritterkreuz? I don't think it's fair. They've been here on the Channel for weeks."

"We're here now."

"I'm the next man to win the Ritterkreuz," Fritz said.

Made Ritter blink. "You have twenty?"

"I have fifteen. That will change momentarily. And I shall have a huge celebration and invite all my friends."

"I'll come," Ritter said. "We can have that party in a phone booth."

"Truly, I have missed you, Ritter. Like an infestation of lice."

"Your imagery is lost on me, Fritz. I've never had lice."

"You're too quick for me today."

Fritz walked around Ritter's airplane like an inspector. The painters had stepped back to review their work. Fritz cleared his throat a couple times, casually. "You . . . hm. You have your Spanish victories on there, Ritter?"

"No. Dumbhead."

Fritz was still smiling but something writhed, held back, behind Fritz's crystal blue eyes.

Fritz had fifteen kills to Ritter's fourteen. Fritz should be pleased to be ahead.

What was wrong with those figures was that Ritter had only one less kill than Fritz even after missing six weeks of the battle of France. When Ritter was healthy he took down enemies faster than almost anyone.

19 July

Red and blue peacock eyes stared up from enemy wings over the water.

Paul Ritter sang out: "*Achtung! Jäger!*"

"Where?" Fritz von Soden demanded. His Staffel was out here too.

The wings of the English airplanes here weren't the lovely ellipses of Ritter's chosen rival, the Spitfire. These crates had thick, boxy wings like Hurricanes, but there were bubble turrets behind the cockpits.

"They're Defiants," Paul said.

"Dammit, Ritter! *Where!*"

Löwe's voice: "I don't see them either, Ritter."

"On the deck."

The Defiants' turrets bristled with movable guns that could fire any direction—any direction as long as it was above the horizon. Ritter's shattering first encounter with Defiants over Dunkirk had taken a piece out of him.

Ritter growled at these. "Oh you. Oh you."

"You got someone in the cockpit with you, Ritter?" Fritz sent.

"The dog that bit me," Ritter said.

Löwe's Geschwader had the superior height, which was, for once, not where they wanted to be. Not against those top-firing guns.

Löwe ordered, "Descend wide to hanni 3000. Do not engage until you're underneath them."

Ritter added, "Don't be afraid to come in head-on. Defiants don't have forward firing guns."

Fritz sent, "You sure about that, Ritter?"

"Dead sure."

The Defiants had to be aware of their bad position because they were turning tail and spilling altitude fast.

Ritter peeled off the formation, his wingman close after him. Their engines sounded a battle cry as they dove.

Ritter selected cannon.

He flipped the safety up with his thumb. He'd had Otto and the Waffewart harmonize his guns to 130 meters and the cannon to 180. Even if prone to overheating, the nose cannon was Ritter's favorite weapon. It pointed straight at the target.

Ritter brought his Staffel up from below the low-flying Defiants. "Choose your targets, Kerls. Fire at will."

His Messerschmitts rose up like sharks from below the Defiants and ripped their bellies out.

Ritter pumped cannon shells into one as it tried to turn and bring its guns to bear. The crate whip-stalled, spun down.

"Abschuss."

Someone else yelled in Ritter's headset, "*Horrido!*"

The next minute was a slaughter of airplanes that had no business ever being in a hostile sky.

Lieber Gott, they were easy marks.

"*Horrido!*"

"*Abschuss!*"

"*Horrido, horrido, horrido!*"

"Jesus Christ, I didn't want to do that!"

Ritter's number 8 ME had run into a parachute.

The Defiants were trying to run away now. They were pitifully slow. Ritter got ahead of one, centered the crosshairs in the dead center of his target's zigzag course and depressed the trigger. The Motorkanone froze after three hammering rounds, but Ritter's left wing cannon caught the target on a zag.

Half of the Defiant's wing came off.

Ritter watched aircraft spin down. The gunner was trying to get out of that bubble turret. Wasn't making it.

"*Abschuss*," Paul said.

Amid the victory cries, a cursing shout rose out of the noise.

It was Löwe's voice.

"Löwe! What's wrong?"

"I'm hit, damn everything!"

"Who got you?"

"I'm not *shot*, I'm *hit*. Wings and crap."

Löwe always got close to his targets. Too close this time.

"My target fell apart on me," Löwe said. "I'm going down. Waldemann, König, cover me. Ritter, see my chicks home!"

"Yes, *Herr Major*. See you in the evening."

"I'm setting down by that safety island," Löwe said. "Pay attention to this location. The water's damned cold down there."

"Löwe!" Ritter cried. "You can't ride it down! Bale out!"

"I'd rather almost anything than bale out."

"Uh. Die?" Ritter suggested.

"Except that," Löwe said.

Another voice sounded, uneasy: "Do MEs float?"

"Löwe is going to let us know," Ritter said, angry. "Follow me, Kerls. You have your orders." Ritter hauled his kite around toward home.

Germany had made extensive provisions for air-sea rescue. In an assault on England, the high command knew that inevitably some crippled bombers and short-winded Messerschmitts would end in the drink. So a series of safety islands had been erected down there to span the Channel. Red crosses marked their towers. There would be dry clothes, food and a radio for any downed pilot who got himself to the island. The buoys were also fit out with a signal flag to run up the pole, flares, and even enough cots for a Heinkel 111 crew, but one hoped one would not spend long on one of the stations. An air-sea rescue unit was standing by with fast boats and floatplanes to pick up their men. Because they weren't barbarians, the E boats would pick up any surviving Tommies from the downed Defiants as well.

It was only a few hours before Löwenstamm was restored to his unit at Pas de Calais. The officers of JG 23 were billeted in a handsome chateau they'd liberated from the French.

The dry emergency clothes from the safety islands were sized for a bomber crew, not fighter pilots, so Löwe looked like boy dressed in his father's clothing. A boy with a mustache and a cigar.

Löwe carried his own flight suit rolled in a soggy bundle under his arm.

He dropped his bundle on the carpet and flopped down into a chair by the hearth. He collected welcomes from everyone.

Ritter spied Löwe's orderly hovering indecisively in the back of the flock.

The man had a question and didn't want to interrupt Löwe's storytelling to ask it.

Ritter nudged the orderly. "What?"

The orderly murmured into the back of his own fist. "Brandy or hot coffee do you think?"

"Put the brandy in the coffee," Ritter said.

The orderly gave a brisk nod, and marched off to carry out his mission.

The rest of the men were drinking beer this evening. They toasted Löwe's safe return.

"Do MEs float?" Fritz von Soden asked Löwe.

"Yeah," Löwe said. "Mine did. Like a brick." He jiggled a finger in his ear, trying to shake water out.

Ritter gave a Cheshire cat smile over the rim of his stein. "May we take this as a recommendation not to ride a Messerschmitt down into the water?"

"We *may*," Löwe growled. "And next time I bale out I'm going to inflate my frigging life vest on the way down." He coughed. "Is the Channel any lower? Because I think I swallowed half of it."

"Your lips are blue."

"I don't doubt it!" Löwe cradled his cup of brandied coffee in his hands and held it steaming under his nose. "Thought I was going to die."

"In water at five degrees Celsius, death comes within an hour," Fritz said.

Löwe pulled in his chin. His eyebrows nearly met. "How the hell does anyone arrive at figures like that? Does someone sit there and watch a pilot freezing to death and not pick him up?"

"Oh *no*," Fritz said, appalled. "Of course not. They use Jews. They put them in different temperature water and see how long they last."

Ritter spilled his beer. "Oh *Scheiße!*"

Johann made a face. "They needn't slow freeze some poor bastard on my account. I *know* the water is cold. I know I don't want to be *in* it."

The Adjutant approached, gave Löwe a telegram. "Message from Major Erwin Halle."

The telegram read: Congratulations on this historic occasion.

"I don't get it," said Löwe. "What's this?"

The Adjutant hesitated. Coughed. "He says yours is the first Messerschmitt to swim in the Channel."

"Damn him anyway!" Löwe threw the balled telegram away from him. "When did that man turn into such a smart son of a bitch? Erwin Halle. Couldn't muddy a river. Don't laugh, Ritter, I don't want to see that coming up your nose. Damn Halle!"

The Adjutant, Nachtigall, cleared his throat. "And did you get the message that came through Luftflotte headquarters from the Reichsmarschall, *Herr Major?*"

"No. And what the hell is a Reichsmarschall anyway?"

"That is our Hermann after tonight," Nachtigall answered. "The Führer is

elevating twelve generals to the rank of Feldmarschall. He needed to create a new title to keep Slim head up over everyone else."

"What did the *Reichsmarschall* say?"

"All units are to stand ready to intercept possible English air activity this evening."

"We're expecting air activity?"

"The Führer is addressing the Reichstag this evening in the Kroll Opera House. He will be making a peace offer to England."

"Peace?" Ritter shouted, aghast. "Peace? Did you know about this, Löwe?"

"No. I didn't."

"It hasn't been made public in advance," Nachtigall said. "News of the Führer's appearance at such a gathering could tempt the English bombers. There are many very important people in the Kroll Opera House at this moment."

"You think the RAF would actually try to bomb Berlin?"

"I don't know," the Adjutant said. "I don't know what the Tommies have left."

The Luftwaffe fighter units stayed alert, but the RAF attempted no airstrike while Hitler spoke at the opera house.

Fritz spoke Ritter's fear out loud. "Maybe the English don't intend to fight at all."

"I wish we hadn't done such a thorough job on the Defiants," Ritter said. They had made the English lose hope.

The English have no choice but to accept peace.



IN THE EVENING, some of the officers gathered around the wireless in a Nissen hut to listen to the BBC report Hitler's peace offer.

"He's not peaceful if he doesn't pull out of the Sudetenland, Poland, the Low Countries, and France," Bryan said.

As far as any of the fighter pilots were concerned, there could be only one answer to the dictator's peace.

Then orders clattered over the teleprinter for 89 Squadron to move to Kingshill to-morrow, the twentieth of July.

Kingshill, in 11 Group, was a designated satellite station of the sector station Biggin Hill.

As Kingshill straddled the dividing line between Sectors C and D, it served as an advance aerodrome for both Biggin Hill and Hornchurch. Kingshill lay twenty-five miles forward of Biggin Hill and in easy distance of no place exciting, but it sat midway between London and Folkestone on the coast. Not that anyone thought the Luftwaffe would ever hit a civilian center like London, but German bombers were making strikes on the industry and shipyards on the Thames estuary. Hotter still were the straits off Dover.

The squadron that was currently stationed at Kingshill had seen so much action that it was already in need of rest and re-equipment.

89 Squadron was going in to relieve a squadron of Defiants.

Kingshill was a new station, equipped to handle one fighter squadron.

There were no concrete runways. The grass field, circled by an eighteen-foot tarmac perimeter track, allowed a 933 yard run N-S, 1130 yards NE - SW. The long approach was 1200 yards SE - NW, the short one 830 yards E - W. A Spitfire equipped with a constant speed propeller and fueled with 100 octane petrol needed less than 200 of that to get aloft.

There was petrol storage for 32,000 gallons of aviation spirit, another 2000 gallons of MT petrol, and 400 gallons of oil. And one million rounds of .303 ammunition.

The whole camp was surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by army details who manned the armoured cars and the Bofors guns emplaced around the field. The grass was painted with tar lines to make it look from the air like cultivation.

As soon as the Spitfires of 89 Squadron arrived they were taken to six double dispersal pens spaced around the field. The wide dispersal insured that all the Spits couldn't be taken out on the ground in one strike.

Kingshill's accommodations were pastoral at best. There were no fine old brick halls here. Nissen huts near the blast pens housed crews at readiness. Other quarters were in the control tower. Canvas bell tents and Nissen huts served both for the ground crews' housing and for equipment storage. Some personnel were billeted in the village.

A tin-fronted watch office stood at one end of the field. There was a Spartan mess and crew room near the control tower.

At dusk the last section of Spitfires arrived, and Percy asked, "Where are the Defiants?"

It hadn't occurred to Bryan that he hadn't seen any.

"I don't know. They must have moved already."

It was nearly dark when the blister hangar opened and the Defiants limped from their shelter into the twilight—the ones that could move themselves.

There were three.

Stunned, the fresh squadron watched the walking wounded emerge shredded, bullet-riddled, and barely airworthy to take their places on the field for take off.

"Where are the rest of them?" Teddy asked.

There was a grim silence.

The engines ran up. The Defiants hobbled into the air and crackled into the blackening distance. Merlins sounded not so mighty in retreat.

It was a long time before someone could ask, "What happened?"

"ME 109s."

"But the Defiants did so well at Dunkirk."

"Defiants have an Achilles heel," Asp said. "Jerry was surprised at Dunkirk. That doesn't happen twice. Second go round, Jerry bit all their heels off."

"But the evaluation at Farnborough said the Defiant was the better fighter."

Asp, who had no use for anyone's evaluation other than his own, said,

"The evaluation was wrong."

"But what about us?"

"What about us?"

"That same evaluation said the Spitfire is superior to the ME 109."

"And so it is."

"The ME is an evil aeroplane," Teddy said.

"Sir Percy got two in one sortie," Witt said. "How good can they be?"

Percy Lovejoy straightened up. "I'm not quite sure how to take that."

The pilots knew that the ME 109 was packing the heaviest armament of any fighter in the air, even more than the Spitfire with its eight guns.

"The ME has two or three 20 mm cannon and two machine guns," Percy said. "If you take a 20 mm punch, you know you've been hit, if you're still in this world to know anything."

"I figured that out, thank you," Bryan said.

"There are Spits armed with cannon now," Witt said.

"Cannon?" Bryan echoed, not happy. "Cannon jam. I'll keep my eight guns, thank you."

The guns were more reliable. And fabric patches over the gun ports kept the moisture out and helped keep the Brownings from freezing at altitude.

"I don't think the Defiant is very agile," Witt said.

"The Spitfire is."

"The Messerschmitt is," Rutger Burrows said.

"Your Spit can turn inside Jerry's Messerschmitt if your heart's in it and it had better be," Asp told them. "Providing you see him first, there's nothing he can dish out that you can't handle."

There was a long pause. No one was willing to say out loud.

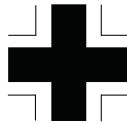
Which was better?

It was close.

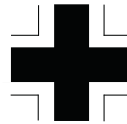
The weaknesses and advantages between the Spitfire and ME 109 were close enough for luck or skill to swing the decision.

Each encounter is a new deal. Play the hand you're given. Either machine could come out victorious over the other. If the Hun wants a battle, it will come down to him, you, and luck. Who uses his machine to its best and to his opponent's worst, he is the victor. Because the machines are nearly a match.

"Of course the Spitfire is faster."



30



“REMINDE ME NEVER TO have you fly with me again, Erich,” Ritter said. “You’re a cutthroat. And you are, too, Kirchner.”

“Pick up your cards, *Herr Hauptmann*.”

“You are going to be sorry you did that.” Ritter batted aside the dye bag that dangled from his deflated yellow life vest, and he picked up the trick. His hand was not quite as bad as he’d thought. He had bid null and his so-called friends were ganging up on him.

They had liberated a stack of French phonograph records and were playing them on the gramophone under the camouflage netting.

The buzz of aircraft engines made them pause in their game. But the broad wings that appeared below the clouds didn’t show ominous peacock eyes. Those were friendly black crosses up there.

“Weather frogs.”

Erich leaned out from their makeshift arbor. “Clouding up again.”

“*Scheiße*.”

The Messerschmitts waited under the trees. Erich adjusted flares around his belt. Ritter had his flares strapped around one boot.

The field telephone under the table rang. The whole Staffel reacted with a start. Ritter seized it. “Ritter here!”

Reinie and Erich folded their cards. Everyone looked toward the Channel and listened for engines of English bombers.

There came only the rusty cry of gulls.

In a moment Ritter signaled his squadron with a wave of his hand to stand down. They picked up their cards and their books, and they lay back down in the grass or settled into their sling chairs.

Ritter hung up the phone. "Erich, mind the shop."

Ritter handed his cards to a feldwebel who had been watching the game. "Finish losing for me."

"What's happening, *Herr Hauptmann*?"

"I'm going to HQ for new orders. I assume the English have sent their official answer to the peace offer."

Löwe summoned his *Staffelkapitäne* before him. His face was downcast, his brow tight, his mouth grim-set.

His unit commanders weren't breathing.

Löwe straightened up. Said to Ritter, "Let's see what we can do about that sore throat."

Ritter sputtered, afraid to smile. "No? They said *no*?"

Löwe smiled. "The English said no. No truce. No peace."

"What idiots! Johann! I could kiss you!"

Löwe raised a fist. His grin was too wide for his face. "No."

War was here again. For real now. Everyone here wanted to fight.

"I understand we'll only have four days," Fritz told Ritter.

Four days was the *Reichsmarschall's* timetable—four days between Eagle Day, which was the beginning of the air offensive, and Operation Sealion, which was the actual invasion of England by troops in the boats.

No German troop carriers could be sent across the water before the Channel was cleared and the English bombers and their bases were ash. No German soldiers would land on English beaches under fire.

The RAF must be destroyed first. Everything else depended on that.

Eagle Day waited on the weather. The campaign required a forecast of four days of clear skies. The *Luftwaffe* didn't have it.

Thunder cracked.

"This needs to stop," Ritter shouted at the sky. "I need to score."

"You?" Löwe snarled at him. "I need to catch Erwin Halle!"

"You're not only one with a sore throat," Fritz told Ritter. "I'm closer to that medal than you are."

Ritter gave a faint smile. "Oh, but it's got my name on it."

Ritter needed four more victories for a *Ritterkreuz*. And he needed a Spitfire, just because he decided he needed one.

Rain tapped at the windows during a briefing. The TO told the *Luftwaffe* pilots that the ME 109 could turn inside the Spitfire. "We calculated."

"Pulling how many g?" Ritter said back.

The TO just stared at him.

Löwe answered for him. "More g's than we can take. Climb, dive, do not try to turn inside a Spitfire."

Ritter nodded.

During his time in the French field hospital, Ritter had a lot of time to relive the way that Spitfire over Dunkirk had turned inside him like a bi-plane and suddenly Ritter had been staring up the wrong end of its guns. There were eight of those guns. He'd thought he was seeing double until his eyes crossed and he saw sixteen. The Spitfire hadn't given up its agility to pay for that heavy firepower like the Hurricane had.

The thought of meeting a Spitfire from the cockpit of a proper fighter quickened his hunter's heart.

There was a true contender in the air.

"Hurricanes and Spitfires have armor plating," the TO advised.

"They'll need it," Löwe said.

"What do we have?" Fritz asked.

"Stay out of the way of the Spitfire's guns," Löwe said. He lit a pipe, blew a smoke ring. "The Messerschmitt is of course faster."



RAF Order of the Day: "The Battle of Britain is about to begin. Members of the Royal Air Force, the fate of generations lies in your hands."

VOICES ON THE R/T OVERLAPPED.

"Hullo. Crossbow Leader calling. Crossbow airborne."

"Hullo, Crossbow Leader. Dolphin calling. Vector nine-zero at Angels one-eight."

"Who is whistling on the R/T?"

"Don't you know something besides *Roll out the Barrel?*"

"Cut the chatter on the R/T."

"Bogeys three o'clock."

"Those are friends."

"Not possible. Rutger doesn't have any friends."

"Bloody hell!"

"Cut the chatter on the R/T."

"Hullo Crossbow Leader. Dolphin calling. Go to Angels one-nine."

"Crossbow Leader to Crossbow, go to Angels one-nine."

"This isn't another ogo pogo flight, is it?"

"Look, Toto, we must be over the rainbow!"

"BELT UP!"

"Bandits one mile at Angels one-eight and two miles at Angels three-zero."

"What the bloody hell are they doing up there!"

"Dolphin, are you sure about that plot at three-zero?"

"No."

"Those will be the 109s. Watch your backs, boys."

"Tally ho. Stukas at Angels one-eight."

"Let's tap in."

"Show the bastards what we're made of."

"I got him! I got him! Oh balls! I had him!"

"Pull up, Yellow Leader. Pull up, Yellow Leader. Jesus, Cat! Are you barking?"

"Drinks are on Catrell."

"You saw that, Padge?"

"Lovely."

"Holy Mary Mother of God, look at him!"

"Yellow Three, mind the wingman!"

"Hoo ra!"

"Nice shooting, Randy!"

"Plot descending. Angels two-five. . . Angels two-four. . ."

"Jesus Christ son of abitchbuggerthistohell—"

"Hullo Crossbow, plot arriving your Angels."

"Here come the Messerschmitts!"

"I'm packing up. One lousy bullet—"

"Get him off me! Someone get this—"

"Flamer! Got him!"

"—7.9 mm of German scrap metal and I'm driving a write off."

"Got him! He's smoking!"

"That's an open throttle, you clot."

"On your tail Blue Two! On your tail!"

"There they go."

"After them, boys!"

"Crossbow aircraft, this is Crossbow Leader, do not pursue hostiles. Do not pursue. Re-form and pancake."

"Crossbow Leader, this is Yellow Leader, permission to pursue?"

"Crossbow aircraft, re-form and pancake at base. What does your fuel level look like, Yellow Leader?"

"Looks like hell, Crossbow Leader. We're forming up."

The cordite-streaked Spitfires of 89 Squadron set down at Kingshill, two less than they had started up. Padgett had baled out. There was yet one Spitfire left unaccounted for.

"Where's Collie?"

Green Two had failed to return.

"There!"

ST-M appeared over the horizon, cannon riddled, wobbling, low and fast, something jammed in its starboard aileron.

ST-M was Green Two. Collie Lloyd.

The aileron stuck up like a flag. Collie managed to line up the approach, descended at the beginning of the long runway, a little to one side and too fast, but he nearly had it. He bounced three wheels down, and a tyre blew.

The jammed aileron caught a gust, and the kite suddenly planted a wing. With a thundercrack, Spitfire ST-M slewed sideways on its port wing, then pitched onto its spinner. The engine squealed against the jammed propeller shaft.

The aeroplane kept sliding, scraped over the perimeter track, took out a bell tent and mashed into the sandbags of a blast pen.

The fire tender trundled after it and heaved foam on the engine.

The crash crew and ambulance bounced over the gouged field. Pilots charged out to help.

Bryan got there first, climbed onto the wing, looked in. Paused.

Collie mumbled, "Showed them what we're made of." Collie's eyes opened a slit, focused on Bryan. "Not quite so graphic a demonstration is what was in order I suspect, sir."

Bryan kept his voice as even as he could. "This is not precisely what I had in mind, no. Mind your head, now. We're taking you out." He jumped down from the wing to make way for the medics.

Collie sighted a WAAF aircraftwoman closing in, and he gave a groaning whimper. "Not in front of the women!"

"ere now," said the WAAF, sounding as common as she could make herself. Her name was Edith. "We'll 'ave you to hospital and right as rain in no time, sir. I'm saving a dance for you."

Collie blessedly passed out.

Edith pried out a 20 mm shell that was wedged in the broken Spitfire's starboard aileron. It was the least of the aeroplane's damage, but the easiest to face.

Rutger Burrows was mortified to learn that he'd shot down a Hurricane. Bryan assured him that the pilot was okay. This was not entirely true. The pilot had taken a bullet in his arm, but he *would* be okay.

Someone painted a bar on Rutger Burrow's rudder in the fashion of a German victory tally, and put a British roundel over it. Rutger took it so badly that Asp made them take it off.

The weather had gone to hell. Probably a good thing. Jerry needed fair weather for his full invasion.

Asp found Bryan out in the rain with his Spit's tail propped up, firing against the test butt. The armorer adjusted the cone of fire to converge at 200 yards.

The WAAF aircraftwoman Edith looked on, dubious, fists in her pockets. She was a chunky girl, with dainty small feet. She rocked up on her toes and back on her heels. Her voice was high and scratchy. "You want it that tight, sir?"

"I'm that good."

"Regulation is 650 yards," Edith said.

"650 yards is birdshot."

"But it's regulation."

"Bugger the regulations."

Edith appealed to the Squadron Leader, "Asp?"

"Catrell may bugger what he likes. Just don't do it in front of me."

"And not in front of tender ears," Harry Witt said.

"Aow, don't mind me, sir," Edith said.

"I was talking about Sir Percival."

Percy Lovejoy's fair face turned a deeper crimson. Mixed company did that to him.

Asp beckoned, "Cat, get down here. I want to say something to everyone, and I'm going to say it once."

Glances all round.

"All right, you lot. I will not tolerate any further breaches of radiotelephone discipline. Next man who says a word—or whistles a note—before the enemy is sighted, will be docked two thirds pay for a month!"

Sound of pattering rain pushed itself into the pilots' stone silence.

"I did not mean *now!* You may say 'Yes, sir!'"

"Yes, sir!"

The situation grew steadily hotter with scattered raids and nerve-clawing false alarms. Often the Spitfires would end up stooging about for two hours only to touch down with their patches on.

"I think they must scramble us every time something goes airborne over there."

Unfortunately what the RDF was probably reading were more and more Hun squadrons moving to the French coast. Masses of aircraft were stationed over there now, and they kept collecting. There were over two hundred squadrons of all kinds. Der Tag must be at hand.

It was worse to be scrambled and meet no one. When the fighters saw the enemy they at least knew what they ought to do to him.

"The Huns are close enough that the RDF can monitor their taking off. When they mount their big invasion push, we will see them."

"Unless they hit the radio towers."

"Shut it, Catrell."

So far, the Hun had been ignoring the towers. It was incredible good luck, but there it was.

"Witt! Stop that infernal whistling. There's a pay cut in this for you."

"It's not me, Asp! I've been fit up!"

"Who is whistling Dixie?"

"Dixie? *Dixie?*"

"*Randy!*"

"The name is Rhett."

"Stop babbling like a lot of bloody Huns!"

"Tally ho!"

"What Angels?"

"No Angels! They're *on the deck!*"

Found them. Moving across the water below the radar towers. "ME 110s! I don't see any of their nasty little friends."

The twin-engine fighters were carrying two 250 kg bombs each under their fuselages. They skimmed the waves at ought feet.

As the Spitfires sliced down on them, the 110s dropped their bombs into the water and fled. With their up-graded engines running on higher octane fuel they were rather slippery at sea level. Bryan pushed the override and caught up with one.

He flicked the milled safety off with his thumb, gave a short burst. Guns spat blue and orange flame. Tracer rounds raked across the 110's fuselage as the Hun passed through his line of fire. Pieces splintered and flew in silvery specks. Yellow flashes sprouted where the De Wildes struck. They twinkled, flared. The starboard engine poured smoke.

There was a fatal impulse to let your eyes to follow a victim down rather than to look for an attacker following you. The jagged descent of a smoking enemy aircraft was more compelling than an auto wreck.

Don't watch your Hun. Let him die. Mind your back.

Bryan tore himself away. Looked for another target.

There were still no ME 109s. From somewhere he heard Randy's yell. "Hoo ra! Splash! Splash!"

In what felt like barely a moment, the estuary was emptied of 110's. A few appeared as specks in the distance, fleeing across the Channel.

"Hullo, Crossbow. Dolphin calling. Have you fuel and ammo? I have trade for you."

"This is Crossbow. A little fuel," Bryan said. "Bags of ammo. What trade, Dolphin?"

"If you could nip over one mile vector one-seven-zero, Crossbow, you should meet a single plot at Angels five, rather slow."

"Yes, I can have a bash at your single plot, Dolphin." Bryan sent his flight back with the Asp and the rest of squadron. Bryan peeled off to hunt the lone

bandit.

In moments, the voice of Dolphin: "Any joy, Crossbow?"

"Dolphin, this is Crossbow Leader. Bandit headed for the terra firma – his kite rather more rapidly."

"Good show, sir."

Bryan returned to Kingshill. The rest of the squadron had already come down. They'd taken a smashing bag of ME 110s for no losses. Even the Spitfires themselves looked proud of themselves with their noses in the air.

It dulled the celebration to learn that Hawkinge, Lympne, and Manston had taken a pasting. And the docks and the town of Portsmouth were on fire.

Bryan dozed under the wing of his Spitfire, his head on his parachute pack. His flight had been up before first light for dawn readiness. He opened one eye to check his watch. 7.45. It was nearly time to be released.

The Tannoy buzzed.

"Bloody hell!"

"Scramble!"

"Start up!"

"What happened to ruddy *Stand-By?*"

Flight mechanics ran, weaving around the pilots, to the kites.

Edith helped Bryan into his gear. Another fitter had the Spitfire already running when Bryan jumped in, strapped in. The ground crew pulled the chocks away.

Jerry was already on his way.

"Buster!"

"Fingers out, boys."

Bryan's flight arrived too late. All that was left for them was a stern chase. The shifty 110s had slithered in below radar level, dropped their loads on target and hared away. They hadn't hit ships after all. Smoke rose from points all along the coast around the radio masts. The bombers had gone for airfields and the RDF.

As Bryan's flight returned to base, there were more aeroplanes landing at Kingshill. The Spitfires were lettered DW and Hurricanes lettered GZ.

Their coastal stations, Lympne and Hawkinge, were in smoke.

A report came over the phone just before it died, "Chain Home system's packed up. Manston is under attack."

Bryan cocked his head to listen to the humming air. "So are we."

"Bloody hell!"

Whistles shrilled. The Tannoy blared a warning. Late. The droning of German bombers were audible through the air raid siren. And high above the approaching bombers were contrails.

Those would be ME 109s.

The airfield's Ack Ack pounded. The Bofors had opened up to the shouts of "Engage target! On! On!"

The Vickers' lighter chatter erupted from the concrete pillboxes.

A tight clump of bombs fell. The tin-fronted watch office disappeared in the cloud. The concussion knocked Bryan to the tremored ground. He staggered up.

He was already running when he figured out where he was going. Not to a trench.

He saw the Spitfire in its sandbag enclosure. A puff of smoke crossed his field of vision, momentarily obscuring the aeroplane. Its outline reappeared in the smoke. The Spit was still there. Bryan ran for it.

He heard the fluttering of wind in fins. He dove on his face and covered his head. The ground swelled beneath him, bubbled. The whole world shook. He hugged the earth. Cool grass tickled his nose. An acrid gust rippled over him with a blast furnace rush as he held onto the spongy ground.

He peered up, squinting through falling clods and spray, to see his pretty aircraft laid open in black and orange flames within its protective bin, broken sandbags spilling like water. A piece of metal fell on his hand. Hot. He jerked away.

From a tent, flares shot up in a great display, red, green and white, starlike, all directions, up into the air, torpedoing through the grass.

A struck bowser coughed up a rolling fireball. Heat shriveled the leaves of trees at the perimeter.

The main fuel dumps were a half-mile distant. Those seemed to have escaped so far.

B Flight was in motion, rolling. Bryan remembered that Asp, Percy, and Padge were chalked on the roster.

In the wake of a bomb blast the Spitfires lofted into the air—

And slammed back to the ground, digging trenches and scattering shredded metal.

Not a moment after the last bomb had fallen, the Messerschmitts came down. A pair of them snarled in low, a recurrent nightmare. Guns flashed through their propeller arcs.

Lines of strafing sent the ground up in little spurts. Struck a crash tender. It skidded, tilted over on its side, wheels spinning.

An armoured car, pumping out AA rounds, dragged a line of white smoke from the belly of one of the attacking aircraft. The wounded ME dipped too low. There was a thrrrrrrp of a propeller bending. The ME stumbled over the perimeter and disappeared. In a moment an explosion towered up beyond the trees. Someone somewhere was laughing and shrieking, "Son of a bitch!"

Firetenders trundled out to heave foam on the burning Spitfires .

Bryan hovered at the edge of the sphere of heat, shielded his stinging eyes, looking for Asp. He didn't know if he wanted to see movement in there or not.

A firefighter in a white asbestos suit lumbered in to get what was left of Asp out.

A figure like a snowman emerged from one of the other two Spitfires. An ambulance stood waiting for him.

"Oh, go to bed!" Percy cried, flinging foam off his flightsuit. "Pick up someone's who's hurt!"

The All Clear sounded.

The absence of engine noise from above met numbed ears. There was left the crackling of fires. A gentle breeze dragged the acrid haze across the field. An ambulance wailed around the perimeter track.

The station crews shook themselves off and crawled out of their trenches. Some took a moment just to stare.

Bryan joined Harry Witt and Rutger Burrows. Bryan didn't realize he was coated with earth until Witt, with a heavy hand, brushed it off his shoulders. At a touch, dirt sprinkled from Bryan's hair.

"You didn't take cover, Catrell? Asp'll have your guts for garters."

"Asp's gone for a Burton."

"Christ."

Percy came to them at a lanky jog, trailing bits of foam.

"Did Padgett get out?"

"They took him away. His mouth still works."

"With Padge that's the important part."

Personal belongings were strewn across the field. The clubhouse they used for a Mess had been hit. There were bits of food everywhere. The pilots were afraid that was dinner. Percy nudged a smoldering Wellie. It gave off a terrific rubber stench. "I hope that's not mine."

He pulled his foamed clothes away from his skin. He picked up a sock. "I think this *is* mine. Oh dear. That's my diary."

"We're not meant to keep diaries."

Percy gathered up a few scattered charred pages. "Is this why, do you suppose?"

"No. "

"I'm going to catch a rocket for this."

"From whom?"

"Asp?" Percy suggested.

"Didn't make it."

"You're senior air officer, are you, Bryan?"

"Looks like."

"Rather unsettling."

"A little, from this angle."

The station was running on inertia, a machine that didn't know how not to run. Chiefy was alive and he was the real foundation stone of the operation anyway. Crews tended the wounded, collected the dead, patched up the field and worked to get the aeroplanes ready to fly.

Even the NAAFI tea van was open for business.

Whatever was flight-ready went up with the scramble order.

The RDF was out at four stations, tearing a "somewhat huge-ish" blind spot in the Chain Home system.

"Your Controller can't you tell who's up there with you, and *you* can't see if what's coming out of the sun is friend or foe. If you're lucky enough to see anything at all it's just a black silhouette."

They were counting on the observer corps and on patrols to cover one another while one squadron was down.

89 Squadron had been scrambled to cover a coastal station while its own planes were down refueling.

The interceptors flew into full-scale milling madness. "Tally ho."

They made for the bombers, the ones that hadn't already found their targets.

"God! God! You can't do this to me!" Bryan hadn't realized he was transmitting.

The solicitous voice of the Controller sounded calmly, "Crossbow Leader, may I be of assistance?"

"Reload my bloody guns!"

"Bad show. Do calm down, I thought you were dying."

Flying back into Kingshill, Bryan didn't even recognize it as the same place he'd flown into three weeks before.

The tower was gone. Red flags fluttered around the punctured earth. A radio from somewhere warned, "Stay left, Crossbow. UXB on the field. And mind the bomb craters."

Flares shot up a warning. Men with picks and shovels ran clear of the runway they'd just leveled to receive the returning aeroplanes.

The Controller advised any aeroplanes with fuel to go the extra stretch and land at West Mailing.

Witt stomped into debriefing, threw his gear down hard. "Teddy's gone for a Burton."

Rutger hurled his gear on top of Witt's. "He was sorry!"

"So was the Hun what got him," Witt said savagely.

Their faces were red.

"Dammit, Teddy!" Bryan breathed.

After debriefing, the pilots grabbed lunch from a tea van, which a stalwart young lady kept open near a slit trench.

Mechanics were refueling and rearming the Spitfires. They polished Perspexes, checked for structural damage, adjusted the tension on the control cables, ran up the engines. In thirty-five minutes one flight was airborne again.

In the evening, if it ever came, there would be time to get drunk with whoever was left.

This time it was Rutger Burrows who failed to return.

"Stupid clot," Witt said and stalked away. No one followed him. No one wanted to see the Harry Witt cry.

Randy surveyed the station and summed it up in two syllables, "Shee-it."

Percy nodded. "We have been well and truly thumped."

The sun was setting behind the trees. An orderly approached Bryan. "While you were up, sir, someone came in to take over for the station boss. A one-eyed Group Captain, he is."

"A one-eyed Group Captain?"

How many could there be?

Bryan was ready to collapse. He was thinking about dinner, forgot what he'd been thinking. He was too tired to think about dinner. Now there was a new station commander. He supposed he had best report before he was summoned. He dragged a comb through his hair, and was bewildered to find dirt on his scalp. That was just this morning that the bombs fell. He'd thought it was a million years ago.

A tent had been set up in place of the watch office. As Bryan walked toward it, he became aware of Asp's dog following him. Its tail would have been between its legs, had it two hind legs. Bryan stopped and looked down. The three legged dog looked up, its ears flat against its head. It put its nose in Bryan's palm.

"Fall in, S.O.B.," Bryan ordered.

Bryan arrived at the tent with the dog at his heels. He saluted Group Captain Greyson.

Greyson's one eye focused past Bryan, narrowed. "Isn't that Asp Garret's dog?"

"It was, sir."

Greyson grunted. "So who is in charge of this squadron now?"

"A lot of people are under the impression that I am," Bryan said. "At any rate I keep bellowing orders until someone tells me to belt, and no one has."

"Well then, Squadron Leader, don't release any of your men. Keep them *all* available." He must have caught a quirk in Bryan's expression at the word "all" because he thought to ask, "Exactly how many is that? All of you?"

"Seven, sir."

"How many aeroplanes serviceable?"

"I'd need to ask Chiefy. It changes by the minute. What's the score, sir?"

"We gave worse than we got to-day. The RDF is back on line. Other than that, the fight has only started."

Bryan thought he had just gone to sleep when someone was shaking him awake.

It was dark and quiet—what passed for quiet at the aerodrome. A steam-roller growled, flattening down the field. Metal clanged under hammers. Fitters in the blister tents called for assistance. Sappers were reconnecting phone lines. It was the quiet of a kicked anthill.

The man shaking Bryan was not his batman, and he hadn't brought a cup of tea.

The Ops Officer pushed a piece of paper in front of Bryan's stinging eyes, the narrow slit of a blacked-out torch beam trained on paper for him to read:

OFFICER ONLY.

MOST SECRET

From a reliable source, information has been received of an impending attack on KINGSHILL aerodrome this morning. Aircraft to be ready to leave at 0500 hours.

This message must be treated as OFFICER ONLY and should not be transmitted by telephone. Air Ministry and Admiralty are in possession of this information.

Lieut.Colonel. G.S.

M.I.14 0215 hrs, 13.8.40.

Distribution:

D.D.M.I. (I) for D.M.I.

G.H.Q. Home Forces

G.H.Q. (Adv) (I), Home Forces

M.O.3.

File.

5.00 came with the squadron at cockpit readiness. Some of the pilots had closed their canopies and watched the rain travel down the curved Perspex bubble until their breath steamed up the inside to an opaque fog. Bryan kept his canopy open, an umbrella spread over his head. He talked to the fitter crouched under his wing.

As the appointed hour passed and the rain picked up, the orders were down-graded to two minutes readiness. Someone had the bright idea this was to be Der Tag.

At 7.00 the phone rang at dispersal. They were backed off to five minutes readiness. Bryan went back to the hut.

Rain clattered softly on the rounded metal roof of the Nissen hut at 'A'

Flight dispersal. The sentry's heavy clomping step passed outside.

Bryan was calling his unit a section, to mask the fact that all that was left in 'A' Flight was Bryan, Harry Witt, and Randy. 'B' Flight consisted of Percy Lovejoy and three sergeant pilots.

The Harry Witt was quiet, lying on his iron cot, his face in his pillow.

Bryan tossed Witt's harmonica at him. "It's too quiet. Play something."

"I'm sleeping."

He wasn't. Witt snored when he slept.

The rain's tapping seemed to increase the quiet. Randy was looking through a book.

"Horrido. I hear them yelling horrido horrido horrido. What's that? I looked it up in a German-English dictionary and hell if I can find it. Does anyone know how to spell it?"

Witt spoke into his pillow. "It's German for hoo ra."

"There's a Hun over there at this moment trying to find hoo ra in his English-German dictionary," Bryan said.

Witt lifted his head to peer out the rain-streaked window at the gloom. "Lovely weather we're having to-day."

The phone rang in the signals tent. The three of them started. Randy's book hit the curved ceiling. He hadn't so much as thrown it, as the book had jumped out of his hands.

The orderly was motioning that this was not a scramble. He put the phone down, turned up his collar and ran to the Nissen hut. "Sorry, sir. That was hospital. Collie bought the farm. Padge will be back in a few days."

"Bloody hell it's an epidemic," Witt said.

With Asp gone, Bryan had the horrible feeling that it would fall to him to write the letter. He didn't know what one was meant to say to parents. He hadn't known Collie well.

Maybe he could get Greyson to write the letter. But that would be cowardly. In this one respect, Bryan was not fearless. He would rather face one hundred E/As than anybody's grieving Mum. What to say? Honesty would not wear.

Dear Mrs Lloyd, your son was a fine man, as if you need me to tell you that. I'm expected to say we shall miss him, but frankly we're all doing our best to forget him and no one has mentioned his name since he bought the farm. We don't use that other term around here much, not for each other. We fail to return, we go for Burtons, we buy our farms, but pilots do not die. Doesn't happen. I truly hate writing this letter, Mrs Lloyd. It makes me think about this too much. What happened to your son shouldn't happen to a Nazi swine. Collie's courage was extraordinary and his loss is felt keenly. . .

Hullo. I can actually use that line.

He crumpled his first attempt and threw it into the bin.

The rain tapped harder.

Randy opened the door. Let in a mild damp breeze. "D'you think anyone'll show today?"



EAGLE DAY FAILED TO DAWN. There was no sun the morning of 13 August.

Paul Ritter's winning streak had come to a soggy stall. Last week Ritter had downed two RAF bombers that were trying to hit the Germans' gathering invasion barges. He thought to have his Knight's Cross by Eagle Day. Now he might not get it at all. The Luftwaffe had claimed 200 British aircraft in two days, and the bombers had destroyed many of their airfields. The RAF could not last much longer.

Eagle Day found Ritter's score at nineteen.

The day arrived cloudy and damp. Ritter was up early and ready to claim his twentieth kill. But he arrived at the airfield and waited under a leaden grey sky. Rain pattered down. "Oh shit." He kicked a pebble, slapped a gloved hand on the doorjamb. *Verdammt. Verdammt.*

"Maybe it'll clear up," Löwe said. He went inside to see what the latest was from the weather reconnaissance.

Ritter walked out to where his airplane waited under a black tarp. He had named her *Mein Fäulein*.

Deciding to make an honest woman of her, his Staffel called her Frau Ritter. There was nothing on this earth Ritter loved more than his ME.

Someone painted on the fuselage, "*Die Frau.*" The wife.

The artwork just appeared one night. Ritter asked the Staffel painter where it had come from. The painter said it was not his doing and he would have it removed it at once *mein Herr*.

"No. Leave it," Ritter said.

He asked his Staffel later, "Why doesn't it say *Das Fäulein*?"

"You want a divorce, Ritter?"

"No. Leave it."

He patted his Frau's cold wet metal side as he would a horse's.

Fritz strolled out to stand next to him. He gazed over the airfield. "Lot of flowers this time of year."

Ritter glanced around. He hadn't noticed them, but they were everywhere, gathered bouquets and wreaths set aside under shelter along with rolled banners and champagne bottles stashed in easy reach for a celebration.

Fritz's score, like Ritter's, stood at nineteen.

"Lots of flowers," Ritter nodded toward the waiting bouquets. "Too bad there'll be none left for you, Fritz."

"Not likely, Ritter!"

Ritter turned up his collar higher, looked up at the sky, anxious as a child whose outdoor holiday looks like a wash.

Eagles' wings twitched.

Ritter fitted a cigarette into a silver holder.

He could hear engines somewhere. *Someone* was aloft.

He pointed with the cigarette holder. "There!"

"Weather reconnaissance," Fritz guessed.

"Too many."

It sounded like bombers somewhere in the thick clouds. The sound soon faded.

The loudspeaker buzzed. Crackled to life. "*Achtung*. Unit commanders to the *Gefechtsstand*."

Paul and Fritz ran to the command post at the field's edge.

Löwenstamm gathered his Staffel captains around him, and relayed the orders. "Have your squadrons stand down until 11.00. Then we'll see."

"Shit," Ritter said.

Fritz gave Ritter a shove. "Come on, Cowboy. Want me to beat you at target practice? Cards? Anything you'd like to be beaten at?"

"Just to make you happy, Fritz."

Fritz and Ritter went back to their quarters. They played skat with the other Staffel leaders.

11.00. Still raining. The sky was factory grey. Ritter thought he saw a thinning in the clouds.

He hovered near the loudspeaker, hoping for an announcement. He stepped into Ops. The staff were sick of looking at him.

The phone rang and Ritter caught in his breath. The Adjutant announced, "Delay attack until 2.00."

"*Lieber Gott*." Ritter moaned.

He took his falcon out hunting.

Someone had caught the young peregrine for him. Ritter hesitated to keep her. A bird demanded a lot of time and Ritter didn't have it. He was afraid he would mess her up.

But he wanted her.

Löwe reminded him, "You'll have lots of time when we take England."

"Yes."

He cooed at the bird, stroked her speckled breast with the back of his finger. "We can hunt English partridges, won't we, Colette?"

Otto had set up a block for Colette at the edge of the airfield under the shelter of some trees where Ritter's Messerschmitt *Die Frau* hid when not on operations. When Ritter was off duty he would carry his falcon with him on his gloved hand and talk to her. She was sadly neglected.

He took her to an open field. It was wet.

The French meadows were rife with ringdoves. There were also rabbits but Colette was only big enough to take on small birds.

The peregrine falcon was the most spectacular bird that hadn't rolled out of Augsburg.

Perched on Ritter's fist she was noble enough, with that exalted bearing of falcons. She was light brown as underbrush, her feathers darker around her face like a flying helmet. In the air, her kingdom, she dazzled, fleet and aerobatic. She was so light-boned he could've crushed in his hand, yet she was the fastest creature on Earth. She was faster in a dive than some airplanes were straight out.

Ritter launched her from his fist. Watched her flit through the air higher and higher. Suddenly she sighted prey. She hunched in her pointed wings and bunted into a steep dive like a Stuka, hurtling so fast there ought to have been sirens screaming.

She was still young and inexpert. Missed her kill. The knot of swifts scattered at her plunge and she darted several directions, not knowing which one to pursue. In her indecision, the swifts escaped all ways. She chased one over the trees and disappeared.

And didn't come back.

That was not entirely unexpected.

Ritter waited a while, called softly. He picked up her little hood, wrapped the tether up, took off his glove. The glove slapped against his thigh as he walked.

He found Otto, who tended Colette as he did Ritter's other bird. Otto looked from Ritter to Colette's empty block. Grunted. "Where is Colette?"

Ritter threw down his padded glove. "I lost her."

It was turning out to be a bitch of a day.

By afternoon some of the weather seemed to be breaking up. Patches of blue appeared in the blustery sky.

Ritter haunted communications at 2.00.

2.00 came and went. "Oh come on."

The afternoon was old.

Ritter fell back against the wall, slapped backwards.

The teleprinter clattered. The staff officer jumped. Ritter covered his eyes.

Oh *please*. Oh *please*.

"Eagle Attack is on."

The duty officer fired a red flare to clear the field.

Ritter was in his ME faster than thinking it.

Fuel selector open. Open throttle one-half. Prop on automatic. Both magnetoes on. Flaps at 20 degrees.

One Wart perched on the right wheel. Otto stood on the wing. At Ritter's signal the Wart cranked like hell. Ritter's heart always quickened with the rising whine. Then the Wart yanked out the crank. "Free!"

Ritter primed the cylinders, pulled the starter knob. The propeller's great blades jerked through a half revolution, recoiled, hammered back, then spun into a blurred disk as all the cylinders fired, exhausts jetting out smoke and blue flame.

Otto had her warmed up already. He climbed back onto the port wing, gave Ritter's straps a last tug and lowered the canopy over him.

Ritter locked it.

He loosened the screw that held the throttle in check and he took control—like holding back the reins of an eager thoroughbred.

The Warte pulled the chocks away. Ritter signaled his Staffel, released the brakes, and let her go.

She roared up to 2400 rpms for take off, lifted. Wheels retracted into their wells with a muffled thump. He climbed with his Staffel through the clouds and flew into the sun.

The German fighters were greeted by pompom guns at the English coast. The Messerschmitts were too high to think about being worried.

I./JG 23 was flying cover for a unit of Stukas. Those slower divebombers had a head start. Dirty grey puffs smudged the air around them.

"*Achtung! Jäger!*"

Through broken clouds the enemy fighters appeared. They were heading toward the Stukas.

"Hurricanes! Easy victories, boys," Ritter said.

Heard his wingman's voice. "One of them has a twenty written on it."

Then Löwe's voice sounded, commanding the *second* Staffel to take the Hurricanes.

Ritter cried, "Johann, how can you do this to me!"

"Heading Three. High. Friends of yours, I believe."

Up there, formed in neat little arrowheads, were Spitfires.

No matter how high the German fighters flew, there always seemed to be

a squadron of British fighters patrolling even higher.

"Spitfires start wheezing over 7000 meters," Löwe said. "Go up and meet them. You have time before intercept."

The second Staffel meant to pounce on the Hurricanes. If the Spitfires attacked the second Staffel, Ritter's Staffel would have the Spitfires.

"*Viktor*," Ritter acknowledged evenly, his pulse thrumming with the start of the hunt.

The Messerschmitt's own performance dropped way off this high. The kite was crawling in the rarified air, propellers finding nothing to bite. Ritter heard his own breath quick and heavy in the oxygen mask. The Daimler-Benz didn't complain. Its cylinders were force-fed. The Messerschmitts may have been crawling but not as bad as the Spitfires. Superior height was important. Position was everything.

The English fighters could go no higher.

As Ritter's Staffel closed in, the enemy's form became distinct—rounded, sleek and agile. Their topsides were colored like the dull English countryside.

Ritter drove at them on the finest line between victory and destruction.

Head-on was a test of nerves. The one to break high or low first presented the target. Or they could both crash into each other's advancing spinners.

The Spitfire's lashing disk looked suddenly huge. Ritter gave a short burst to find his angle of fire. The Spitfire neatly sideslipped off center. Startled, Ritter tried to angle over and take the shot, skidding. His bullets looked to be turning. The two fighters roared past each other's port sides.

Ritter broke into a sweat. Suddenly, it had become a turning contest. The Spitfire was more agile at any height.

The Spitfire banked hard for another pass. Ritter made a low speed tight turn on his wing. Leading edge slots banged open a half g from a stall. He was flying on the extreme edge. The colors went away. His breath became ragged, laboring in his mask trying to draw in oxygen.

Then the Spitfire overstepped its bounds. It overestimated its own ability to accelerate up here, stalled out of one of its infamous tight turns, suddenly flicked onto its back and spun. Ritter pushed down after it.

The Spitfire was leveling out as Ritter centered his crosshairs on it. Twice as close, it looked four times as big. At 150 meters Ritter fired. The Messerschmitt shuddered from all guns. The motorkanone drummed within his own heart. Tracers like colored strings tied the two fighters together for a moment.

Beautiful rounded wings folded up.

A gasp of sudden release.

"*Abschuss*."

On the homeward voyage across the water, Ritter saw yellow spots on the waves, and the long white streaks of speeding E boats on their way to pick up the life-jacketed men.

Ritter made his return drumming over the field, the ground so close he thought he was cutting the weeds. Any lower he would hear the horrid thudding of propeller blades grazing the dirt. But he got away clean.

An ovation rose from the ground. Ritter couldn't hear it but he could see it, men waving and shouting. *Hussassassaaa!*

After he touched down and rolled to a stop, Otto opened his canopy. Bellowing cheers reached his numb eardrums. His men mobbed him. Flowers spilled into his cockpit. A glass of sparkling bubbles materialized in his hand. More of it showered on his head. He climbed out of the cockpit. Stood on the wing. He saluted everyone, threw back his drink, and crushed the glass in his gloved hand.

Fritz followed him in.

Fritz made two victory passes over the field.

Figured.

"How was it?" Löwe asked Ritter.

Ritter thought a moment. "It was quick."

"When you get a Spitfire it will always be quick. You don't hold long conversations with a Spitfire. Get long-winded and they win the argument."

Ritter nodded. *I was almost Cinderella up there. Too long at the ball.*

The table in their chateau was laden with cheery flowers. As Ritter made his entrance, attention turned away from Fritz, who had been holding court. Glasses lifted to Paul Ritter. He brought his heels together sharply, and inclined his head in a stiff bow.

Telegrams had been piling in. From the stack of them, one was kept apart.

To Herr Hauptmann Paul Ritter, 1./JG 23

Pas de Calais

13. August 1940 In grateful appreciation of your heroic action in combat, in the name of the German people, I transmit to you on your 20th victory as the seventh soldier of the German Wehrmacht, the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross. Adolf Hitler

Darkness had fallen. The airfield still rang with the shouts and clanging metal as the Warte repaired the day's battle-damage. Ritter walked to the field's edge where his Messerschmitt hid under the trees for the night and his

falcon's post stood deserted.

Ritter stooped to gather up Colette's toys. Despite the day's victory, there was the inevitable hollow sadness in picking up after a pet that is gone. Or maybe this was the downside of a tremendous high.

A flapping of wings sounded above him with a jingle of belled jesses. A ruffled silhouette stretched out its talons and alighted on the top blade of the ME 109's propeller.

"Well!"

Colette cocked her head sideways. She hunched her shoulders as if wanting to come down.

"Why you fickle French tart, why should I take you back?"

Colette pulled at her ruffled feathers. Ritter could see even in the dark that she was not so smooth as when she'd deserted him.

He pulled on the padded glove and held out his fist. Colette fluttered down. The strong grip of her toes closed around his hand.

She was shabby, some of the darker brown feathers gone from her flying hood. Down feathers poked out like stuffing from a child's battered toy.

She was young, and young hawks often chased bigger birds. The bigger ones were easier to intercept. There was trouble once the interception was made and the little falcon had its talons full of large, wounded, flapping panic.

A falcon's flying skills improved with age and then it could catch the nimble little swifts.

"You went after a Wimpy because you couldn't catch a Spitfire, didn't you?" He petted her ruffled chest with the back of his forefinger. "Are you hungry? Let's go see Otto."

The day that was meant to be Eagle Day dawned loathsome.

After one sortie the fighter units stood down. They needed to make ready for the arrival of an important visitor.

His train was code named "*Asia*."

Paul Ritter and Fritz von Soden were driven out to the train station to collect their medals. The officers of their Geschwadern followed them out and assembled at the station in parade order.

The pilot train showed first, drawing the troop cars and a light Flak wagon. Then came the Reichsmarschall's train, pulled by a big black-and-red 05 engine like the Führer's. Göring had baggage cars, an operations car equipped with a map room, a club car, a cinema, his own sleeping coach with bedrooms for himself and his wife, and another Flak wagon on the end.

The Reichsmarschall's entourage brought out Göring's personal standards, which marched ahead of him wherever he went like Caesar's Eagles. They were the Standard of the Reichsmarschall of the Greater German Reich, and the Command Flag of the Supreme Commander of the Luftwaffe. They were posted heraldically for Göring's arrival.

A small table was set out with a snow-white cloth. On that, two red

velvet-lined boxes were laid open. Inside each was a black cross on a red, black, and white ribbon.

Fritz, standing at attention, hissed between his teeth to Ritter. "Look. Look."

Ritter returned a clenched whisper, "I see 'em. I see 'em."

The first two Ritterkreuze awarded to pilots of the Luftwaffe had been bestowed by the Führer himself. After that, awards were conferred by unit commanders.

Because there were two of them in one Gruppe today, the Reichsmarschall would do the honors.

With that, Fritz seemed to forgive Ritter the shared thunder. Fritz wanted his Knight's Cross from the Reichsmarschall *at least*, not from some lesser being.

A door in one of the silver-topped first-class passenger cars opened outward and a figure in white appeared. Descended the steps. Advanced between the standards.

Ritter remembered how shocked he'd been when he'd first laid eyes on Hermann Göring. He remembered thinking: Surely this could not be the same man who was one of the first fighter pilots back in the last war.

Here, now, Fritz muttered beside Ritter, "No wonder the old Fokkers needed three planes to stay up."

The first picture Ritter had seen of Hermann Göring was an old one from the Great War. It was a picture of a hard slender man with bright flinty eyes and a firm jaw.

The eyes were still hard as shiny bright stones. The jaw was altogether lost.

The Reichsmarschall was wearing white today, which made the expanse of him seem all the vaster. The great stretch of white encompassed him like a bellied sail. He wore white jodhpurs and shiny black boots. None of the Messerschmitt pilots were big men. The fighter cockpit was restrictive. The pilots' lack of size only increased the Reichsmarschall's vastness.

Food was a national passion. Göring had an aggressive lusty hugeness. He wasn't soft. There was enormous energy in him. His enthusiasm, humor, earthiness were childlike. He lived out a common man's fantasy, the luxurious life of a first Reich prince. He was vulgar. He had the exuberance of an airman, if not the figure. He was called the Iron Man. Small eyes in their soft bed of flesh could be merry or cruel.

At the bottom of the steps he glanced up at the drizzling sky. One of his lackeys hastened out with a cape for him.

Göring carried a carved baton, and wore a sword at his belt. He was the only officer Ritter ever saw use the chin strap of the service cap. Everyone else wore their straps flush over the cap's beak.

There was a spread of medals on Göring's left breast that only his girth

could accommodate. On his right pocket was the Blood Order, awarded for his early loyalty to the Führer.

Paul Ritter and Fritz von Soden were called forward.

Up close, the Reichsmarschall's face was fair and pink like a pudgy baby's.

Three medals hung around Goring's own neck, the Blue Max, the Knight's Cross, and the Great Cross, which looked like a Knight's Cross that had put on a great deal of weight.

Fritz received his medal and raised a smart Nazi salute with an enthusiastic *Heil!* The Fat One seemed pleased.

His smile became less warm as he came to Ritter. He didn't like something in Paul Ritter's opaque eyes. Or the opacity itself.

Ritter received the decoration without expression. He gave a military salute.

He 'd heard of the Iron Man's mercurial nature, and somewhere in the ceremony the mood shifted. Merry gleam in the pale eyes became a hard glint.

At the end of it, words passed between Reichsmarschall Göring and Oberst Löwenstamm standing at attention with the assembled pilots of his Jagdgeschwader.

And when the Reichsmarschall strode away, it was at a stalk.

He was sweeping past the two award recipients, when he suddenly stopped. The head of his elaborate baton tapped Ritter's chest. "You won this at the expense of the bombers. You are up there to protect the bombers. The bomber is the key." He gave Ritter's Knight's Cross a flip. "This is just for show. You're all cowards. You fucked up the Eagle Attack."

The Reichsmarschall marched back into his rail car. The mobile headquarters pulled back southward to the shelter of a tunnel near Le Coudray.

Löwenstamm dismissed the ranks. The men boarded transports that would take them back to JG 23's airfields.

When Ritter thought he was alone he unfastened the black, red and white ribbon, and pitched his Knight's Cross into the mud.

Löwe jogged up beside him, scooped the Ritterkreuz up from the ground. "What did he say to you?"

"Nothing worth repeating, *mein Herr.*"

"I brassed him off," Löwe said, cleaning off Ritter's cross. "Whatever he said, he should've said it to me."

It was the first Ritter knew for sure that Eagle Day hadn't been a success. Despite the celebration of victories, the beginning of the Eagle Attack had in fact gone wrong.

"What did he mean we fucked up Eagle Attack?"

The corners of Löwe's mouth pulled up wryly. "The bomber did not, as they say, get through. Remember how bad the weather was? We were grounded half the day. The bomber squadrons didn't receive the abort order. They went over without fighter escort and got pretty well chewed up. And

the Stukas are *not* surviving well by themselves. The Fat One insists that Stukas were a great success in Spain. "Where they were properly covered."

"There were *three* Stukas in Spain," Ritter said flatly. "Of course they were covered. What does he want us to do?"

"He'll let us know, I'm afraid." Löwe looked up. "The weather mavens say tomorrow will be like today. The Fat One is having a conference to discuss new tactics. In Berlin."

"Good riddance."

"Shut it, Ritter." Löwe had Paul Ritter's Knight's Cross mostly cleaned off. Löwe placed it back around Ritter's neck. Clasped it. "Never mind what you think of him, this is for your Spitfire. Well done."

Ritter touched the sharp corners of the iron cross. He left it on this time.



BRITISH INTERCEPTORS FLEW constant rotations. German bombers pounded the forward airfields at Hawkinge, Manston, and Lympne. Those stations' fighters had to put down at Kingshill to re-arm and refuel while the bomb craters were filled in at their home fields.

Then the Hun bombers found Kingshill.

Lying in the grass, Bryan Catrell had dozed off. He cracked an eyelid. Saw specks of black in the grey summer sky.

He jerked. Sat up, sides heaving.

Birds. The specks were just birds.

Bryan fell back. Rubbed his eyes.

A phone rang.

Bryan twitched, kicked. Everyone did.

Percy spilled his tea.

Randy ran behind the dispersal hut to be sick.

"Not on my bicycle, mind you," Bryan called after him.

It wasn't a scramble. The Ops Officer summoned Bryan to take the telephone.

Bryan received his orders and returned to his meager squadron. "We're upping sticks. Fighter Command is rotating us out to 12 Group."

Randy sank into the grass and fell asleep on the spot. Harry Witt turned white as if told he were being court martialed for cowardice. He bellowed,

waving his long arms. "No! No!" He paced, spun around. "I'm not going! There's nothing wrong with us! They think we can't fight—"

"That's not it at all," Bryan tried to edge in, but Witt was roaring.

"I can fight! I don't know about you, Cat, but I've got a lot of fight left in me—"

"Collect your kit, Mister Witt."

"No!"

"You fancy a court martial?"

"What is this, Cat? Dr. Jekyll, Squadron Leader Hyde? *Acting* Squadron Leader Hyde."

"What squadron, Harry? We are seven. And two of us will need to join the train north at that, because we haven't Spits serviceable to fly all—" His voice broke and withered. "All seven of us. Since you're not keen on flying north, I'll arrange a place on the train for you. You can be on it or not, as you like. Someone else can take your Spit."

When it was time to go, a sullen Harry Witt took his Spitfire up, and the flight sergeants joined the train.

A dreary morning gave way to scattered clouds riding on the lightest breeze. 89 Squadron, in their safe inland haven, received a surprise telephone call.

"X-Raid approaching from the north. Can you scramble a squadron?"

"A piece of one," Bryan said.

The Tannoys blared, "Squadron stand-by!"

Startled men ran to their kites. "What's the flap?" Percy yelled.

"It won't be 109s, that's all I know," Bryan shouted.

This airfield was outside of ME 109 range.

Bombers. The enemy had to be unescorted bombers. "Should be good shooting."

The Spitfires of 89 Squadron intercepted ME 110s. It looked like the German fighter-bombers came in expecting to have the sky all to themselves.

Bryan positioned himself directly behind one ME 110. He received no blast of defensive fire in his face. And he was shocked to see the reason for it.

There was no rear gunner on board.

He could not for the life of him figure out why the Hun gunner had been left behind. And he was sure the Hun pilot was wondering the same right now, with more desperation.

The 110s were definitely not expecting Spitfires. What were they thinking?

They think we're all in the south!

Randy's voice sounded on the R/T: "Is it my birthday?"

"Hullo?"

Randy was laughing. "This Hun don't have no gunner."

"Shut your mouth and open your birthday present!"

“Hoo ra!”

Bryan’s guns clipped an 110 as it tried to tuck up into a cloud. It spilled its bombload into a forest.

Bryan circled around behind the crippled enemy. The 110 lowered its gear, and Bryan broke off his attack to allow it to land.

Members of the Home Guard, carrying pitchforks, turned out on the field in rough welcome.

When Bryan returned to base to refuel, he could see color in those pasty twitching faces of his men who had pulled back from Kingshill only yesterday.

Harry Witt was singing, his arm slung around Randy’s shoulders.

Piece of cake. Just what the doctor ordered.

But it wasn’t the end of the unexpected attacks.

Maud Gaunson pedaled her bicycle down the perimeter track of the MU at Brize Norton. She swerved onto the grass to make way for some erks pushing about a Spitfire.

There was a hangar full of Hurri’s waiting to receive guns. She had just ferried in another one.

The MU was well inland. It was a quiet place to build aircraft and to make repairs. Maud felt ridiculous toting a tin hat around with her. She carried a gas mask case over her shoulder, but there was no gas mask inside. She used the case as a handbag.

She could hear a barking chorus of Merlin engines somewhere being run up. She guessed the Spitfires would be ready to take off for a test flight as soon as these Blenheims cleared the pattern.

The roaring Merlins shut off one at a time.

In the relative quiet, the droning of the bombers became clearer. A half-conscious thought strayed through her mind. *Those Blenheims need to synchronize those engines. They sound like ruddy Germans.*

She glanced up at the Blenheims. Double-took. She stopped her bicycle and shaded her eyes at the circling bombers, their landing gear down in friendly approach. Those Blenheims didn’t *look* quite right either.

They were German.

They were JU 88s. And their bomb bays were opening.

Maud opened her mouth to shout something, thoughts crashing one on another, so many at once, she didn’t know what to shout, while she looked around for the bell. Mouth open, nothing coming out and suddenly there was the air raid siren.

And the first bombs were dropping.

Mechanics burst from the hangars, pelting for the slit trenches.

Maud pedaled toward the nearest trench, then suddenly turned without thought toward a Spitfire. It sat on the field, abandoned. She jumped off the bicycle. Let it fall. She climbed onto the Spitfire’s wing and dropped into the

cockpit. The hard metal bucket was deep without a parachute under her. She raised the seat. Undercarriage light was green. Flaps up. Fuel cock levers on. Throttle half-inch open. Mixture rich. Prop lever fully forward. Radiator shutter open. She pulled the ring to load the cartridge starter, carefully released it. Primed the Ki gas pump. Fired the cartridge starter.

Blue jets from the ports. Propeller spun with a growing roar.

She was screwing down the ki pump. A blast, very near, moved the Spitfire on its wheels.

No chocks. There hadn't been time.

Good. She was moving.

She couldn't see where she was going. She zig-zagged onto the field, leaning out one side of the cockpit then the other, squinting without goggles into the furious gale.

She realized as she taxied that this was probably the worst choice of any that she could have made.

Too late. She was committed. She pointed the Spit into the wind. Increased the revs, leaned one last time out the side to see where the bomb craters had formed. A bomb struck close. Rain of debris and mud clods thudded on her tin hat, clattered into the cockpit.

She released the brake and the Spitfire sprang. She hurtled down the field, heart galloping in her throat. If a crater appeared in her path now she would be folded up in twisted metal in an instant. It would be fast. She held the throttle at the gate.

She saw a packet of bombs dropping out of the heavens ahead of her. She braced for impact.

A loud boom slapped at her eardrums. Smoothness underneath her startled her. She was airborne.

Her kite bobbed *up* on a blast wave.

Grit snarled, hitting the propeller.

Then the Merlin returned to a clear song.

Maud pushed the selector lever. Felt the double thump below. Undercart up.

The wind picked up the edges of her tin hat, yanking at the chin strap. She took the helmet off. Jammed it down beside her seat.

The aeroplane dropped into an air pocket. It shuddered in a reverberating blast. Rode the blast bubble back *up*.

She drew into a banking turn just in time to see a direct hit on the hangar full of Hurricanes. The hangar went up in a horrible inferno.

Scared, like never in her life, she did something ferry pilots were never meant to do. She pushed the emergency boost cut-out. She wasn't meant to touch it. It was for combat only.

Get me out of here. She felt it kick. The Spitfire bolted, speeding her out of the swarm of JU 88s.

In a minute she reduced throttle. Heart wobbling. She spent some moments

just breathing and flying.

ATA pilots were required to fly below 5000 feet and in sight of the ground. In her fear she had headed upstairs. Bother the requirements. If she ever came down from this escapade, someone would be waiting on the ground to give her the chop.

She swallowed down the sour aftertaste of panic, over and over.

It was getting cold. She reached up with shaking hands and closed the canopy over her. Now she was snug in the small space.

She couldn't catch her breath. In a moment she thought there might be another reason for that. She had no oxygen mask. She looked at her altimeter. *A little high.* 15,000 feet. And a little far. The Spitfire had carried her for miles.

Time to calm down, ease down, and find a base to set down.

She had no R/T connection to ask for help. The fields were camouflaged. She had no maps.

She needed to find some place she knew. First, where was she now? She needed to find a landmark. *Find the coast.*

She looked ahead. Thought the black dots were birds. Realized in horror: not birds.

She turned so hard she nearly blacked herself out. The machine was so sweet in straight flight, it was easy to forget its enormous power.

She'd flown straight into battle near the Channel.

A spinner on a yellow nose appeared in her rearview mirror. She hauled left. Smacked her head on the Perspex. She straightened out, too dazed to do anything about the tracers crossing her bow. An ME arrowed in from the quarter. She yanked her feet off the pedals, threw her hands over her face, shaking. *I am going to die.*

Even if the bullets didn't hit her, the ground was far below her in this parachute-less bucket. She sobbed.

The Messerschmitt thundered underneath. Black smoke of emergency rich exhaust swirled, stinking, around her Perspex.

Engine sounds rose loud enough for her to hear over her own Merlin. She moved her hands from her face.

The Hun was right here.

She was catching turbulence off the edge of his squared wing. She gripped the stick and replaced her feet on the pedals to catch the rudder.

Another Messerschmitt held steady off her right wing, close enough to be part of an airshow vic with her. It looked enormous in its menace. Soot from its low-set exhausts swept in its slipstream over the wing root blackening its mottled green colour. It was a dirty, much-used aeroplane. Cannon jutted from its wing. It was all squared lines, its nose, its canopy, its wingtip, its evil black crosses. A red heart was painted on its cowling and black script on the cockpit read: *Die Frau.*

She was about to peel away from it, but there was another ME on the other side.

She looked again at the starboard ME. The pilot had slid open a side window in his boxy canopy and was squinting at her.

She screamed at him, as if he could possibly hear her or read her lips. "Leave me alone! Leave me alone, you bloody Nazi!"

Suddenly both Huns were belly up and peeling off either side and she was alone in the sky.

A single Spitfire without markings made its approach at an inland aerodrome. The aircraft failed to respond on R/T channels and echoed no I.F.F., so the Controller had identified it as a hostile. The Spitfire did not flash the letter of the day, and shot no flares of any colour. It was, however, Morsing from both signal lamps:

S-O-S.

The inland aerodrome was not quite so trigger-happy as to shoot at a Spitfire. They allowed the mystery craft to land.

Regimental guards met it at the end of the field.

"Blimey, it's a bird."

Maud stepped down shakily. "Have any of you a cigarette?"

Helmets and hats whisked off. A forest of cigarettes appeared. She took one, tried to keep it still to be lit. She coughed.

"Look at 'er kite!" an erk cried.

Maud turned, saw the bullet holes in the fuselage. "Oh. Dear."

"Maudie!"

She turned. Lifted her arm and waved. "Hullo, Bryan."

Bryan shouldered through the men, caught her up. Her arms fell around his neck and he set her on her feet.

She looked calm, but he felt her vibrating.

"Maud, what happened?"

"The MU was hit. I wanted to save the kite. I—took a couple of wrong turns."

Maud had to tell her tale for the Intelligence Officer.

"What made you fly into Messerschmitt range?" he asked. "That was foolish."

She thought a moment. "Must have been all those years of combat training I had." She flicked ashes from her cigarette.

The IO blinked vacantly behind his glasses.

"It was a stupid thing to do," Maud said. "I was looking for a landmark. I didn't have a map. I found this field. Your camouflage is dreadful."

"Tell me about the Huns."

She reported exactly what she'd seen. She noted that the ME 109s she'd met near the coast were not flying up top. They were flying on level with their bombers, ahead of them and beside them.

The IO asked her to repeat that, convinced that she was confused, but she was certain of what she'd seen.

"The fighters and the bombers were absolutely together."

Maud wasn't the only one to report the new Hun deployment. It was an unbelievably poor decision on the Hun's part to make the fighters give up their height and speed advantage and slog alongside the bombers.

"When *we* were in it, the MEs were always upstairs," Percy Lovejoy said.

"Not this time," Maud said.

"Sporting of them, I think," Percy Lovejoy said.

"But why would they do a stupid thing like that?"

"I for one never said the Germans were smart," Randy said.

"They're smart," Bryan said. "But fortunately there is at least one idiot in a command position over there."

Some of the pilots of 89 Squadron were travelling into London that evening. They gave Maud a lift into town.

She asked the boys why they were never lacking for petrol. Everyone else was subject to rationing.

The pilots exchanged glances. Bryan answered her. "If a Spitfire lives long enough to see inspection, the tanks need to be drained. That petrol is officially 'contaminated.' Air Ministry orders. It must be filtered and re-used, but Chiefy is not terribly concerned if some of that stuff, well, evaporates."

"Is that legal?"

"Not precisely."

"How did we make it through the gate?"

As the pilots were exiting the aerodrome, a brown job at the gate had stopped the motorcar and stuck a plastic tube down into the tank, expecting to catch the glamour boys at something.

To be caught with green fuel would have had them all on the mat. But the automobile's fuel passed visual scrutiny. It was the proper colour even though it smelled not altogether right.

"A teaspoon or so of bright red hydrolic fluid turns bright green aviation fuel a marvelous nondescript brown," Harry Witt said.

"I hope you're this clever up there." Maud pointed at the dark sky.

"We're marvelous up there, ducks."

They arrived at a London pub, the kind of establishment that wouldn't sling them out at twelve o'clock.

They could hear AA pounding somewhere. Searchlights raked the black sky. "Lot of ruddy noise. What do they do? Just chuck a few pounds into the air and expect to hit something?"

"It makes the bombers fly higher."

"Jerry's not going to bomb London," Percy said. He may be stupid, but he's not stupid."

Bryan looked at Percy sideways. "What did you say?"

"You heard me."

Inside the pub, Squadron Leader Bryan Catrell D.F.C. stood a prodigious round of drinks. "Gin, Percy?"

"Get that away from me."

Maud noticed Bryan's scraper ring. She hadn't been paying attention to what he was wearing before now. She tugged on his sleeve. "Congratulations."

Then she noticed the silver and mauve ribbon over his left pocket. "Have we been heroic?"

Harry Witt answered for Bryan. "Catrell goes stooging about in a Spitfire at government expense, takes a few lucky shots, and HM shows up to put a medal on his tunic. Same with Sir Percival. How much sense does that make, I ask you."

"It's mysterious," Maud said.

More men made a noisy entrance into the pub. Bryan jumped to his feet. "Macy!"

A small dapper turkeycock of a Squadron Leader glanced around. Found Bryan.

"Bryan Catrell!"

They embraced hard.

Macy was as wiry as ever, his muscles hard as aircraft cables. His pencil thin mustache spread with his smile.

"Bryan Catrell. Almighty. So you *did* get out of Poland before the balloon went up."

"No."

"*No?* What'd you do? The Polish Air Force was destroyed on the ground the first day."

Bryan clamped his mouth tight shut. Shook his head.

Macy blinked surprise. "Get in any early shooting?"

"A little."

Macy threw back his head and howled. "Wish it was me!"

Then something caught Macy's attention. Something behind Bryan.

He'd sighted Maud.

"Yours?" Macy asked. "Or is that bit of goods fair game?"

"I'll shoot you where you stand."

"I see."

Maud recounted her war story for the pilots of Bryan's original squadron.

"It was *upsetting*," Maud said. "There was one Hun here and one here, and painted on the side of the first one were the words, 'Die Frau,' as if he was up there just to kill a girl ferry pilot."

"That's dee," Harry Witt said. "Dee Frau."

"It said d-i-e," Maud said. "DOG ITEM EASY. Die."

"*Die* is pronounced *dee*. It's German for *the*. It's not telling anyone to drop dead. He's named his aeroplane The Woman. The *married* woman. The Kraut loves his kite."

Macy's brow furrowed. Something twigged. "And did it have a heart on its prow?"

Maud's eyes flew wide. "Yes! As a matter of fact it did. A red heart."

"I can put a name on your Hun." Macy jutted up a forefinger to command a moment's patience, and he went outside. He returned with an issue of *Der Adler*, taken from a downed HE 111. He flattened the paper in front of Maud and pointed, "There. There's your Hun."

The photograph was of an imperious young officer standing by his Messerschmitt 109. He was polished and rather inhuman. He had a peregrine falcon perched on his gloved fist, and he was wearing the Nazi's big award, the Knight's Cross, at his throat.

The script painted on the ME's cockpit behind him read: *Die Frau*. The heart may have been red. The photo was black and white.

"That's the aeroplane!" Maud cried. "The man? I don't know. I didn't get a good look. I was crying, if you must know."

Percy, Randy, and Harry Witt clustered to look over Maud's shoulders.

"Good looking sod," Percy said.

"I don't think so," Randy said.

"Bet he buggers sheep."

"Witt!" Macy scolded.

Harry Witt, quickly: "Beg your pardon, Maudie. I think of you as one of us."

"I suppose I shall have to take that as a compliment," Maud said.

Randy was still frowning at the picture. "He's not right. There's something wrong with this man. Look at his eyes."

Maud studied the incomprehensible words of the caption and pulled out a name from the ornate Fraktur print. "Hauptmann Paul Ritter."

Bryan spilled his pint. "Who?"

"If you're going to wear that, Catrell, I'm going to cut off your tap," Macy said.

Bryan reached for the newspaper. "Let me see that."

"Hauptmann seems to be a common German name," Maud said.

"That's a rank," Witt said. "Hauptmann. And Ritter means *knight*. But here I think it's his name."

Maud passed the paper to Witt. "Here. Since I have such a smashing command of German."

Witt passed the paper to Bryan. "Know him?"

Dark eyes gazed back at Bryan from the photo. In the photograph the eyes looked perfectly black with an impenetrable expression and the same attitude as the hawk.

It was Ritter. With a Messerschmitt 109.

"That's Paul," Bryan said.

Lots of voices: "Paul?"

"Paul?" Macy cried, eyes bulging.

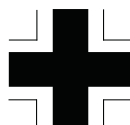
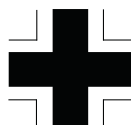
Percy: "You know him, Cat?"

Bryan was about to say, no, not really. Heard himself saying instead, "Yes. I do."

He flies.

That said everything.

So do I.



COULD HAVE HAD AN EASY ONE. Paul Ritter was relieved that he'd hesitated on the trigger. The Spitfire looked like it had just rolled out of the factory. Evidently it had.

"That was a ferry pilot," Ritter told his Kerls. "The Spitfire was unarmed."

"How did you know it was a ferry pilot, *Herr Hauptman*?" Winter asked.

"Because she was too pretty to be a fighter."

His wingman said nothing. Ritter knew his wingman would've shot her anyway. As it was now, there was one more Spitfire they would see again. Armed next time.

All the fighters were frustrated. Hermann Göring had decided that the Stukas needed three fighters—*each*—to escort them, all flying at the same altitude, which effectively pulled the ME's teeth. The ME 109 was an offensive weapon. The short-range MEs burned their fuel weaving around the Stukas, just to fly slow enough to stay with them.

In between escort missions, Ritter took his Staffel up on free hunts for his ME 109s to do what an ME 109 did best. Attack.

They returned from another barren sweep. They'd met nothing over the English skies except the gray blots of Ack Ack from the 'dromes.

On returning to the airfield at the Pas de Calais, Ritter climbed off his ME's wing. Heat radiated off the metal. Otto slapped a dusty canvas over it.

Sweaty shirtless Warte with heavy gloves wielded the ammo belts to reload the cannon.

Ritter ducked into the shade of Operations. The wilted officer asked, "Anything?"

Soaking wet under his clothes, overheated, Ritter put down his helmet, disgusted. "Balloons," he said. "The fighters wouldn't come out to play. We shot fucking barrage balloons."

Over a thousand of the big gas bags floated from tethers over different locations in England, mostly over London. They were meant to deter bombers from making a low pass through the forest of cables that held the balloons in place.

The barrage balloons presented broad targets but holes had to be shot in the top in order to do any good. Then the bags withered — slowly — down on their operators. With incendiary rounds they went up nicely, first as a black smoke cloud, then as a dark red fireball that became bigger and bigger with the escaping burning gas. Then the bag puckered, collapsed together, shriveled and expired.

Ritter considered it a ridiculous and vulgar target.

Sometimes he buzzed low on approach to the white cliffs and took a squirt at Manston on the homeward voyage as a farewell to England rather than bring all his ammunition home.

Fritz's Staffel reported in after Ritter's, and received the same question.

"Meet anyone?"

"*Kein schwanz.*"

"There's no one left," Fritz said.

"Oh, they're *there*," Ritter said.

The Luftwaffe had lost more bombers on Black Thursday than anyone was saying — Stukas, Dorniers, JU 88s, and a shitload of ME 110s.

"They're playing hard to get. They stay out of range. If you're not a bomber, they're not interested. Send the *Seelöwe* over if you want to see how many aircraft the English actually have left."

"It can't be that many," Fritz said. "I don't know why we *don't* launch the *Seelöwe*. In the last week, from August 11 to August 18, the Luftwaffe destroyed 732 English aircraft."

Paul Ritter blinked. "Isn't that the entire RAF?"

"Has to be close."

"Then who is shooting down our bombers?"

The shakeup came on 21 August. The Stukas had suffered a massacre. The blame was not laid on the Stukas. It was the fighters' fault.

Reichsmarschall Göring reordered his commanders.

More aggressiveness was needed in the command positions. *Aggressiveness* translated as *youth*. He decreed that no man over the age of twenty-seven should hold command of a Staffel, no man over age thirty for a Gruppe, and no man over age thirty-two for a Geschwader.

In JG 23, that meant the current Geschwaderkommodore, an old eagle,

was ousted, and Johann Löwenstamm was kicked up to the top position.

A celebration was thrown for Löwe.

Fritz von Soden offered the new Geschwaderkommodore his heartiest congratulations, his eyes shining, his smile sincere. Fritz couldn't be happier with Löwe's promotion. It left a vacancy at the top of I. Gruppe.

Ritter knew that Löwe wasn't entirely happy with his promotion. As Ritter grasped Johann Löwenstamm's hand in congratulations, Ritter hissed through his frozen smile, "Better you than me."

Löwe hissed back with a grimace, "Not so fast."

Ritter felt all the blood deserting his face.

"What?" Ritter said.

Löwe's stare was fixed and cold.

"Johann. You wouldn't."

"I./JG 23 needs a Gruppenkommandeur —"

"No," Ritter said.

"What do you mean *no*?"

"I'm a pilot, not an administrative paper pusher."

"So am I," Löwe said. "And I don't like to suffer alone."

Ritter was already responsible for 130 men, only ten of whom were pilots. The rest were mechanics, armorers, painters, clerks and security personnel, cooks and bottle-washers. That was all the overhead Ritter wanted to handle. In a Gruppe there were closer to 600 people — three Staffeln plus a headquarters flight and staff, communications and weather personnel.

For a Geschwader, with three Gruppen, the responsibility was nearly 2000 men.

"Please don't do this to me, Johann."

"I said something just like that to the Reichsmarschall."

"Why is the Fat One doing this to us? Over seven hundred English planes downed in a week and we're not aggressive enough? Something doesn't add up here."

"Done is done. And I need a commander for my Gruppe. It doesn't look good for you with a Ritterkreuz around your neck to command nothing bigger than a Staffel and truth is we've been holding you back for your own protection."

Ritter blinked. "Who is we?"

Löwe paused. "Me and Halle. 'Son of a bitch, *mein Herr*' does not go over splendidly when talking to superiors. And for God's sake, if you meet any of the Nazi party it doesn't wear at all. I know you don't care much for gongs and ribbons, but *they* take their decorations seriously —"

"How can they? There are more bangles and *Quatsch* on their chests than on my Tannenbaum and we won't even mention Hermann."

"Let's not mention any of them. You do know how to keep your mouth shut. Trouble is that the contempt pours out your ears, or maybe it's those

eyes. Anyway Ritter, if I don't promote you, someone else will and call me jealous for not doing it sooner. And you can lead. Where you go, men follow. I've seen them quiet down to hear your every whisper. You lead well. You just don't follow worth a shit."

"Give the command to someone with political ambition. Fritz! There's Fritz. Fritz has a Knight's Cross. Give it to Fritz."

"There is Fritz," Löwe conceded.

Fritz von Soden was in JG 56, still a Staffelkapitän. Fritz hadn't advanced while Ritter was prisoner in France.

"I thought I'd offer the command to you first," Löwe said.

Ritter never knew command as something to be offered. He supposed that was because it was never turned down. "I don't want it. All I want to do is fly and fight."

When Ritter returned to the party, Fritz was waiting for him, smiling. Fritz cleared his throat and asked amiably, "What was that about, Ritter? What did he just do?"

"Nothing. We were talking."

And when the new Gruppenkommandeur for I./JG 23 was named, it was Fritz von Soden.

Fritz consoled Paul on being passed over for the promotion. "You have to be politic sometimes, Ritter. You haven't learned that."

Ritter smiled, merrily drunk. "Oh, but I have."

For the first time, Ritter was caught at an altitude below the enemy fighters and glad he was there.

Ritter looked twice. There had to be a mistake in the identification, but there wasn't.

Someone else's voice on the R/T: "*Achtung*. Defiants!"

"At them!" Ritter cried.

His Messerschmitts came up under the vulnerable bellies of the misconceived enemy fighters.

"*Abschuss!*"

"*Abschuss!*"

Who sent these men up in these flying coffins? Ritter didn't shout *horrido*. What he murmured as he removed the safety and pressed his thumb to the trigger was, "I am sorry."

The Defiant plummeted in flames.

He passed the next one and gave it to his Rottenkamerad, like something on a tether for his tame falcon. Let the fledglings try their guns. He felt terrible about this. A training flight with real targets.

Maybe the English were beaten after all. Had to be. They were dusting off their Defiants and sending them up for slaughter. The end must be near.

Ritter was asleep. He rose to consciousness slowly, became aware of the soft tapping on his door. He didn't know how long it had been sounding. It was not an alarm, but there was a sense of alarm in it, in the persistence, in the hour. Ritter lifted himself onto his elbows. "Yes?"

The door cracked, a shaft of dim light fell in from the corridor. His orderly spoke low so not to disturb anyone else in the building. His voice trembled. "Forgive me, *mein Herr*. I thought you'd want to know before morning. They're bombing Berlin."

Confusion. Still half asleep. "Who is bombing Berlin?"

"The English."

Ritter absorbed the news, became rigid. Vibrated in outrage. He remembered at last to dismiss the orderly. The door shut soundlessly. Blackness returned. Ritter blinked into the dark.

Berlin.

The ground felt unsteady, like something had been kicked out from under him. He was surprised how hard it hit him, or that it hit him at all. There was very little Ritter held sacred.

Berlin.

He lay back in anger, forcing himself to rest to be ready for morning operations.

They have written the end.



35



We must prepare for heavier fighting in the month of September. The need of the enemy to obtain a decision is very great.

– Winston Churchill

89 SQUADRON ROTATED BACK to Kingshill sooner than Bryan expected. The men weren't rested. But there simply wasn't anyone rested at this point.

The squadron had never been at full wartime strength. Now, with eighteen pilots, they were more than half strangers, a cabbage-looking crop from the VR with barely enough hours to call themselves pilots, much less fighters.

As the squadron flew into Kingshill, the Controller's voice greeted them. "Welcome home. Do mind the UXBs."

The Spitfires touched down around the flags.

Bryan was surprised that Group Captain Greyson was still active, still flying. The one-eyed over-age officer had taken up a Spitfire and shot a Jerry bomber, and there'd been no one here to tell him he couldn't.

Bryan saluted Greyson smartly. "What's the form?"

"New tactics. The 109s sweep in early. We take cover. Don't expect to be scrambled for anything except bombers. Looks like we're in for another big

push. Hitler knows he has to break us soon or he'll miss the weather. Last two days the attacks have been concentrated on the airfields. Jerry had a good bash at us yesterday. Made a balls-up of tea. While we were up making intercept, the airfield should have had cover from 12 Group, but 12 Group were so long getting organized, they missed the show altogether. Catrell, is there something wrong."

Bryan couldn't help staring at Greyson. Finally blurted, "What happened to your nose, sir?"

Bryan was quite sure that when he'd hit Greyson, he'd left Greyson's nose bent the other way.

"My helmet slid down my face as I was scrambling for a funk hole, if you must know. Get out of here."

"Yes, sir."

Bryan's batman woke him as gently as possible. There was some hazard involved in venturing this close to the sleeping officer. The squadron leader did not so much stir sometimes as he detonated with a lashing of strong limbs that left the orderly stunned on the floor or scalded with the tea he'd brought.

But the batman was a dedicated soul. He considered it his duty to take the extra risk and cushion the transition from sleeping nightmare to waking nightmare as much as possible. "Tea, sir?" he said gently.

Bryan became conscious of steaming tea under his nose and a gentle jostling of his mattress. He opened his eyes. There was a tea mug and a notebook by his face.

A slit of light from a torch pointed at the page. "Sign here, sir."

Bryan scrawled something approximating his name to say he was awake. He was lying.

He took a few swallows of tea, crawled from the bed, washed, shaved, dressed.

It was still dark when he pushed off for the drome. He pedaled down the lane on his bicycle. Sounds took on a clarity at this hour, the quiet crunch of grit under his bike's narrow tyres, the first tentative bird calls from the surrounding meadows, and from behind him a mechanical coughing and grinding of gears of a big vehicle coming up on him. It sounded its horn and slowly passed with a swirl of exhaust fumes.

Sleepy ground crews were crowded in the back of the transport and hanging on the sides. The transport knocked and clattered ahead of Bryan with a tail-heavy yawing.

Once inside the gate, Bryan passed all the private cars, which parked just inside, the weeds grown high around their flat tyres.

Bryan knew some of the automobiles. Their owners weren't coming back. The cars just stood there like stones in a churchyard.

White wraiths were lifting from the fields as Bryan pedaled around the perimeter track toward dispersal. A Merlin's throaty bark broke the stillness.

The wraiths scattered.

Dawn came markedly later these days. The horizon was still scarcely pale. Overhead was nothing. There had been no stars this night.

The first Spitfire was bellowing now, two flight mechanics huddled on the tail as the engine was run up. The men hunched their heads in their collars and turned their faces away from the propeller's blast. The kite strained against its chocks and the weights on its tailplane. Somewhere else another roar awakened. Soon the field resounded with their noise, the baying of a hunting pack.

They quieted by turns and shut off, ready for the day.

Not that the Luftwaffe wasn't coming at night. They were. But there was nothing 89 Squadron could do about that. The Spitfires weren't equipped to be night fighters.

Intercepts by night fighters were few. Luckily Jerry wasn't much cop in the dark either.

The British ground crews lit up a Q site in a fallow field some distance from anywhere to keep Jerry entertained. The Germans had come again last night and hit it hard. Smashed all the decoys.

Bryan paused at the tea van. Percy was there, looking sleepy with too-long blond bangs in his face. He was warming his long fingers around a cup of tea. The day was going to be blistering, but it was cool now and Percy shivered in his Irvine jacket.

Bryan had two cigarettes left in his packet. He put one between his lips, offered the last one to anyone around the van. "Quis?"

"Ego," said Percy, hand up.

"Aow, aren't we precious," Edith the aircraftwoman said.

Another flight mechanic, horrified, hissed at her, "Belt!"

"I wanted it," Edith said.

"Why didn't you say?" Bryan asked between puffs.

"I didn't understand the bleedin' question!"

"Here," Lovejoy gave up his smoke.

"Yer all right, sir," Edith said.

"Give me the foil," another WAAF said, reached.

"Yes, ma'am," Percy gave her the foil.

Chiefy, frowned deeply. "You let the WAAFs push you around, sir?"

"They do enjoy it so," Percy said.

Bryan lifted his chin at Chiefy. "I don't think I want to hear whatever it is you're here to tell me."

"K's got a mag drop."

"Again? Already? What is wrong with that damn thing?"

"I think it was a Nazi in its past life, sir."

"All the new kites are goose-stepping a little."

"Whatcher mean by that?"

"I mean there's enough German scrap metal falling in English fields to

rebuild the RAF." Which was actually what the scavengers were doing with the metal. Just not fast enough.

RAF losses were outstripping replacements two to one.

"How many on line today, Chiefy?" Bryan asked.

"Fifteen this morning. Maybe eighteen by noon, if your boys don't break any."

Bryan nodded. This was probably the last time he would ever see eighteen serviceable aeroplanes. The word 'reserves' might as well drop from his vocabulary.

By the time Bryan wheeled into dispersal, the mist had diminished. He skidded to a halt, bicycle tyres slipping on the gravel. He dismounted, leaned his bicycle against the brick backwall of the Nissen hut. He knocked on the metal roof. "Good morning, gents. Breakfast?"

Yellow Section stirred within.

Bryan phoned B Flight, exchanged insults with Harry Witt.

After he'd checked everything, Bryan rang Sector Ops. "89 Squadron Red, Blue, and Green Sections at readiness. Yellow Section available."

Then he pulled up a sling chair in the damp grass and went back to sleep.

The sun was just breaking in the east when the first scramble sounded. Men ran. Pilots grabbed parachutes off tailplanes. Engines barked. Bryan stepped on the dew-damp wing of his Spitfire. His boot sole slipped on slick metal and he rapped his knee. He uttered a string of words he didn't know he knew, American, South African, Polish. Catrellese.

"Cor, that's impressive, sir."

"Sorry Edith."

Bryan swung into the cockpit, strapped in, and signaled chocks away.

The day's first melee. Fifteen up, fifteen back. Fair start. Most of the new boys had no joy. They didn't consider their own return the miraculous feat that Bryan did. It was all he wanted from them their first time out in anger. Just live through it. Next time they could hit something.

Next came the waiting.

The long idleness stretched into mid-day, but Ops kept the pilots close to the kites. To-day's show was not expected to be a one-act play. Still, Ops didn't seem to believe in eating or bathing. The squadron was kept at constant readiness. Formal meals were past a joke.

Bryan lay sprawled in the grass. The sun was high and the dampness had sizzled away. The pilots lay scattered about as if at a picnic or a party at the sea, in sling chairs and on blankets, with their magazines and their cards.

Among them was an officer just moved from behind a desk. His name was A.A. Fox, whom everyone called Archie though his name was Andrew Alan. He'd been a paper-pusher for the Air Ministry. A gentleman, Archie had flown extensively before the emergency. He had cajoled his way from the desk into a fighter cockpit.

Archie took to combat like born to it. No victory his first outing, but he'd

knocked some bits from a bomber and came back whole. The battles, the waiting, the bombers in the night, the shooting, were nothing to Archie. He might have been on holiday. Finally Bryan had to ask how he managed.

"As long as it makes sense," Archie said. "It makes sense here at the front. You know what side you're on, you know what you have to do. Jerry knows what he has to do and I need to kill him before he does it. Everybody understands what he's here for. We know what we're about and we know whom to shoot."

"Piece of cake," Bryan said flatly. He didn't get it.

"Up high," Archie said, significantly—he meant rank, not altitude—"When you get near the top, the sniping is directed at one another."

Bryan stared open-mouthed. High level in-fighting. It never occurred to him there could be such a thing even now. It goes on. Even now.

"Big wings," Archie said. "Don't tell the babes. It'll disturb their sleep."

"You have ruined mine."

"Sorry, Cat."

"Cat was my father."

Harry Witt had begun using the word "y'all" even as Randy was breaking himself of the habit because his mates ragged him unmercifully. Witt contended it was a useful word. "Just what English needs, a you plural. German has one. The Americans have one. But if I say *you*, you don't know if I mean *you* or you. You see?"

The dispersal telephone rang.

"Oh oh, it's them," Bryan said crushing out a cigarette. "Plural."

"Them *is* plural," Witt said.

"You're telling me."

"89 Squadron stand-by!"

"Start up!"

Fitters and pilots dashed for the kites. Edith tripped on a chock rope, did a one-foot dance to stay upright.

The shotgun crack of the first Merlin engine coming alive echoed off the Nissen huts. Became a chorus.

Another Spitfire lurched from its pen onto the field wagging its tail behind it, the fitter looking out first one side then the other to see where he was going.

"On the kites!"

Sixteen aircraft rose from Kingshill.

Bryan Catrell: "Hullo. Crossbow Leader calling. Crossbow airborne."

The Spitfires climbed over fields of hops. The Kentish landscape shrank to a brown and green patchwork of fields with furry blocks of trees and startling blue lakes.

Ahead of the fighters appeared a flock of unnatural birds.

Percy Lovejoy: "Tally ho. It's them. Plural. Bags of plural."

Bryan switched on his reflector gunsight. "Choose your targets. Stop the bombers. Watch for the Messerschmitts."

The Spitfires of 89 Squadron tore into the bomber formation. The big two-engine HE 111s reacted with an untidy spill of bombs short of their target and they tried to retreat. Metal flew off their broad bodies. Their engines trailed black smoke. Victory cries congested the R/T.

Small olive-silver machines swooped from above, wearing yellow noses now, yellow wingtips and yellow rudders.

"ME 109s!"

The fighters wheeled in a frenzy of flying bullets, tracer streams, and smoke trails. Bryan kept turning, trying to find two seconds in which to stay straight and shoot without being shot.

A wing slashed over his head. It was the biggest black cross he'd ever seen in his life. Voices in his headset were a solid buzz. Somewhere amid the yelling he thought he heard a hoo ra.

An ME's canopy, fouled with oil, flew off, nearly hit Bryan's kite. No one was baling out of the Messerschmitt.

Another ME 109 flashed by. Bryan glimpsed a triangle within a chevron, and horizontal dashes on either side of the ME's fat cross. This was somebody. Bryan tracked him. The Hun was making a wide wide turn, getting himself clear of the melee first, then coming back for another strike. The yellow nosed bastard angled at one of Bryan new chicks. The Hun was lining up for a deflection shot, holding his fire until he was extremely close. But Bryan was on him first.

The Messerschmitt's yellow rudder was darkened with a blurred catalog of death, three rows of victories and the beginning of a fourth row. The man was a killer. Bryan fixed a glowing red dot onto that yellow nose, ruddered the dot ahead of his mark, held his breath, thumb to the teat.

The Hun was gone. Vanished, down and under.

Damn!

And here's the *wingman!*

Bryan turned hard on his own tail.

Don't worry so much about the Hun you see. Your Spit will see you through. It's the ones you don't see.

There were two more.

If I go, one of you is coming with me. Bryan threw his kite around hard, plug pulled, stick forward, bottom rudder. *Sweet Merlin don't die.* The Merlin engine hesitated only an instant. His kite plunged.

Air pressed in. Sky and ground spun together, kept spinning before his eyes even as the machine steadied on its broad wings.

He leveled out he wasn't sure where, dazed, his ears shut. He tried to swallow his thudding heart back down from his throat. He glanced up, saw black gnats milling high above. He'd fallen several thousand feet.

Someone was barreling toward him, head on. He almost shot, but recognized the radiator centered under the flat midsection of its large wingspan: Hurricane.

The Hurricane roared past Bryan's port side. He glimpsed the red and white chessboard painted on its side—

And the enemy spinner in Bryan's rearview mirror disintegrated in the same instant that Bryan saw it.

Bryan turned his Spit hard. The Hurricane, blazoned with the red and white chessboard, fired on another pair of ME 109s that had followed him down.

89 Squadron returned to Kingshill. No sooner out of the cockpits when the phone rang.

Scramble base. An X-raid was coming their way.

"We can't scramble! We just pancaked, Goddammit!"

"Quite right," Ops said. "Please stop screaming."

Greyson sent non-essential personnel into the trenches. That was everyone who was not turning a Spitfire around or manning a gun emplacement.

"What about food," Padgett mumbled in the trench. "Is food essential? Can we send an orderly out for some sandwiches?"

The men leaned back against earthen walls and watched the sky.

Someone else rasped, "What was wrong with those bloody Hurricanes back there! They're shooting parachutes! I mean, they were Hun parachutes. But still."

The Poles were taking no prisoners.

Bryan murmured, "I believe they have difficulty seeing the sportsmanship of it."

Engines sounded from somewhere, but the sky overhead remained blue and vacant. The engine sounds diminished.

Apparently the raid had found another target.

In thirty-five minutes the Spitfires of Kingshill were screaming off the deck again to cover an attack on Biggin Hill.

On the homeward flight, Bryan was drenched. His muscles had razors in the sinews, and they trembled from strain. A fiery knot tied itself behind his neck.

Even the rim of his own goggles became something menacing in his peripheral vision. He took the goggles off.

He set down at Kingshill, taxied in, shut down, and shut his eyes for a moment.

Metallic thumping of a fitter's footsteps clomped on his wing. More thumps of hoses being thrust into the kite's sides jarred him.

"Sir, wouldn't you be more comfortable in a bed?"

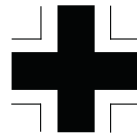
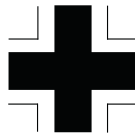
The vibration and engine roar had stopped. It was quite peaceful here. His arms hung strengthless. Hands lay dead in his lap, tingling. Head leaned back on the padded rest. Finally he unclasped his harness and climbed out, but only because he had to piss very badly.

The sun was down. There had been no breakfast. Lunch was in pieces and cold from a NAAFI van. Tea was had one section at a time. By day's end the

squadron's fresh faces had aged. The new ones had already gone wide-eyed, if their eyes were open at all, and staring as if to say: why didn't you warn us?

They'd lost one of the new young faces by evening.

The Hun was hitting where it hurt—factories and aerodromes. His only mistake right now was allowing the radio towers to stand.



PAUL RITTER RETURNED from a sortie in whispering anger, “Why is it that an aircraft that needs twenty minutes—twenty fucking minutes—to reach altitude, is always there *just* when we show up!”

“They see us coming,” someone said.

Ritter nodded, too incensed to speak.

“Those towers,” his wingman said. “Those should be a priority target.”

“We *have* knocked them down. The Tommies just put them right back up.”

“And the speed with which they get them back up ought to say something about how *important they are to the Englishmen!*” Ritter hissed.

“It would take an awful lot of bombs to break up things that spindly. They need several direct hits.”

Someone else said, “No, it’s not the towers.”

“Why no?”

“They don’t look like what radar towers are supposed to look like.”

“Well Goddammit they’ve been tracking us somehow.”

Ritter didn’t know much about radar. When he’d first heard of it it was reported to be some kind of Buck Rogers death ray that the English would shoot up at German airplanes to kill the engines, or kill the pilot, Ritter forgot which. He’d passed all of it off as gibberish.

“They’re seeing us somehow. Haven’t we always said to see is to stay alive? And they know where we are before they can even *see* us.”

And there were other things wrong. The numbers were wrong. By the

numbers in the reports, the RAF should have crumbled by now. Either the Oberkommando had underestimated the numbers of the English forces, or someone was over reporting the English losses. If the numbers were accurate, there should be no RAF.

There was definitely an RAF.

And the Oberkommando's system of accounting losses was wrong. They struck out British squadrons stationed at British bases reported to have been destroyed. If Ritter learned nothing else in Spain, he'd learned that a target destroyed does not mean the target was gone forever. You were lucky if you got the target to stay down for one night. He had recurring nightmares of the bridges at Ebro. Only those hadn't been nightmares. He had actually flown all those missions. It was the bridges that recurred.

"The number of squadrons counted as destroyed means the RAF has ceased to exist, so who am I meeting over there?"

Ritter checked the penciled-out squadrons. "I thought there were no more GZs and DWs. I was up to my schwanz in DWs yesterday. And ST. Who invited them back from the dead?"

"Sometimes I hear them on our wavelength," Löwe said. "You speak English, don't you, Ritter?"

"I do. *They* aren't." Speaking English, he meant. "Pancake? What have pancakes got to do with anything? Angels 20?"

"Angels 20 means 20,000 feet," Brücke said. "If you hear them ordered to Angels 20 you know where you have to be to meet them. If you hear the English on your radio, shut your Staffel up and listen for the angels."

"What is 20,000 feet in meters?"

"A foot is slightly less than a third of a meter. 20,000 feet is 6100 meters."

"So if we divide their angels by three we should be above them?"

"We ought to be in perfect position."

"Hullo, Sparrow Leader, this is Tarzan. Proceed to Angels one-eight. Watch for bandits approaching from the southeast."

"*Achtung*, Vestalin aircraft. Go to *hanni* 6000."

The Tommies were going to be surprised.

Ritter continued to listen in case the controller ordered the English squadron to adjust its altitude. He didn't.

"Bandits one mile. Any joy?"

"No."

Me neither.

Ritter looked and looked for the English fighters at 5500 meters. He could hear from the English controller that they were almost on top of each other: "Plots coinciding."

Where?

Ritter looked all over. Nothing at 5500 meters.

On reflex, just as he heard, "Tally ho!" he looked *up*.

Shit!

"Break! Break! Break! Indians! High!"

Heart throttled wide open. Mouth prickled. Tasted sour fear. He'd stumbled into a trap and led his squadron with him. *Lieber Gott*, just get my Kerls out of this. I deserve to be shot for being stupid!

At least they were only Hurricanes, not Spitfires.

Ritter dodged quickly out of the path of one, and took aim at the white letters of another.

He spoke into the wireless. "Have no fear. I happen to know this squadron no longer exists. We pencilled them out a month ago."

"Vestalin 1—" His wingman's voice started. Quit. Then nothing. Ritter looked back.

Saw his young wingman's airplane spinning down without its tail.

Only Hurricanes!

"Rudy?" *Shit! "Request viktor, Rudy?" Herr Gott!*

No parachute appeared.

There were nearer targets. Ritter drove in blind rage after the one that got his wingman. It sprinted with a darkened rich trail. Ritter would give him no chance to savor his victory, to tell his English friends about it. Ritter hoped the Tommy was frightened. *Fear me, you son of a bitch.*

Ritter shunned the other targets. That one. Get that one or don't go home.

He closed into range. It was not enough. He loomed in the Tommy's rear view. He looked into the cockpit and pumped both guns and three cannon into the airplane.

It disintegrated into wood and metal and tatters of doped fabric.

Ritter turned back and dove after a severed wing that was sailing away as if under power. He drilled it. Just a piece of falling wreckage.

He put down at his base in Pas de Calais, screaming to have his Staffel airborne again now.

Otto the mechanic informed him that his beloved *Die Frau* had 100 hours on her and her engine had to be pulled.

"What!" Ritter whispered.

Otto said he had another crate ready for him.

"I want mine!"

The mechanics were called blackmen for the color of their overalls. Black was also the color they turned if they so much as looked at a Daimler Benz. It was a notoriously dirty engine. It needed maintenance, and Otto refused Ritter so much as one more hour on this one.

Incensed Ritter had no choice but to take the replacement because Otto wouldn't refuel *Die Frau*.

In the new cockpit Ritter hit his head on a *thing* behind his head. A thick metal armor plate curved behind him in the small space.

The factories were adding armor plates to all the MEs now, eight millimeters thick. Ritter's beloved old Frau did have an armor plate, and Ritter didn't

like it in this crate now.

He took off with only a single schwarm on a *Freie Jagd*. He found another Tommy to kill, a Hurricane. He put a cannon shell through its port wing. It began dumping gasoline through the gaping hole, but Ritter knew the Hurricane had three tanks and that his shot was not a killing blow. He needed to finish it.

He glanced back to check what was behind him, saw only the dark wall of armor plate. *Fuck Otto!*

He looked forward, fired again at his Hurricane. It turned. Its one good trick.

Ritter had been told: it is possible to turn inside a Hurricane if you are brutal and he is timid.

I am brutal, and we take our best guess with Tommy. With a cannon hole in the Hurricane's wing, Ritter took his chances and turned with it.

The ME shuddered at the edge of the stall. Ritter felt his head drain. Heard a screaming groan and felt the stick fighting him. He stayed with it, let the throttle race.

He could smell a white-knuckled kid afraid of stalling. Ritter was not afraid of anything and he was angry. *This Hurricane is going to die.*

The Hurricane crawled into his sight. Ritter accounted for the curve, took the shot.

Abschuss.

He didn't hear the warning. Something had come up behind him. He heard crashing of bullets breaking his canopy. Heard the hammer-strike of them imbedding into the armor plate behind his head.

A second later a smoking meteor streaked underneath him and his wingman said, "*Abschuss. Herr Hauptmann, are you there? Request viktor.*"

"Yes, viktor, fuck everything." Ritter turned his crippled crate back toward the Ditch.

His engine failed short of France. This crate was done. He turned her upside down. *Fuck this.* He rode a parachute down into the water. His schwarm didn't have the fuel to stay with him. They proceeded home.

Ritter foundered in the waves, knew he was crying because tears ran hot on his face in the icy water. His dye-bag bobbed by his face. He released it. Yellow-green fluorescence dye spread out on the surface, swirling like alien blood.

The *Seenotdienst* fished him out with a seaplane. He was still vibrating when they delivered him back to base before sundown. He screamed for another plane. He went up one more time, on another free hunt with Brücke, scored another kill, a Spitfire this time.

When he returned he was frothing to go again. The Gruppenkommandeur stepped in and roared at him, "I don't know what you think you're doing but it's over!"

In the face of Löwe's wrath, Ritter backed down.

He slumped into a chair, and let himself cave in at last. He was not angry at Löwe. He mumbled that he was glad really that he'd stopped him. He felt empty.

A champagne cork popped near him. His squadron gathered round, laughing.

"Congratulations! Three in one day!"

"*Horrido, horrido, horrido!*"

"Has it been done before?"

But Ritter felt hollow. He hoped all three kills would go unconfirmed. *I don't want them.*

"It was stupid. I failed my Rottenkamerad and that is all I did."

He'd lost a wingman. He'd never lost a wingman. Even the kid who had separated from him at Dunkirk had made it home. He'd lost one. Halle said it was the worst sin to lose a wingman.

When the witness reports crossed the Gruppenkommandeur's desk for authorization, Fritz came to Ritter's squadron and raised his blond brows, "You trying to catch up with me, Ritter?"

"I went a little crazy. I'm wishing everyone would just forget it."

"It's forgotten."

Ritter went out drinking with Fritz that evening. He knew Fritz would talk of anything other than Ritter's victories.

Löwe met him when Ritter came back to base. Ritter saw Löwe coming, and tried to head off whatever he was going to say. "Please."

But Löwe pushed ahead. "I wanted to apologize for not anticipating that the British might change their code once we caught on to it."

Ritter ran his fingers back into his hair, and pressed his head between his hands as if his skull were coming apart. "You didn't figure. I didn't figure. We were so busy feeling clever."

Löwe nodded, gnawing on his pipe stem. "It felt so good to feel smug and devious. I should have seen it for fool's gold." He looked up at the night sky. "God knows the Englishman is not easy."



GREEN LEADER FAILED TO RETURN.

His Spitfire was last seen streaking down like a white comet in a boil of glycol steam. His undercart had dropped in combat, impeding the radiator vents. The battle-heated engine overpowered its cooling system and it bubbled right up. Randy had been on oxygen, spoke through the microphone in the mask as he broke off. He said he was looking for a place to put down, so no one was worried about him at first.

The waiting set in. The squadron began to think there'd been a snag.

Randy was looking for a place to put down. Must've found one by now. "Damn Yank mucked it up," Harry Witt said, loud.

He was louder even than normal, scared.

"Not to worry," Padge said, glib. "Rhett pancaked in a field and he's having a bit of spare in a loft with a farmer's daughter. He'll ring when he thinks of it. These Yanks aren't much for procedure."

Padge could hear himself talking. Too cheerful. He wasn't convincing. He shut up.

The waiting was the worst. The longer it goes on, the more certain you are that you don't want the phone to ring. A ringing phone was almost never good news.

It was happening a lot lately, to young men whose names they'd just learned, or hadn't had time to learn. The new kids were lousy shots. They opened fire too early because they heard that it was the Air Ministry approved

way. They mistrusted new information even when it was coming from the front line. There was a steady parade of them, replacements for the ones before them. They were starting to look alike—young—only greener every time. They came with the same boasts, same jokes, same complaints, same fake horror in B Flight upon learning “The bloody OC is named Adolph!”

They were cannon fodder.

Only this time it was Randy, who really ought to have some kind of immunity. He’d been with them too long.

The phone rang. Harry Witt grabbed it, yelled into it, “Witt!”

He quieted, mumbled only a few words, then he put the phone down. “It’s Rhett. He’s not comin’ back, Miz Scarlett.”

“Dear God.”

“Damn Yank,” Witt breathed, then set off roaring and cursing with big gestures. Bryan suspected it was because he was crying. All Witt’s noise was diversionary fire. Witt howled at the sky, “You damn Yankee! How could you leave me alone here with all these bloody Brits!”

“Poor sod,” someone muttered.

“Can’t take it personal.”

“Someone in a Hurricane squadron shot down a hun, and *Die Frau* took it personal. Must have been a friend of his. I suppose even Nazis have friends. The bastard went after that poor Hurricane like the devil himself. The queer thing was when he shot the Hurri’s wing—after the wing came off, I mean. He shot the detached wing. Bang on. Maybe he thought it was a parachute. Or maybe he was showing off. Jolly unpleasant—an insane Nazi sharpshooter. The Nazi was upset.”

“I’m sure you’re reading into it,” Bryan said. Everything happened so fast up there it was hard to be sure of anything, let alone what it meant. “You get used to people not coming back.”

“Do you? Do you really?”

“Sad to say, I am.”

Harry Witt stalked back to the group, blustering, “You get yourself killed, Catrell, I’ll piss on your grave. See if I don’t. And you, Sir Percival, we won’t even say what I’ll do to yours.”

“We’re not going anywhere, Harry,” Percy said. “Are we not, Cat?”

“Just so, we are not,” Bryan said. “We’re going to make the Krauts die.”

“Here! Here!” the boys cheered.

They had only to stick it until winter, when the Channel would be too rough for an invasion force to attempt crossing. But even maintaining for that long was looking a tall order considering the fighters had been reduced by a quarter in the last fortnight. It wasn’t in the published figures but Bryan Catrell could count and he knew names. So many cheerful new faces in the squadron. Keen, they were all jolly keen. They reminded him of his younger brother. So quickly they come and go, and next thing Bryan knew, he was

writing a letter to kin.

How could he write to Randy's family? What did one say to Americans? *Help us, damn you* came to mind.

The Luftwaffe's constant hammering continued in waves, wearing them down. Not just the aircraft, it was the pilots. *Something's got to turn*. He knew. The weather — he knew not to count on that — but something. In the meantime don't get attached to anyone.

"Squadron Leader Catrell?"

Bryan turned. He knew he would see another bright enthusiastic young face. But the voice was horridly familiar.

"Sergeant Catrell reporting for duty, sir!"

"O dear God."

"No. It's dear Victor. I hadn't expected that rapid an advancement. But divinity is fine if you insist."

No smile. No welcome. "I have enough to do here without looking after my baby brother," Bryan said.

"Point of fact, I'm not here as baby brother. I told you, I'm Sergeant Catrell."

Vicky had come up through the Volunteer Reserve.

"This isn't happening," Bryan said to heaven.

"You don't know half of it. And you thought you had trouble getting Mum to let *you* fly! Sir."

"Vicky, how many hours do you have on Spits?"

"Nine and a half, sir."

Bryan grabbed him by the collar, shouted at another NCO while pointing at Victor, "Rip! Take the *sergeant* up and put forty more hours on him by tea!"

"Bryan —"

"Nine and a half —" Bryan was incensed. "Don't even look at me with nine and a half hours! Christ!"

The pilot officer who was given charge of Victor didn't seem to think Bryan was out of line. In fact, Rip murmured, "Nine and a half. What are they sending us, sir? It's fair murder. Is this all we have?"

Bryan was too agitated to answer.

The Tannoy clicked. One of the pilots ran to retch behind an aeroplane. Bryan looked up at the speaker, narrowed his eyes in annoyance, "Oh belt."

"89 Squadron, scramble base."

"On the kites!" Bryan shouted, running.

Vicky gasped, hopeful. But he knew that the name chalked on the board, "Catrell," meant Bryan, not him.

When the squadron returned, Bryan beat up the airfield.

Victor Catrell didn't expect these men to be moved by the event of a Spitfire blazing past them low and loud, but crews still peered out of their tents. Fitters looked up from their work and raised spanners, while the girl at the NAAFI van applauded.

"Good show," someone said. And aside to Victor, "Three days running."

The prop's lashing blur swept up a cloud of dust. The aeroplane's weathered sides showed off bullet holes and cordite streaks on slender wings. And there was the sound. That deep crackling thunder roared back to the sky. Vic shivered with its passing. No, he supposed they wouldn't get tired of it.

Bryan circled around and brought the Spitfire in at a gentler speed.

After he'd taxied in, an aircraftman moved in to paint another swastika in front of the cockpit but Bryan waved him away. "No, they didn't confirm yesterday's. God knows where that one's pranged. No one's seen him."

Vicky waited. Others were there, demanding Bryan's attention for different things. Bryan laced fingers back through his curls. He was wearing a jersey and his Mae West, no tunic. For his deliberate moves, the way he talked, the way others listened, one didn't need the insignia to know who was leader of this pack.

Finally Bryan had time to notice Victor. Victor had been left in the care of Rip, an old instructor, with orders to get 40 flying hours on Victor by Tea. Bryan asked Rip, "How did it go?"

Vic Catrell answered for him. "I have been well and truly humbled."

Bryan nodded.

That squared with what Rip said. *Slightly better than utterly miserable. Just like the others.*

"He's been at this a while, Rip has," Victor told Bryan.

"So has Jerry."

"You aren't cutting me any slack, are you."

"Jerry doesn't."

"All heart you are. The sergeants are a bundle of cheerful blokes. No one outside of Rip has asked my name."

"After about five ops, they'll ask," Bryan said.

They never got to ask.



ERWIN HALLE SCORED forty aerial victories, double what had earned him the Knight's Cross. For that feat there was a new award created, the Oak Leaves, to be added to the Knight's Cross. Halle was summoned to Berlin to receive the award from the hands of the Führer himself.

JG 23 HQ lay on the rail route to Halle's camp. On his way back to his own base, Halle stopped to show his closest rival the new decoration and to rub it in. He didn't do it well. The same disarming modesty Halle always had clung to him even as he flaunted the award. He couldn't be a braggart even when he was trying.

The men were comparing him to the '14 - '18 War's hero Oswald Boelcke, another thoughtful warrior. Now that Halle had reached Boelcke's score of forty, the comparisons were made again.

Fritz von Soden advised Halle not to follow in Boelcke's footsteps too closely after this.

There was a sudden outbreak of superstitious warding and knocking among the men. Paul Ritter hissed at Fritz when they were away from the others, "What a rotten thing to say."

Oswald Boelcke had been killed in the autumn of the year after achieving forty victories. He was only twenty-five years old. Halle was twenty-five.

"It was a joke," Fritz said.

"A piss poor one."

"I wished him well," Fritz said. "You know what I meant."

"Do I now? Do I? Tell me. I am eager to learn what it is I know."

"What's wrong with you, Ritter?"

"What is wrong with *you*?"

Fritz shrugged with a pasted-on smile, then, on second thought, he took Ritter farther aside and said, "Why is it — *why* is it — that as soon as I get the highest award there is, they invent another one and I'm left holding second best?"

"I suppose it's because Halle and Löwe keep doing something extraordinary," Ritter said.

He hit a wide open sore with that one.

"Halle and Löwenstamm. Löwenstamm and Halle. It's a given that Löwe is next, isn't it? Why isn't it Halle and von Soden? Or von Soden, Löwe and Halle? I am not that far behind them. I have thirty-eight victories, Ritter. I could have been first. It was all luck. But where are all the people mentioning my name?"

"It's not just the number of victories, Fritz."

"Don't be an idiot. Of course it's the victories. What else is there?"

Fritz took the silence for an answer. It was actually despair of explaining anything to Fritz.

Fritz started up again. "You're right. There is something else. I'm a Nazi, and they're not. You'd think the leaders of this party would look out for their own. I think that's damn unsupportive. I tell you this: I'm going to get one of those goddamn highest awards invented for me."

Ritter was sitting on the wing of *Die Frau*, watching the sun go down.

He heard a military stride crossing the grass toward him from the other side of his ME. Not Otto. A twig snapped. The step slowed nearing the airplane. The man rounded the rudder.

Erwin Halle.

He made a small motion to say *at ease* before Ritter could try to stand up.

Ritter had one black booted foot tucked up under him, the other foot on the wing, his knee raised so he could rest his fist on it, his falcon on his fist. His other hand held a bottle and a glowing cigarette.

"*Prosit*," Ritter hoisted the bottle.

Halle nodded. They hadn't talked face to face since Ritter had been shot down over France.

Halle stood by the tailplane. He moved the ME's rudder side to side as if doing a walk-around. There were thirty victories painted on it.

Halle had just come from Berlin. He still wore his dress uniform with every decoration he had. A man could see himself in Halle's polished black

boots. Halle carried his dress gloves in one hand along with a book.

"Do you always drink alone, Paul?"

"I'm not alone. Colette is here. And you're here." Ritter reached the bottle to Halle, offering.

"No," Halle said. His newest award glittered at his collar.

Ritter motioned with the bottle for him closer. "Let's see, *Herr Major*."

Halle moved in, stood at the wing root. Ritter leaned in to see the cluster of gold leaves on the black, red, and white ribbon above the Knight's Cross.

"Oh, that doesn't look bad," Ritter said. "I thought it would be vulgar." When he first heard of the Oak Leaves he thought it an exercise in lily-gilding. "That's good. I gotta get me Oak Leaves."

He leaned back and gazed at the reddened horizon.

The quiet re-settled around him. His bird stretched and folded her wings.

"Where do you go when you look like that?"

Halle's voice surprised him.

"I'm here," Paul said.

It wasn't a leaving. It was a shutting in. And he stayed shut, not to be looked through by grey eyes. Sometimes with Halle Ritter felt he may as well have no skin. Halle missed nothing.

"Cigarette, *Herr Major*?"

"No," Halle said.

Erwin Halle was the perfect soldier, well-groomed, short-haired, clean shaven, with none of the vices or habits Hitler hated. He wore no scented hair oil, didn't smoke, didn't drink much.

Ritter lit another cigarette for himself. "I'm sure the Führer adored you."

"No," said Halle. "I left him not very happy with me."

"What did you do?"

"Same thing I did before Dunkirk."

"Don't tell me you argued tactics with the Führer."

"He asked me what I thought. I answered wrong. I've been sent back to school." He lifted the book he carried. Ritter cocked his head falcon style to read the title. It was a German translation of Douhet's *The Command of the Air*.

"He said I learned nothing in Spain. The real lessons were taught before I got there."

"What lessons? How to bomb the hell out of civilians?" Ritter thought he was being sarcastic, but Halle motioned him to silence.

Ritter whispered, "O Erwin, please say he's not thinking of switching targets."

Erwin Halle said nothing.

Johann Löwenstamm was the next fighter pilot to score forty victories. While he was in Berlin collecting his Oak Leaves from the Führer, Fritz von Soden returned from a mission to report the remarkable feat of three victories

in a single sortie. His wingman saw them all. Everyone gathered round as Fritz talked with his hands.

The day was still young, and there were more missions to fly. Ritter noticed Fritz's armorer watching the goings-on, and Ritter stalked over. "What do you think you're doing standing around gawking? You re-arm that aircraft before you do another thing."

Black-stained fingers removed the cigar from between brown teeth as the Wart took in Ritter's rank and slowly considered coming to attention. "It's armed, *mein Herr*."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying there are sixty rounds in each cannon drum, and one thousand rounds for each machine gun. And nothing's jammed." The Wart shifted under Ritter's unwavering coal dark gaze. He dropped the cigar and stood straighter. "I'm not saying anything else."

Ritter turned away.

Fritz's victories brought his score to forty-one, which was one ahead of Johann Löwenstamm and tied with Erwin Halle.

No one could overlook Fritz von Soden after today.

But Fritz was not called to Berlin. The Reichsmarschall was at the front, and he summoned Fritz to his train to present him the Oak Leaves. Fritz returned to the airfield smiling, less than pleased.

"The awards are diluted by the time I get them. Even if I am third, Löwe and Halle get it from the Führer. I from Göring. If you ever get forty you'll get your Oak Leaves from a Waffenwart if you're lucky. Something on your mind, Ritter?"

Ritter spoke so quietly Fritz could barely hear him. "One of your men shot a parachute from my victory today."

Ritter had shot down a Spitfire. It had been a clean strike and the Tommy baled out. Ritter was in the grip of the soaring sensation that possessed him when everything was right – then suddenly his worthy adversary was being murdered, helpless, before his eyes.

Ritter was surprised that Fritz was not surprised.

"Yes," Fritz said. "It keeps the pilot from coming back at us in a new aircraft."

"Fritz –"

"Before you say anything, let me tell you I didn't make up the tactic. I took it under advisement from a very high authority."

"A very *large* authority," Ritter said.

"Yes, that's the one. So you would do well –"

"The hell I will."

Ritter was hard put to credit Hermann with such a thing. It was monstrous. "I don't believe it. And in any case, I won't do it."

"It wasn't exactly an order so you might be safe in defying it," Fritz said.

Didn't sound like he thought it was safe at all. "Knightly honor is all well and good, but if we bale out, we fall prisoner and we're out for the duration. When Tommy bales out, he's back tomorrow shooting at us."

"Very practical." Ritter said.

It was shitty.

"Never mind all that, Ritter. Listen. Word is, as soon as there's an opening, I'm to be a Geschwaderkommodore. What position do you want? My Adjutant? I don't think I can work with Nachtigall."

"Sounds like you're expecting to get *this* Geschwader."

Fritz shrugged. "Löwe is pretty free-lipped with the Reichsmarschall. So is Halle. That might even be more likely."

"Why wait for someone to fall, Fritz? You're a man of initiative. Shoot one in the back."

"That's an evil blow even from you."

"I talked to your Waffewart."

"You did what? Why did you do that!"

"I was worried about you," Ritter said, bitter. "Your Waffewart was doing nothing. I thought he should've been *reloading your guns*."

"I can explain this," Fritz said, then didn't. He said instead, "People need heroes right now. You couldn't take this from them."

"I never want to see you again as long as I live."

"That shouldn't be too long, Ritter. You've got a problem."

Ritter dismissed himself. Fritz said at his back, "I've never been hit by friendly fire before."

Ritter was almost to the door of the Gefechtsstand when Fritz dashed after him, slung an arm round his shoulders, suddenly his best friend again. "Listen, Ritter. I *have* the kills. They're unconfirmed from other sorties. You know what it's like. If no one else sees it, you don't get the victory even though you did it and it was perfect. Tell me that hasn't happened to you. I dare you. My score is legitimate. You're not going to—you know. My old wingman would never let me down.

"Just leave me alone."

"You think you are so great because you made that three-point landing."

"*What?*" Ritter said, lost. He made three pointers all the time.

"The first time in the ME."

Ritter searched his mind, as if suddenly dropped in water and he was floundering for the surface. Where did that come from? Out of the sun. In a moment Ritter placed the event Fritz referred to. Their first flights with the ME 109. In Spain. Two years ago.

Two years.

"You remember that!"

"*You do!*" Fritz shot back.

"I do now! For God's sake!" Ritter stalked away.



39



= REGRET TO INFORM YOU YOUR SON 853415 CATRELL KILLED
5TH SEPTEMBER LETTER FOLLOWS =

BRYAN RIPPED UP the fourth draft of the letter he was trying to compose. Didn't want to do this.

But there had to be something to follow the telegram. Margaret wouldn't even know which one of her sons was 853415 Catrell. Bryan only identified himself in the telegram as COMMANDING OFFICER 89TH SQUADRON. And when Margaret found out that it was he, signing a telegram that way, she would murder him.

He had collected Vicky's effects. There wasn't much. There was a journal. An awful feeling crept up his throat as he opened it to the last page.

You should see yourself stride across the field like you own it. 'No don't paint another swastika. It's only a probable.' You're so off hand. I will never be off hand. It's not something one can have an ambition for. It's either there or isn't, like the color of your eyes. And there is Bryan like a god.

I am angry with you. I am an impostor here. I want to be one of those knights with shining wings. I'm scared and absolutely no one else is.

He was meant to send this to Margaret?

He appealed to Greyson, who agreed the situation was bloody. Vicky hadn't just died. He'd died in agony. There wasn't even a body.

"It was explained to me that a man comes into this world at about seven pounds, that is how many they need to put you back in the ground with your name on the grave. And for Vicky we don't *have* it." Bryan's voice caught.

Greyson looked over all the standard messages they had ever sent. In the end, he swept them aside. "Go tell your mother in person. Take a few days compassionate leave. Arrange a memorial service, and attend it. Promise to sleep some."

"No, sir. I mean, I don't want leave, sir."

"You *have* leave. It's an order."

"What will I *do*?"

"You see your Mum. You sleep the clock round. You spend time with your ferry pilot. You do anything. You do nothing."

His ferry pilot. Maud. "I don't even know her last name."

"Gaunson."

"Sir?"

"Maud Gaunson." Greyson pushed a piece of paper with an address on it across the desk. "I had Emmeline do a bit of reconnaissance on your behalf. Do with it what you will. Get out of here."

Maud opened the door. Those grey eyes grew wide in her heart-shaped face. She wasn't wearing makeup, so Bryan could see her freckles.

His hat was being strangled in his hands. "I just called to ask if you'd fancy a few days in London."

"And nights?"

"Those are between the days."

"I don't know you."

"Thought I'd ask." He turned away.

"Bryan."

He stopped, glanced back.

"You aren't giving me an awfully long time to pack a bag."

"Maudie, would you still love me with my face burned off?"

She turned her head on the pillow.

"I have not said that I loved you with your face on."

"But you do, don't you?"

"I am trying very hard not to."

"I don't make it easy, do I."

"Really you're not fair. I have all the worry I can manage. The last thing I need is to get attached to a beautiful young man with the life expectancy of a cigarette."

"Funny analogy," said Bryan. "At any rate, one doesn't choose whom one loves anymore than he chooses who gets burned."

"Who did, Bryan? Get burned?"

"My brother."

"Bombing?"

"Dogfight."

"I didn't know you had a brother who was a fighter."

Tears suddenly blurred Bryan vision.

And then he heard himself telling her about it, more than he ever intended to say. He hadn't intended to mention it at all.

"Facing Margaret was almost the worst of it. That was . . . yesterday? Second only to burning to death, or having your brother burn to death, is telling your Mum you let your brother die. I didn't know how. I told her Vicky was saving someone else.

"She asked if he was scared. Christ, he was petrified. 'No, Mum. Not Vic. He never knew what hit him.'

"Then she screamed at me for murdering Vicky. She's right. I shouldn't have let him go up. I should have made up something and had him posted."

"He would have hated you for the rest of his life," Maud said.

"His long life," Bryan said.

"Living to be bitter old man who never got a chance to defend his country. Bryan, he's one of the Few."

The Few. That's what they were calling the RAF since 20 August.

The gratitude of every home in our Island, in our Empire, and indeed throughout the world, except in the abodes of the guilty, goes out to the British airmen who, undaunted by odds, unwearied in their constant challenge and mortal danger, are turning the tide of world war by their prowess and by their devotion. Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.

Bryan lay prone with his chin propped up on his stacked fists. "When I was a boy someone told me about the Battle of Marathon. In ancient Greece when all that is Western, all that we live by, art, music, politics, philosophy, it was all just coming into being. It might have been snuffed out in an afternoon. The Eastern hordes were sailing across the Aegean to take Greece. And all the Athenians could put into the field to defend Greece were 9000 men. Their little ally Plateia sent 1000 men. And that was all they had. And they stood on the beach as hundreds of thousands—a million some say—vast numbers of Persians, anyway—landed on the beach. The Greeks fought them, and won. I heard that story, and God I wanted to be there. I wished I could do something like that. And here it is. I am one of the Few against Them. And we're losing.

Greyson won't let me fly. We have days to last and he gives me days off. The Few. I'll tell you Few. We have no pilots. They're sending us Vickys. I'm sorry, Maudie. I'm being bloody. I shouldn't have come to you."

"You reach for that shirt, I shall stab you with something."

Bryan rolled toward her to take her in his arms. She was warm, and melted to him easily. He breathed in her scent. When she moved he felt the flow of muscles under her skin. She was strong but so small within his embrace. He ran a strand of her hair between his fingers. Her eyelashes brushed his bare shoulder like delicate wings. It made him feel the urgency of life and love, the need to protect her to his last strength. Even when it was wiser not to love, the heart refused not to.

He remembered words from Vicky's funeral service.

"It is He that giveth strength to the weary, and increaseth force and might to them that are not. Youths shall faint and labor, and young men shall fall by infirmity. But they that hope in the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall take wings like eagles. . ."

He blinked into Maud's hair.

Vicky, you're with the angels now, send help.

He said, "I'm talking like a coward. I see why Greyson chased me out. I'd kill morale."

"You're not a coward, Bryan."

"For the first time I don't know if we can stick it. The Luftwaffe pound the aerodromes and factories in wave after wave after wave. They bombed Hawker to-day. If it were one-to-one we'd have them down, but there are so many of them. They can afford to keep coming. We won't hold together at this rate. They pound and pound, and we're bailing water from a sinking ship and it's overtaking us and our arms are tired. I hope you believe in God because there's no power on Earth that can save us now."

Late afternoon, September 7th, Bryan and Maud were still in bed, not sleeping.

At 4.00 they heard the air raid siren and the droning of many aircraft. Bryan lifted his head. Maud looked up to him. "Ours or theirs?"

"Theirs," Bryan said, not moving. The sound was the out-of-synch lurching drone of German bombers. "They're headed for the docks."

The ground shook. Maud and Bryan didn't take shelter. The Germans weren't bombing cities. Certainly not London.

A sudden boom rocked the building.

"Someone got lost," Maud said. She got up from the bed, put on a robe and peered out the window.

The heavy pounding of AA had broken loose. "Bryan, they're not lost. We're under attack."

Bryan joined her at the window.

A black swarm pocked the sky like a Biblical plague, the stepped-up masses

of Hun aircraft. The ground shook again. The windowpane shuddered within its frame.

The London skyline was outlined in weird orange light. A thick cloud-bank grew out of the ground.

Up high, white contrails curved into vapour scribbles of fighters writing their combat on the sky.

Bryan stood with Maud at the window.

He felt her shiver. She took a half step backward to huddle against his chest. He put an arm across her and held her to him, his own heart hammering with profound wrath. From outside came cries, running, and some calmer voices like shepherds. The horizon was on fire. The vicious dark swarm advanced overhead.

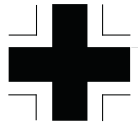
"Maudie, do you know what this means?"

She did. "It means they're *not bombing your aerodrome or my factory.*"

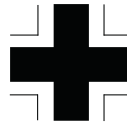
"Jesus, Maudie, Jesus."

God had come through with a miracle in the most unlikely guise of an infuriated, Adolf Hitler. The Lord worked in mysterious ways, none more bewildering than the whim of the dictator.

The Lord's ways weren't just mysterious, they were barbarous. But suddenly Bryan knew with all his being that God was here, and the RAF and England had just been given a fighting chance.



40



THE MOON WAS UP. Patchy clouds lay scattered on the black sky like pale rags. Paul Ritter could hear bombers passing over his airfield for a night raid on London.

A light still burned inside Löwe's office. The Kommodore was trying to catch up on his infamous paperwork.

Ritter had been summoned.

He tapped.

Löwe admitted Paul Ritter and slammed the door.

The room was blue with pipe smoke. Löwe had a pile of witness reports in his fist.

Ritter froze. He thought in a fainting moment that Löwe was going to question his witness reports of Fritz's kills.

Löwe threw the reports at him. They separated and fluttered down. "What does this mean?"

Ritter managed to catch one. It was a witness report for a victory. One of his.

Löwe was bellowing, "This is the last thing I ever expected to find, and I don't know how to account for this! *Them!* All of them!"

Ritter felt off balance. His head drained as if in a hard turn. "What's wrong with this, *Herr Oberst?*"

"Where's your victory report!"

Oh. Ritter looked again. This was a witness report for a victory he *hadn't*

claimed.

Löwe roared. "I have a whole stack of witness reports but no kill claim to go with them! I asked Nachtigall. He says you never filed them!"

"I must not have seen them crash. A claim requires you see it crash."

"You don't see them crash? You don't *look!*"

"No, *Herr Oberst*. I'm busy up there."

"I CAN SEE THAT!"

Ever since Löwe had offered him the Gruppe command, Ritter had been noticing a disturbing trend – disturbing to him – of high scorers advancing to command rank, as if fighting ability equated with administrative ability. The idea was to have an active leader. But then who was running the desk? Ritter was not an administrator. And after Fritz's honors, Ritter suddenly didn't want Oak Leaves on his Knight's Cross either.

He opened his mouth, started a lie, met burning blue eyes and couldn't. "All I want to do is fly and fight. I don't want a higher command. I don't want to be ferreting through all this." He toed the papers that had fallen around him.

Löwe's face darkened. His scar stood out as a white star on a livid ground. Ritter thought Löwe was going to shoot him. Or stab him with a pencil. He might have said a number of things. What finally came out was not to the point. He was too angry to address the point.

Löwe snarled, ominous, insulted. "You think I'm ferreting?"

"What do you call it, *Herr Oberst?*"

After a long lethal pause, Löwe said, "Ferreting."

"And so."

Löwe bellowed. "Halle's Geschwader is the top scorer. That record ought to be mine! You are costing me an honor that rightly belongs to me!"

"I did some ferreting of my own, Johann. I called up each of the Geschwader's staffs and asked for the totals from their victory reports. Know what? All those scores don't add up to half the total the Oberkommando has been feeding us. We account so carefully. We waded through this Quatsch and sweat out the verifications. We need witnesses, we need authorizations. We report our scores, pilot by pilot. They are so strict with us. But for the total, the high command sends back Scheiße. Who cares if the individual scores are accurate – they just double it for the whole anyway!"

"It's called morale, Ritter," Löwe growled. "And who the fuck are you to be undermining what they do? This is borderline treason. Or maybe it is treason."

"How can it be treason? I haven't told anyone but you."

"The reports are inflated publically to counter the British propaganda. As for our own reports, the high command does know the real score."

"I don't think they do know."

"Not with *you* doing the reporting! You piss me off Ritter, I'll make you my Adjutant. Not just for a Gruppe this time. Geschwaderadjutant. Or maybe

I can get you a job shuffling papers for an entire Luftflotte. How does that appeal to you? You can be chief ferret."

Ritter turned gray.

"I used to think it was funny when you pulled this shit on Halle."

"I'm not trying to pull anything on you, *Herr Oberst*."

Löwe spread the witness reports out with his foot so he could count them. "You would have Oak Leaves by now."

"Who would put them on me? *Meier*? I don't want his fat hands near my throat."

"I would do it."

Ritter turned his head aside, gazed off. "I am very much like Göring."

"*Bitte?*" Löwe blinked, lost on the turn. He didn't see the similarity at all. "In fact, how the hell do you figure?"

"I'm no good at administration. And that man doesn't know strategy from his ass. He belongs in a cockpit."

"He wouldn't fit," Löwe said.

"When you try to be what you're not, you fall apart, and become something. . . something else that you're not. It's warped and all wrong. Where does it say the best fighters are the best strategists? I don't know strategy but I know enough to see that whoever's running this show is losing it for us against all odds."

Löwe crossed to the door in a few long strides, looked out to make sure the outer office was vacant, closed the door again.

Löwe turned. He spoke very low. "Bombing London is Hitler's idea. So don't argue with it. And we are *not* losing. Don't you *ever* say that. It is simply taking longer than we expected. You're right, you don't belong in higher command. But I want your victories. I want Halle's ass. He's not getting an honor that belongs to me. And I want you in Oak Leaves by the time the Sealion is unleashed!"

"When will that be, *Herr Oberst*?"

"Any time now. The RAF is on the brink of collapse."



A BRAMBLY REDDISH-GOLD eyebrow lifted over Greyson's sighted eye.

"We have recalled everyone on leave," Greyson said. "That did not mean to include you."

"I'm fit, sir."

Bryan Catrell had spent all yesterday and to-day getting back to Kingshill. The train was U/S. Communications were out. He'd heard church bells ringing as he came in. Bryan decided there was not going to be an invasion without him.

"I'm not going to argue the toss," Greyson said. "This arrived last night. It was just now decoded."

"What is it?"

"Alert Number One."

"Meaning what exactly?"

"Invasion imminent and probable within twelve hours."

The alert had been issued over twelve hours ago, dispatched from Fighter Command HQ, Bentley Priory, at 9.50 pm on 7 September.

Bryan lowered the transcript. "Are they here?"

"They're bombing London."

"I noticed."

"*Er kommt*, he says."

Rumors were flying that the invasion by sea had begun. Townsmen and farmers waited on the cliffs, prepared to fight with pitchforks, duck guns, fieldstones, whatever they had. Coastal aerodromes were prepared to scuttle their stations and pull their squadrons inland. Incendiaries poised over petrol lines running to the coast stood ready to set fires on the water.

"Are you sure you're fit, Catrell?"

"You're not going to fight the Battle of Marathon without me."

"Sorry?"

Bryan looked out at the airfield. There were no craters in it. No flags marked unexploded bombs. Repairs had got ahead of the raids now that Hitler was raining terror on the women and children and old men of London.

"I'm fit, sir."

"Then get out there, Cat."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. Sir?"

"What now?"

Bryan had been meaning to ask, knew this was not a good time, but anymore he did things when he thought of them, just in case a better time never came. "Did you know my father?"

"Yes, I knew him."

Thought so. "What was he like?"

"He was just like you."

Bryan's dog staggering out of the B Flight dispersal tent to greet him. The dog, in spite of having only three legs, usually walked better than this. "What's wrong with my dog?"

"Nothing," Witt said. "Dog drinks are like dog years."

"Harry, I don't want my dog drinking."

Bryan collected his flying kit from his locker.

The Tannoy blared. *Scramble!*

Kingshill sprang into action. Trolley accs bounced over the ground. Pilots climbed onto the kites.

Pointed into the wind, Bryan raised his hand, waved to indicate he was ready to roll. He looked back. His flight lieutenants Percy Lovejoy and Harry Witt gave thumbs up. Bryan signaled.

The machines leapt forward as one.

"Crossbow airborne."



SEPTEMBER DAYS WERE growing short.

Paul Ritter's new wingman, Wolf, had to get himself killed. On this side of the Ditch. The airplane was recovered but Wolf's grieving Rottweiler wouldn't let the new pilot near it.

"Shoot it," Fritz said.

"I can't shoot a dog," Ritter said. "I'd rather shoot you."

The Messerschmitts no longer looked like German aircraft. Their Teutonic order and precision had given way to haste and improvisation. French parts patched British-inflicted holes.

The weather was disintegrating.

All the men were on edge. Ritter thought back to Spain. *If this was Spain I would send the lot of them home.* But the Luftwaffe didn't have pilots to spare any more. Half of his squadron were children he didn't know. None of them were what he would call fit. Most were only in need of twenty-four hours assured quiet. For some of them the trouble ran deeper than that.

He was one of those.

Ludwig Ritter died. Löwenstamm gave Paul the telegram and granted him leave to go back to Berlin for the funeral. Paul refused to go. "He can't do this to me." His father, he meant.

There was a big mission being mounted tomorrow, the biggest yet, to clear a path for the invasion fleet. 1900 barges, 1600 escort and 420 tugs were assembled for Operation Seelöwe. The operation only waited on the Luftwaffe to

clear the way.

The bombers would be hitting London. The English fighters must come up to meet the attack. Ritter wanted to be there when the Luftwaffe crushed them once and for all, in the air, not on the ground. "Tomorrow is the day we annihilate the RAF."

Tomorrow was 15 September.



BRYAN WAS WAKENED in the middle of the night.

“Cuppa tea, sir?”

He groped to consciousness, became aware of the comforting sound of gentle rain tapping at the window. But that stopped even as Bryan was dressing.

Mist crept over the grass as Bryan walked to morning church service. He didn’t usually attend. Percy glanced aside as they went in together. Noted something missing from Bryan’s kit. “No fire extinguisher?”

It was what they called one’s pistol. In case you’re on fire, pull trigger. Bryan shook his head. “Percy, I just enjoy breathing too much.”

Aero engines warming up barked through the hymns. You could imagine the machines were praying for strength. And sometimes Bryan thought the kites did know what this was about. Such unfailing valour, you really want it to be on purpose.

A voice inside his head, Vicky’s, told him this was it. This day.

It seemed like most other days, the usual conversations and laughter. His dog wagged its tail. Riggers moved the Spits from their blast pens.

The mist thinned. The air became very warm. Even Percy was down to his shirtsleeves. He looked up at the clearing sky. “Good day for a blitz.”

“Think so?”

"Hm."

"So do I."

"We shall have to do something about lunch."

The morning was passing. Bryan lay asleep in a Lloyd-Loom chair he'd dragged out in the grass with others when the Tannoy clicked on. Bryan opened his eyes. His watch read 10.50. The Tannoy blared, ordered the squadron to cockpit readiness.

Archie pushed up from the grass, and pelted for his aeroplane, "Come Watson, the game's afoot!"

Bryan snared his parachute off the tailplane, hauled it on. He climbed up the left wing, stepped onto the metal seat, held onto the top of the windscreen with both hands and slid down.

Edith handed down the shoulder straps. Bryan collected them with the lap straps into the central pin. He fit the radio and oxygen leads in. Made all the checks. Altimeter set to zero.

And suddenly there was nothing else to do.

Hurry and wait.

The trolley acc was connected. Battle-bowled erks were standing by.

The Ops Officer was standing outside the tent, a phone pressed to his ear.

Bryan shouted, "How many bandits?"

The Ops Officer put a finger to his ear to block Bryan out and to listen to the phone.

Bryan shouted louder. "Hullo? How many —! Edith! Get him!"

The Ops Officer covered the receiver with his hand and shouted to Bryan, "They're still counting!"



PAUL RITTER WAITED in his tight cockpit, masses of bombers passing overhead as they circled Cap Gris Nez. He'd heard them taking off since 10.00. Their engines vibrated the air as they approached, resonating in his chest and shaking the ground. The pitch Doppler-shifted as they passed.

He pulled his notes from his boot and reviewed them one more time. The airplanes would be flying to maximum endurance. Everyone needed to follow routes precisely. There were hundreds of aircraft up there.

Finally his turn to take off. The Warte churned the inertial starters. Ritter fired his engine up. Low-set exhausts spat long flames. Smoke and dust whipped past his closed cockpit on a furious wind. He looked back at his Staffel, all the MEs poised on their gangly legs. Props thrashed.

At last, the signal.

With the baying snarl of opening throttles, the ME 109s leapt.

Off the ground, they climbed eagerly and joined up with the rest of the host, shining fierce birds with black crosses. The sky was thick with them. They could not possibly fail.



45



HOT, WINDLESS. WAITING.

Bryan's watch ticked slowly. Thirty minutes now. Bryan was baking inside the metal cockpit. His trousers stuck to him, feet roasting in his boots. He loosened his straps so he could move. Edith, clucking, tucked him back in snug. She gave him water.

Sweat trickled down his sides. The sun had broken through the clouds.

He'd had a cup of 100-octane coffee this morning. Felt it burning a hole in his stomach.

By now he hoped they would be stood down. Not likely. A priority message had come over the teleprinter from Group: Attack developing estimated strongest yet mounted in daylight.

"Start up!"

At last.

Bryan primed the engine, a few strokes only in this heat. Switches up. "Contact!" He thumbed the starter. The Spitfire woke with a shotgun crack. Leads pulled out, the trolley accs rolled bouncing away. Chocks away. Only the Spitfires' brakes held them back.

Twelve Spitfires stood in a storm of their own making.

Heated exhaust swept past the cockpit. Bryan hailed the Controller. "Hullo, this is Crossbow. Are things as hot up there as they are in here?"

"Don't go rushing off now."

Bryan had shaved too close that morning. Felt like he'd used a piece of broken glass. Left his neck raw, bumpy and stinging with salt sweat. A wipe with the back of his hand made it worse. His silk scarf was plastered to his skin.

He watched his coolant temperature creep upwards near the red as the kites stood in place. At 110 degrees and they would all go up in steam.

"Hullo, Dolphin, either scramble us or I'm shutting this bloody thing down."

"Off you go."

The barking chorus rose in pitch and strength. Spitfires strained against their brakes, then—unleashed—sprang. Sun flashed on metal wings. Bryan felt buoyant. It wasn't so much a take off as it was simply losing contact with the ground. Discomfort gave way to exultation. "Crossbow Airborne."

He touched the handbrake to stop his wheels' spin before they thumped into the underwing wells.

A thermal rose up from the heated ground, gathered under his wings, and carried him toward the sky.

"Hullo, this is Blue Leader. Is anyone else's radiator hot?"

"Yes. I shouldn't worry."

"As long as I'm not the only one."

"Well it *is* warmish to-day. Nothing a little altitude won't cure."

They were ordered to Angels two-seven.

At 20,000 feet, the ascent became work.

Sunlight was brilliant up here in an intense blue sky. A blinding spot of glare beamed on Bryan's polished Perspex. The air was thin and icy. The canopy frosted from inside. Bryan rubbed it clear, and unstuck his boots from the rudder pedals.

From the assigned height he could see London. A gray haze hung over the sprawl. The huddled rooftops seemed to be crouching together against a storm.

The Controller changed his mind and brought them down to Angels twenty. Then back up to twenty-five.

"Hullo Dolphin, this is Crossbow. I thought we were a bit better than this by now," Bryan sent.

"Trade for you, Crossbow. Two hundred plus at Angels one-five to Angels two-six. Crossing Dungeness."

The Controller gave the heading and it didn't change again. No feints this time. The Luftwaffe was headed straight for London. They weren't even pretending to be interested in anything else.

"Ought to be in sight, Crossbow."

Bryan had thought that the two altitudes meant bombers below and fighters above. Then he saw the mass of them: from 15,000 to 26,000 feet and just about solid in between.

"Bloody hell, it's the Luftwaffe entire!" Witt's voice, there.

A mass of stepped-up ranks advanced in waves, nine miles wide, five miles high, and of impenetrable depth.

Fifty broad-wing HE 111s led the way. Then came the columns of pencil-thin Do 17s, and Do 215s and JU 88s. Higher still were the ME 110s. And way up high, condensation trails glistened pure white ribbons that would be the tidy little yellow-nosed sharks at more Angels than Bryan cared to think about. ME 109s floated like clouds, higher than the tallest mountaintop.

Bryan turned up his oxygen, moved the knurled ring around the firing button through a quarter turn from SAFE to FIRE. He turned on his reflector sight to the daylight position. The sky was so bright he pulled the ring above the dimmer switches to slide the sunscreen into place.

The horde advanced, taking on shape and substance, deadly, immense. It came back to him that there was not one man in his squadron who wasn't younger than he. He was just 25 years old.

And we are all that stands between the boundless might of Nazi Germany and that huddle of grey rooftops.

He tried to picture blood red flags with clawed black crosses flying over England. And he couldn't. It must not happen. *Won't.*

With fierce elation, startling in its calm, he said, "Tally ho."

The Spitfires drove at the enemy.

Already Bryan could see the straight ribbon contrails begin to curve down. Someone was engaged. The Luftwaffe's neat columns began to break into whirling madness and descending black streaks.

The bulk of the mass marched solidly on.

The Spitfires tore in head-on. Unnerved Dorniers broke formation before them.

Bryan threw the anchor. Flaps, throttle, pitch wrenched down the airspeed. The Merlin engine whined. A Dornier grew enormous in his sight. Bryan squeezed. Red canvas patches blew out from his gunports. Tracers arced down. For the briefest fraction of a moment his kite appeared like a puppeteer holding the great bomber on eight glinting wires, then the puppet broke apart spouting smoke and flame.

Immediately another Dornier appeared dead in his sights. Too eager, Bryan let fly with the guns. Their streams crossed, separated and missed. The Dornier dropped its bombs, its rear gun winking at him as he shot past.

Bryan squinted up behind him into the sunlight's brilliance. Yellow-white radiance stabbed at his eyes. He could see nothing but brightness. Then a flash off of something up there. "Break, Crossbow aircraft, Break! The Hun is in the ruddy sun!"

ME 109s came slanting through the bomber formations, cannon pounding.

An ME pounced on a Hurricane below Bryan. Bryan stall-turned, flicked left, dropped vertically onto it. The ME pushed its nose down and ran.

The sky around him was a blur of black crosses and red white and blue

roundels. Anything yellow made him convulse on the stick.

He was only half aware of the R/T, charged with shouting, warnings, curses, cries for help, English, German, Polish.

"My oxygen is packed up. I'm going downstairs to have a bash at something a bit lower."

"Blue Two, on your tail!"

"You don't say."

"My Number Three is shooting at me!"

"That's a Messerschmitt you idiot."

"I have puzzled that out, thank you."

Through the yells and grunts pierced a high thin scream. You couldn't even know if it was German or English. The word could have been Fire! or *Feuer!* It didn't matter. The scream stopped being words. Bryan seized up inside.

Vicky, Vicky, Vicky.

The scream died quickly.

"Crossbow Leader, on your bleedin' arse!"

Christ! Bryan threw everything into a corner as another Spitfire slashed down on the ME 109 in his mirror.

"Bloody fool."

"Thanks, Harry."

Bryan rounded on a silvery shape, slapped a glowing red dot on the ME's oil tank — knew the tank was directly behind that supercharger intake sticking out of the port side of the yellow cowling. Needle centered in the turn and bank, thumb on the button.

Bryan's DeWildes hit with yellow starbursts, and the companion Hun was suddenly flying wing on a fireball.

Bryan aileron-turned. Avoided collision. Found a Dornier in his sights. Opened fire.

"Bloody hell, it's snowing!"

Parachutes bloomed. Stricken German bombers dumped four men at a time. Bryan turned his Spit on its wing to avoid snaring one. He had a horror that he might look left and see himself towing a man by his silks.

A Hurricane blundered in front of him, wings shredded, glycol billowing into its cockpit. Bryan dodged from its blind path.

Saw a Spitfire going down. Through the black smoke coiling round it he glimpsed a white ST.

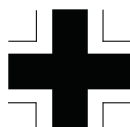
Dear God that's one of mine.

Bryan had lost a lot of altitude without being aware of it. He gave an instinctive look up and back. But some time in the melee the ME 109s had vanished and the horde of bombers had reversed direction.

Bryan chased a Heinkel. Closed on it.

His hammering fire withered to an impotent chatter and hiss of compressed air through empty breech blocks.

He requested and received permission for his squadron to pancake.
Dark billows rose up from scattered places around the city.
It stole the joy out of bringing down one or two of the enemy when he saw
the fires set by the hundreds that he failed stop.
Jesus. God. The Few. We are so Few.



THE ME 109S FLARED and stepped down from the air on fragile legs. Paul Ritter had a blazing headache. *There is a Tommy strafing in my head.*

The canopy lifted off him like a greenhouse opening. He inhaled open air. A Wart thrust a fuel hose into the ME's side behind the radio mast.

As soon as Ritter was out, the Warte cleaned his canopy, refilled the oil and water, and recharged the CO2 bottles that cocked the guns.

Gun barrels were swabbed out. Ritter had incendiaries mixed in with the other color-coded rounds, so his guns were very dirty.

"Motorkanone jammed again," Ritter told the Waffenant, and he went into the operations shed.

Ritter had three of his fighters ditch in the Channel, out of fuel. They'd stayed with the bombers too long, trying to keep the Spitfires off of them.

The IO said, "There aren't that many Spitfires left."

With an absolutely straight face he'd said that.

"Come again?" Ritter said softly.

"According to the latest information, their numbers are dwindling," the IO said.

Ritter grabbed the man by his tie and pulled him across the trestle table up close to his face and whispered into the beetling eyes behind skewed glasses, "They have dwindled up my aircraft!"

Someone pulled Ritter off, and his friends dragged him outside. Ritter lifted his arms to make them let go. He raved, so furious that his men could

hardly hear his rush of whispers, "I have never seen so many fighters in all my life!"

He demanded his duty officer get on the phone with someone closer to the top. "Let's get this show turned around and back in the air! Right now! Refuel. Rearm."

The British must've put everything they had upstairs. All those aircraft would be coming down now.

"Hit the airfields now! Right now! Quick while they're down!"



RIGGERS AND FITTERS worked to get their charges turned around. Armorers knelt under main planes and fed fresh belts into the gun bays to re-load the Brownings. The chugging of bowsers beat a sluggish measured tempo. A second Hun wave was coming any moment, no one had any doubt.

Bryan looked up at the sky and listened. "Hear anything?"

"No," Percy said.

"No one is on patrol while we're refuelling."

True. The sky was silent. "Where the devil are they?"

"You mean reserves? I don't think there are any."

"Well that's rather distressing, isn't it?"

Everyone was on the ground because everyone had been in the air.

All we had was up there.

The phone rang. The pilots reacted with flailing limbs and nothing to do but run to the trenches. Bryan's stomach lurched. Bile started up. He swallowed hard.

But nothing blared over the Tannoy. No scramble.

The Ops Officer leaned out the window. Beckoned Bryan over, and gave him the telephone.

It was Group, reporting one of his failed-to-returns was safe in hospital with a broken leg. Bryan gave the phone back to the Ops Officer. Tried not to shake.

Chiefy came to him. "You have nine kites, sir."

"When?"

"Now."

The bowzers, silent now, were trundling out of the way. Everyone had refueled.

Bryan blinked, afraid to smile. *Jerry missed the bus!*

Edith was standing on the wing of his kite, polishing his perspex with cotton waste. She was humming. "That's about it, sir."

He got cheerful. Grinned at her. "Still needs painting." He meant swastikas. For his victories.

"Oh, jolly good. I've made a stencil," Edith said. "I'm expecting bags of them, sir."

Part of Bryan's squadron, those who could swallow, were still eating when they were called to readiness again.

Ops advised, "Jerry's at it again. A lot of noise over there. Rather more of them this time." He paused with his hand on the bell pull. "Brace yourself, sir."

"Thank you for the warning."

He still flinched at the clanging and the shout: "Scramble! Scramble!"

He ran with his men for the kites.

The Spitfires had the altitude this time. Bryan ripped into a Hun bomber formation, guns blazing.

The Heinkel tumbled down end over end. Bryan hadn't thought that an aeroplane could move that way.

"Crossbow. This is Orchard. Are you engaged?"

"More than somewhat—Percy! Break!"

"On your tail! On your tail!"

"Whose bloody tail!"

The voice of Orchard: "Refrain from speaking in tongues on the R/T. It does nothing to aid comprehension."

"I'm hit. I'm hit."

From the corner of his eye Bryan saw a collision, Spitfire and Messerschmitt. He turned to look as two eagles dropped screaming from heaven, talons locked, no one climbing out.

He roared past an ME head on, heard bullets striking. He hauled up into a half loop, rolled off the top and gave chase.

Suddenly a yellow nose appeared high behind him, moving in very close without yet firing. Disciplined. Not just a fighter, this one was an assassin.

Bryan turned a split-ess but the ME anticipated this too, and began its turn immediately.

As Bryan levelled out far below, facing the opposite direction, the ME was still high on his tail. He'd traded in his altitude for that trick and suspected his soul was at stake because the devil was here to collect. Bryan's speed wasn't what it should have been. Something was wrong with his kite.

You can get an ME off your tail. You do however have to be willing to suffer for

it. Bryan heeled around, hard, chasing his own tail.

The ME didn't like that game and it climbed away.

Bryan's engine spilled smoke. He turned for Kingshill, angry to be breaking off while he still had fuel and bullets.

At the airfield, his wounded Spitfire joined the circuit.

He held back on the stick, moved his seat up. He released the harness catch to allow him to lean forward, the better to see.

The Spitfire lost speed in the approach. Bryan felt the stall. Banged on the throttle. She leapt, coughed, skirred over the barbed wire. Came down fast and hard. Dropped onto the grass, smoking.

Brakes. Brakes were among the casualties. His Spitfire took the whole 933 yards of the north-south runway and skinned off the end, dragged by the momentum of its great heavy nose.

A fire tender lumbered in pursuit.

The barbed wire at the far end caught Bryan's Spitfire, almost gently, like a net, and brought it to a stop.

Bryan jumped out and scrambled clear.

The fire tender heaved foam on the engine as the first flames licked from under the cowling.

The rest of his pilots straggled back in ragged sections.

Behind them in the sky they'd left vapour trails like a tangle of discarded thread. The contrails lingered, became wider, diffuse, then erased by the wind.

Percy Lovejoy had failed to return.

The ringing telephone sent a jolt through Bryan. He dropped into a crouch to dash for his kite.

Didn't have a kite.

The Ops Officer pointed at the receiver. Bryan straightened up and crossed to the tent at a walk. He sucked in a quavering inhalation, afraid what he would hear. "Catrell," he croaked.

"Lovejoy here! I broke the Spitfire."

Bryan exhaled. "Anything to show for it?"

Percy cheerfully reported two more victories. "And three more well and truly frightened. Don't let them start another flap without me."

"I shall dash off a note to Berlin and tell them to wait."

It wasn't the fighting, it was the waiting in between assaults that was going to kill him.

He haunted the maintenance hangar, watching the erks work on his Spit, until they chucked him out.

I need to get back up there.

The day crawled to a close without a return visit from the Luftwaffe.

Bryan returned to his billet, as tired as he could ever remember being, but truly he could not remember much at the moment. His face was wet. Water streamed from his eyes. He wasn't crying, he didn't think. He was just so

tired his eyes were leaking. When he closed his eyes he saw a red wall and an unending black swarm of bombers.

The BBC was saying that the RAF had scored 185 victories today.

"That's not possible because. . . ." He paused in what became a very long pause, his mind detoured momentarily then lost its way back. "Because . . . I was going to say something, wasn't I?"

"Yes, sir."

"Because . . . because," he murmured drifting. It should come to him in a moment. "Because it's not possible, that's why."

"Very good, sir."

Bryan was asleep. His batman pulled his Irvine jacket across him and left him where he was.

The crease between his brows didn't unfold even when he slept. He dreamed of a deathless monster pounding and pounding, and his spirits bowed, because he didn't yet know that the Sealion had died to-day.



ON THE 16TH OF SEPTEMBER, the staff of the German navy, who were going to be doing the crossing, concluded that the RAF was by no means defeated, and the season of calm seas was behind them.

Did we lose?

The Luftwaffe had never lost a battle. Paul Ritter hadn't considered it a possibility so he didn't know what to expect. They were still intact as a fighting force. Germany had lost no territory. But, *verdammt, I think we lost*. He felt empty.

If we can't win with odds like these, how can we ever?

According to Giulio Douhet in his *Command of the Air*, bombing was the key to victory. Not just military targets. Wars were won through terror. With the bombing of civilian centers, the physical and moral resistance of a people collapses.

That may have been true for Italians, but, it wasn't working on the British. If anything they get tougher under bombing.

Like steel in the fire.

"Who is the brain who listened to an Italian strategist anyway?" Ritter cried.

Someone mumbled, "Adolf Hitler."

A falcon was a lot of work. It demanded a lot of time. Ritter had been neglecting his.

He went to Colette's block under the trees. The tethered royal bird was tearing apart a locust.

No. Don't do that.

She looked sad on her tether, debased, shredding an insect with her hooked bill. He should have worked with her every day.

He took her from her perch, held her wings against her body, and unfastened her jesses. Her head stayed upright as he turned her on her back. She didn't know what he was doing to her. She nipped at his glove.

Ritter righted her, and lifted his fist skyward. Her pointed wings spread, feathers beat his face once. His hand bowed under her thrust and she took flight, a short glide, to perch on the prop of an airplane. She stayed around for awhile. Finally she disappeared and didn't come back.

What was it for?

The question came up now and again. Ritter had always managed to push it down.

To justify killing in the air was the easy part.

This was war. The enemy was shooting at you. This was simple.

The wider focus was muddier. *Why am I up here? Why is my country here?*

When you questioned your country, you were in serious trouble. Your country was your country. Question that and you've kicked out the foundation of the world.

Fritz was sometimes right in spite of himself. He'd told Ritter that he thought too much. There were two ways to get through this: Have all the answers, or don't ask the questions. War was a young man's game. And Ritter was suddenly feeling old.

The Luftwaffe had been throwing itself across the Channel in droves for no purpose at all. He needed a reason to go on. He couldn't face Löwe with it. Never could. The man didn't know what weakness was.

Halle does. And for that Ritter used to scorn him. He remembered that with an inward cringing. *I had no right.*

Löwenstamm was who Ritter wanted to be. And who Ritter wanted to be would never understand what was in his head at this moment. Ritter needed someone who believed in things.

A man who crosses himself before he goes up.

He remembered a church. A Madonna black with soot. A man kneeling. Ritter had thought him a ridiculous pious figure at the time.

He desperately needed someone who believed in the incredible. Unswervingly. Because Ritter believed in nothing.

He looked out to the field where a rugby match between the third and ninth Staffeln was in full riot. It had been a wet morning and all the players were the same mud color by now.

Ritter sat quietly, a drink at his elbow. The white tablecloth fluttered with a slight breeze. The gramophone played.

He got up, shrugged into his leather flight jacket. He collected his motorcycle from the motor transport garage and drove down the coast to Halle's Geschwader. Halle wouldn't think less of him. He could come unglued in front of Halle.

My sight is broken. Fix it.

Halle always looked through him anyway, so what the hell?

Most of the pilots were gone from Halle's airfield. They would be hunting game, watching the cinema, whoring, sight-seeing. There were few operations to-day.

The ground crews were pasting their aircraft back together.

A ball of feathers in a trash heap caught Ritter's eye. Drying blood was still sticky on its speckled breast.

He leaned down from his motorcycle and picked her up, smoothed her brown-and-white feathers in his black-gloved hands. He tried to close her hooked beak but it just opened again when he let go of it. Maybe she had screamed. Her feet were curled up, already stiff.

A voice sounded beside him. "It was the damndest thing. He perched on the prop of my plane. I went in, got my grousing rifle. He stayed there. I aimed. Pow."

"A sitting tame bird. That's very good," Ritter said. He settled Colette back in the trash. When he straightened up, the great hunter had already stalked away.

Ritter walked his motorcycle to where the Geschwader TO stood, head craned heavenward, squinting at the overcast glare.

"Where is Halle?" Paul demanded.

The TO pointed up.

The sound of a Daimler-Benz engine snarled somewhere in the low gunmetal sky.

The TO muttered. The throttle sounded wide open. It was coming nearer.

Suddenly the Messerschmitt broke under the cloud layer, nose down.

Too fast. Too steep. Dagging down in a screaming dive, air whining in the aerial wires. The nose began to lift, starting to recover.

Pull up. Pull up.

The ME plunged downward, nose rising, pulling so hard the wings juddered.

A faint shadow appeared on the ground, growing rapidly, the shape of a hard edged cross.

The ME met its shadow.

Propeller bit, dirt flew with a *thrrrrriip* before the ME smashed onto its spinner, then slammed, nose over, onto its back. Pieces flew off like thrown

knives. The fuselage scraped down the field and kept sliding, gouging out a trough in the damp earth, destroying itself as it went. Then, half entombed in the ground, it caught fire.

Men swarmed toward it.

Ritter kick-started his motorcycle. Turned around. There was nothing for him here.

He drove back to his airfield, sat at the little outdoor table at the edge of the field where the rugby match was still on. He changed the record on the gramophone and cranked it up. He poured another cognac, sat back and watched the game until the Adjutant came out, flapping.

A distant part of Ritter's brain registered: *Oh. There it is.*

"It's unbelievable. It's horrible," Nachtigall was nearly shrieking. "Do you think a Tommy was up there? Did anyone hear anything? I'd arrest his Wart for sabotage. You never know."

Ritter lit the cigarette. An even flow of smoke streamed from his nostrils.

Nachtigall turned away from him to someone who could share his grief and alarm. The two rugby teams, covered in mud, looked as desolate as Landser in the trenches. They wore that fixed 1000-meter stare of stricken infantry. The man holding the ball looked like he would cry.

Fritz von Soden waited until he could get a cue for the correct reaction for this situation.

It was a hot and pointed fence Fritz sat on. Politics always was. The battle for Britain had gone wrong. Unexplained death of the famous always drew suspicion.

Ritter could see Fritz calculating how much sorrow for Halle was politically healthy for Fritz to show here. He wouldn't want to be caught giving the wrong reaction.

Halle had been a national hero, but the suggestion was whispered once and immediately spread like a plague that Halle had been assassinated from within the Reich for his dissent from certain Nazi doctrines.

Ritter rejected that suspicion. No. He refused to consider for an instant that Germany could be some mindless brute that would chew off its own paw.

He assured Fritz five times that he didn't think Halle had been hit by the Gestapo.

Fritz asked someone else a few times.

Maybe England had a death ray and shot Halle out of the sky.

Could've been suicide? No, that wasn't in Erwin Halle.

Frozen instruments? Sabotage? Sabotage meant there was an English spy among them.

Assassination? That idea would not go away. Halle was awfully Catholic.

But the official reaction, when it came, was stunned distress. The Reich was in mourning.

Fritz showed tears.

Operation Sealion and the invasion of England was postponed until further notice by order of Adolf Hitler.

Officially the Reich called the assault a victory. Germany had taught England a lesson.

To his Luftwaffe, Hermann Göring roared, "The fighters have failed!"

The men held a subdued party for the new Gruppenkommandeur. The hour was wrong and everyone was in funeral dress. It was tough to celebrate. Ritter wasn't so much promoted as he'd been sucked upward by the sudden vacuum at the top. Fritz von Soden had assumed command of Halle's Geschwader.

Ritter inherited command of the Gruppe I./JG 23.

The radio was playing *Bomben auf England* one more time.

Löwe switched it off. He hooked a leg of the piano bench with his instep and dragged it out. "Play us something, Ritter."

Ritter stared at the piano keys. "I don't feel like it."

"Play something before I jump out the window."

"We're on the ground floor, Herr Oberst."

"Then I would look like an ass, wouldn't I. Play something."

Ritter doubted that Löwe ever entertained thoughts of killing himself. He was one of those men who, no matter how bad life got, would never think of leaving it on purpose.

Maybe Löwe sensed someone else about to leave. And made him put his hands on the piano keys where he could see them.

Something smelled like fear.

Odd machines had been showing up on the Geschwader's airfields. There was already something called an ME 109 E-7, which looked suspiciously like an E-4 but with the addition of a 300 litre moulded plywood drop tank. It had been tried in France and no one had liked it back then. Why did anyone think the pilots would be more willing to carry a leaky incendiary under their bellies now? It was a dangerous baby with a tendency to dribble.

Ritter intercepted a Wart maneuvering a wooden tank with intent to install it. Ritter defended his *Frau*. "Where are you going to put that?"

"I'd like to put it up Der Dicke's ass, *mein Herr*. It would fit too."

"Put it on Löwe's spare crate. He needs a drop tank."

Then Ritter saw the Waffenwarte hanging something else on the MEs.

"What is that?"

"Bomb racks."

"I see that. What is it doing on an ME 109?"

"Reichsmarschall's orders."

O mein Gott.

Fighter-bombers. He remembered the Waffenwarte in Spain hanging bombs on his antiquated HE 51. These men were hanging bombs on a

Messerschmitt 109 as if it were an obsolete aircraft that couldn't do its job. This is what happens to fighters when they are no good. It happened to the HE 51s. It had happened to the ME 110s. Now they were hanging bombs on ME 109s.

We're done.

Ritter started to shake and couldn't stop. He watched the armorers jerry rig the bomb racks onto the fighters. Ritter rubbed his arms, stepped backward. No. The mind screamed over and over. No. So loud he was certain others would hear him, that scream inside his head. No. A dread he hadn't felt since the early days in Spain.

A hand landed on his shoulder and he jumped.

Löwe said, "It's just me. Don't look like that, Ritter. Those aircraft aren't assigned to your Gruppe. You don't have to fly them. You don't even have to command them. I know how you feel about carrying bombs on a fighter."

"Why do we need to hang bombs on *any* of the MEs? This is your Geschwader."

"A third of the fighters are to become fighter-bombers. The order came from the Fat One. If the fighters can't protect the bombers, they will become bombers. The decision is Hitler's."

"That man could fuck up a wet dream!"

Löwe told Ritter to shut up.

Even if Ritter didn't carry them, hanging afterthought bombs on a fighter meant the fighter was no good as a fighter. The ME 109 was his pride, his life.

The dread returned to stay.

Göring's train, *Asia*, was due at the station at Pas de Calais within the hour.

Hitler had demanded to see the Reichsmarschall in person to explain the Luftwaffe's failure. From here *Asia* was bound for Berlin. The train would be carrying Halle's casket back to Germany in state, with several high-ranking officers of the Luftwaffe, Löwe among them.

In anticipation of *Asia's* arrival, the machines of JG 23 were polished and made parade ready.

A row of humiliated ME 109s with single bombs under their fuselages lined up in cowed obedience to meet the Reichsmarschall. They would be the first thing Göring would see coming inside the gate.

It was a grey day. The MEs didn't even cast shadows. May as well not be there.

"Otto!"

Ritter's Wart lumbered out frowning. His black overalls were parade clean and that didn't look right on a Wart.

"Start me up."

The frown pulled deeper.

"Come on, come on. The Reichsmarschall will be here in an hour. Let's get this done."

Otto shuffled back to the shed to fetch a crank for the inertial starter.

At the ascending whine, Ritter pulled the starter. The engine fired. Blades spun. Temperatures crept up the dials. When she was warm enough, Ritter ran her up.

With the opening throttle she screamed like a bound eagle, rocking against her chocks and her ties. Ritter watched for mag drop. It was negligible. He throttled back.

Satisfied with the readings, the windblown Otto untied the tail for him.

The cockpit had grown shabby, its black paint worn and chipped. Bare metal showed through in patches. The harness straps were pliant, broken-in. Otto reached in and pulled them tight.

As the canopy closed over him Ritter felt a twinge of regret. Guilt for taking her down with him.

"You understand, don't you, *meine Frau*?" he murmured.

She wanted to go. Strained against the brakes. *This is what we exist for.*

Otto hauled on the ropes to pull the chocks clear. He climbed on the wing and guided Ritter onto the field into the wind.

Otto jumped down, ducked clear of the wing.

Final checks. Trim, mixture, fuel, flaps, radiator. Ritter had done it so many times it was long past routine and became ritual, like the priest at the altar, and every move had significance and moment. Neglect some part of the ritual and never mind God, the Messerschmitt would damn you for it. And the ME 109 was, thought Ritter, altogether the more responsive.

The duty officer stalked up the middle of the field. He had no orders to clear any aircraft for take off.

The engine bellowed with opening throttle. Brakes released.

The Messerschmitt tore down the field, straight at him.

The duty officer froze more in disbelief than fear. Dull indignation insisted he had not cleared any aircraft.

The ME lifted, roared over duty officer. The low-slung wing nearly took his head off.

Johann Löwenstamm struggled into full dress uniform. The waistband of his riding style breeches had become too tight, or else he had just got fat. Locating his sword escalated into a major search operation. He'd been using his helmet as an ice bucket. He sent someone to polish that. His best boots were too tight, always had been. It was such a grunting ordeal getting into them, he guessed they would never come off.

Between tugs he said, "This is what they must mean when they say someone died with his boots on. *Uph*. It does not mean they died in action. It means their dress uniform boots were too goddamn tight. *Shit!*"

"Once more ought to do it, *mein Herr*."

"It had better."

"*Zieh!*" With a last mighty pull, his heel slid down.

Löwe sat up, his face red. He slapped the boot hook into the orderly's palm, done. "What next?"

As the orderly rummaged through regalia, Löwe stood up and stomped. He had the sinking feeling he'd just run his big toe through his sock.

"I can't even get back at Halle for this!"

Once more, Erwin Halle beat him to something. "*Gott*, I hate funerals. I don't even want to go to my own."

He watched somberly as his orderly fastened the black armband on his left sleeve opposite his Kommodore's ring on his right sleeve.

He gathered his staff around him, giving last minute orders as he thought of them. Or just talking, which Löwe always did.

"I have this dream, and it's a wet one. There are ten Arabian dancing girls in my office—no, twenty. They have jewels at their ankles and rubies in their navels, and not much else. They *had* seven veils but those are on the floor. Then in comes Salome carrying a huge silver platter over her head, and she shimmies up to the dais—did I forget to mention I'm on a throne?—and she lays this enormous silver platter at my feet, and on it, I love this part, is the rudder of Erwin Halle's Messerschmitt. And it has fewer victories on it than mine."

"I had this dream again last night after we got the news, and in comes Salome. Only the tray is dripping blood and I never did see what was on the platter because as she started to lower it I woke up.

"And I started to think: Did I wish this to happen? And I actually had to ring up Halle's unit—I called those poor men—and I asked them: Did the rudder come off Halle's crate? Yes, it did. Everything came off. And I thought: I've done it. I have murdered Erwin Halle. But then they told me it wasn't Halle's usual airplane. It wasn't the one with all his victories on it. And then I thought, if I really did have the power to wish things to happen, then why hasn't the goddamn weather been sunny? Why aren't we in England? And where are my dancing girls! Twenty—Thirty! I want my goddamn dancing girls—What is that?"

A roar made them look up.

It sounded like a Daimler Benz at takeoff revs.

The Staff rushed outside.

Löwe saw Ritter's Wart walking in from the field.

Oh *shit*.

The duty officer with grass-stained hands and knees insisted he hadn't given clearance for takeoff. He nodded up at the airplane. "I don't even know who that is."

"I do," Löwe growled.

The duty officer quieted when he learned it was a Gruppenkommandeur who had nearly taken him out. He muttered indignantly that he might have been told.

"He had to check something, *mein Herr*," Otto said. He believed that.

"Wretched timing."

Löwe crossed his arms and looked up. He could see nothing but grey. The Wart waited for his pilot to circle back. The engine sounded fainter and fainter, then faded from hearing.

Came the realization he was not coming back.

Otto looked like a puzzled rock.

Löwenstamm tapped two men, Winter and Brücke. "Get into your flying gear."

He pointed to his own reserve airplane sitting apart with an experimental drop tank fitted on. "Is that tank filled?"

"Yes, *Herr Oberst*."

"I'm flying that one."

Löwe's ME trundled into a long sluggish run, wind dragging at the drop tank. Löwe felt every bump and jar under his wheels as he accelerated over the rutted field dragging 300 litres of flammable liquid inches from the ground. Mole hills were in fact mountains. If he hit one, then Johann Löwenstamm would be going back to Berlin in the same car as Erwin Halle. Smaller box.

The ME waddled into the air. Löwe joined up with Winter and Brücke.

It was a wide murky sky in which to find one Messerschmitt.

Löwe guessed where Paul Ritter would go. Ritter was a shoot for the heart sort of man. Löwe set a course straight across the narrowest stretch of the Channel and pushed his throttle toward the gate.

It occurred to Löwe that he hadn't one chance in hell of finding him, but sometimes a pilot knew when a thing was meant to be and there was never a doubt that he must find Paul Ritter.

Suddenly, Winter's voice. "There! Twelve o'clock."

Under the clouds a moving shape showed itself against the water.

Löwe spoke into the wireless. "Come in, Ritter. What do you think you're doing?"

A silence. Then Ritter's voice. "It's a free hunt."

"Turn around and get in parade formation with everyone else. What the fuck am I going to tell the Reichsmarschall when you're not there?"

"Tell him I have influenza. Tell him I have distemper. Tell him I'm pregnant."

"Come home, Ritter."

"I'm not standing for charges."

"You're due a leave, I should have ordered you take it."

"To do what? Ski at Zürs? Go *home*?"

Ritter was afraid to come down. Dying had always been in the picture. He knew it was possible and he'd learned to take steps to avoid it. Death was still a constant.

Losing had never been part of the picture.

Ritter couldn't watch the Luftwaffe lose. He couldn't retreat. He would go

down fighting. He wasn't waiting for the end. He would go out and meet it, armed.

"Turn around now. This never happened. We are having a nightmare."

"I have news, Johann. We are never going to wake up from this one. But that's not news, is it?"

"I have not given up. How do you expect to meet anyone?"

"I was hoping to be taken for a bomber. And if no one comes up to meet me, I haven't forgotten how to strafe."

"And when were you planning on coming back?"

There was a long empty crackling on the wireless.

Ritter spoke at last. "You're going to ruin this for me. They'll only come up for bombers. Four is a fighter swarm. They won't come up for fighters."

Löwe barked, "You insubordinate traitorous swine! Turn around now!"

There was a daunted pause.

"That almost worked. I'm not a traitor."

"You are losing an airplane and a pilot for us, what else shall I call you? We need both."

"The pilot is already in the basket. I'm sorry about the aircraft. I'll see if I can't make it worth it."

He was weary of being a baited dog chained to the house while intruders taunted at a safe distance. He'd snapped the chain. He could spend a lot more time over England and go deeper into enemy territory than ever because he didn't need to worry about getting home.

One last free hunt, using his ME 109 as ME 109s were meant to be used.

Ritter was surprised when the other three Messerschmitts fell into position on his flanks in a bomber-style formation.

Löwenstamm was always good at playing the cards he held.

Ritter heard Löwe's voice: "Winter. Brücke. We're coming into range. Radio silence everyone."

Ritter smiled. If only for this moment, all was right in the world.

Red Section drove their Spitfires as if they were prams, radiator shutters in the minimum drag position. ASI 160 miles per hour. Revs at 1700 per minute. Mixture control set to weak.

Bryan Catrell suspected his flight had been sent up on another tail chase. The radar lost the suspect plot when it crossed the coast.

Bryan continued the patrol because it was difficult to believe another day would pass without a visit from the continent.

The bombers would come at night. The Luftwaffe kept up its cowardly terror raids on civilians in darkness.

But the days? They were quiet. Something had happened.

The Air Ministry had stepped down to Alert level 2.

Invasion was no longer regarded as "Imminent."

The clouds were trying to clear in places. Bryan flew with his canopy open.

With the Rolls Royce engine's loud crooning he was beginning to relax, untangling nerves he hadn't realized were so taut until they began to untie. He glanced over at the rest of his section. From time to time one would give a sudden jink, a nervous twitch.

The Merlin's guttural humming continued strong and steady. Nothing to fear. Nothing to fear.

The four Spitfires spread their broad wings over the muted countryside.

The red canvas patches over the gunports in their wings were still intact. When was the last time gun patches had stayed on so long?

Something had happened.

Bryan suspected that the 15th of September had been a significant day. The Battle of Marathon. The claim was 185 E/A down, and he believed it. The tide had turned. It was difficult to recognize it while he was in the midst of it, and he couldn't be certain now, but he thought maybe England had warded the Hun off, at least for the year. An invasion on a rough sea was simply not likely.

Hitler could be stopped. He was not invincible.

Ritter and Löwe took the leads, Leutnants Winter and Brücke flew high and behind.

Ritter sighted the blue and red peacock eyes first. The Spitfires down there were flying in a loose formation.

Ritter leapt ahead of his formation like in the old days before the wireless, and he rocked his wings.

The Spitfire's canopy was a clear bubble, much better than the ME 109's braced canopy but no good at all if the pilot didn't *look*.

Bryan had had a contact from Jan Bujakowski. The Polish squadron was sitting on one of the highest scores in this battle. He would have to tell Vicky – Stop. Sadness. So many things Bryan wanted to tell Vicky.

Victor, an internal voice insisted.

Bryan's intuition started speaking with Victor's voice.

Bryan, you have company.

Bryan hauled around with throttle firewalled. A voice yelling. His. "Break! Break! Break!"

Debris clattered against his fuselage as his No.2's aeroplane collapsed around him.

It was a clean kill.

Ritter's Tommy didn't climb out. Löwe's did.

As Ritter veered away he thought he recognized the Spitfire pilot flying with his canopy open. His imagination probably. Who could recognize anyone in a leather helmet and goggles at these speeds?

Ritter thought the pilot looked like Bryan Catrell. But then Ritter thought every Spitfire pilot looked like Bryan Catrell. Paul Ritter knew the name of one Tommy pilot and he imagined every one he encountered was he.

Winter and Brücke reported red lamps warning of low fuel levels. It was time to turn around. Löwe still had his drop tank, and Ritter's lamp didn't light because he'd pulled the bulb out before he took off.

"Nice shooting," Löwe said. "Let's go home."

Ritter fell in with the schwarm automatically, homeward.

Bryan slammed his throttle forward and pulled the plug. He moved the milled safety off. But the Huns had a start on him.

There'd been no warning. And even though the MEs happened to be on his frequency, he hadn't heard anything from them until they opened fire. It wasn't like the Hun to keep quiet on the wireless. All at once he'd heard a crowing "*Horrido!*" And suddenly only he and Harry Witt were left in the air. Ned was augering in and Bertrand was hanging from a parachute while four ME 109's sped away.

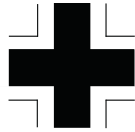
Bryan was astounded to know one of the ME pilots. He'd glimpsed the painted red heart and the Gothic script letters as the Messerschmitt flashed by.

Die Frau.

For once the Nazi bastard had a name and he was getting away with murder, one of four black specks hying for the coast.

Furious, Bryan sent over the R/T: "Paul Ritter does run. *I fly.*"

One of the MEs stood on its tail and turned around.



49



THE MEN OF JG 23 kept an anxious vigil on the coast of France, scanning the horizon for their two airplanes.

"Löwe and Ritter were right behind us," Leutnant Brücke said.

Leutnant Winter gnawed on his lip. He crossed and uncrossed his arms. "I shouldn't have come back without Löwe."

All of Löwenstamm's men squinted at the horizon, as if the looking hard would create something to see.

The TO gauged the ME's fuel consumption and checked his watch.

"Ritter can't get back."

The Adjutant got on the phone with air sea rescue. He dispatched a seaplane to look out for a possible dye marker on the Channel water.

The TO had to figure in extra time for Löwe because he was carrying a drop tank. He was trying to estimate how much time Löwe might have left in the air.

"He's here," someone said.

"Where?" All the men looked toward the Channel.

"Not Löwe." The TO was facing the other way. "*Him!*"

A train whistle blew. Smoke chugged up in dark puffs from beyond the trees.

Reichsmarschall Göring's train had arrived at the station.

"Oh fuck!"

The men turned back to the Channel with desperate glances.

In a quarter hour the staff car arrived at the airfield.

Officers wearing helmets and carrying guns jumped out. They couldn't imagine why the Jagdgeschwader hadn't sent a car to receive the Reichsmarschall at the train. "Is there danger?"

"There's trouble. No danger."

Göring's men stirred. "Indeed."

"The Reichsmarschall is not going to like this," the officer said.

And a hatchet-faced man wearing civilian clothes like a Gestapo agent asked softly, "Whom are we waiting for?"

"Oberst Löwenstamm."

The man folded his hands. "We shall wait as well."

The TO looked at his watch. "Löwe's down."

All faces turned toward the Channel.

A distant buzz pushed itself into hearing, a single engine. A glint flashed in the sky.

The Adjutant looked through the glass, found the lone Messerschmitt. "It's Löwe!"

Even as he said it the sound hesitated and died, came back to life for another buzz, then died altogether. The ME 109 was now a glider, its prop wheeling silently.

Men lined the headlands above the beach. Their heads jutted forward as if they were the only thing physically keeping the airplane up.

The ME glided lower and lower. Nearer.

A new pilot from the Lehr Geschwader said, "He forgot his landing gear."

"He isn't forgetting."

It was going to be a wheels-up landing, if it was to be a landing at all.

Löwe was already too low to bale out.

The ME sailed landward.

Short of the beach, the tail wheel touched water, the belly slapped down. The ME pushed in with a white wake. Splashing prop blades bent back as they hit the shoal, and the ME nosed up the shallows and onto the beach with a crunch of sand on metal. The heavy Daimler Benz engine burrowed itself into the soft sand and Messerschmitt came to rest, half in, half out of the water. Waves lapped at its sides with a tinny sound.

Johann Löwenstamm climbed out and onto the wing. He jumped down into the shallows and waded in.

His men crowded around him.

Löwe nodded. "I would have waved but as you see . . ."

Smiles broke out. "You got a victory!"

Löwe nodded again.

"Where's Ritter?" many men asked.

"Give me something to drink."

Someone passed Löwe a flask. He took a long draught.

The Reichsmarschall was here.
Where was Paul Ritter?
Where to begin?

Don't dogfight a Spitfire. Hit and run. Hit and run. Hadn't Ritter always been told? *And this one yet!*

But here they were, the Messerschmitt and the Spitfire, locked in a dogfight, and Ritter couldn't let go.

The English poet said of the cobra and the mongoose, "This shall end when one is dead." It sounded a lot like what Adolf Hitler had said, "The continuation of this battle will result in the total destruction of one of the opponents."

So it is. Me and my Englishman.

It was a surreal to know the man he was shooting at. Bryan Catrell. Ritter couldn't back down. *There is no second place.*

If a pilot survived five sorties, his odds of survival skyrocketed thereafter. It had to be the same on the other side of the Channel. Bryan Catrell had his wings since 1936. He would have been flying throughout the battle. He would be an expert.

No margins. Paul Ritter was flying against a Spitfire at its best.

Well, Bryan Catrell was flying against a Messerschmitt 109 at its best.

They sped at each other. At a combined speed of over 600 miles per hour, they were hurtling toward mutual annihilation. Bryan wouldn't want to die. But he would be angry. Ritter had shot down his comrade.

Ritter couldn't risk it. He rolled out of the way just as they came into firing range, 1000 meters, keeping the stick well back so his nose didn't pitch him below the Spitfire at the bottom of the roll.

In the seconds it took him to turn over, the Spitfire vanished.

Ritter turned to look for him. He didn't see him, so there was only one place he could be.

Under my tail!

Ritter threw the ME to the side, heard the guns. Phosphorescent orange bullet tracks flashed past his port side. He jinked again. His forehead bounced off the rubber padding on his Revi sight.

He needed to get clear of the Spitfire's firing line and get himself into attack position.

He powered the stick forward, throttle to the wall. Stomach pushed up toward his throat.

Down. Ears slamming in. ASI berserk. Altimeter unwinding. Stick fighting him. Tailplane wanted to right him. He jammed his full weight against the stick to free his left hand to trim the tailplane into the dive. Better. But he couldn't trim the damn rudder. He stamped on the left pedal harder and harder, muscles in his thigh vibrating.

Water droplets of the thin cloud made scraping sounds like bits of glass

against his machine at this speed. Then the vapor cleared and the ground was flying up at him. He tried to pull back on the stick with both hands. Wings shuddered and the stick would not move.

In a terrifying moment he wondered if this was what had happened to Erwin Halle.

Sweat trickled along his scalp, arm muscles knotted and burning. He shuddered like the aircraft, all the blood slipping from his face. He had trimmed to keep her nose down, now she wouldn't come up. The ground came charging upwards. Both hands hauled hard. He should never have trimmed. Pull, pull. Trying to bend solid steel. He let one hand off the stick to reach for the trimmer wheel. Hauled it back.

Ground careered up and up. Not going to make it. Pulled. Every fiber strained, screaming agony. Metal groaning under stress. Goggles pressed down on his nose, slid on sweat. Starlike lights pricked before his eyes. Green all round. Earth suddenly close, distinct, and grasping.

He pulled up. Imagined he heard grass whipping on his belly.

Flying.

He jinked away from the Spitfire he knew was there. He didn't look, only knew it had followed him down.

Blood burned back into his head. He breathed hard. Turned up the oxygen. Tried to get his senses back. He thought he would have at least gained room to turn around and face the attack. He'd won it, then lost it to dizziness.

He looked back.

Flames erupted from the leading edge of the Spitfire's slender wings, dancing lights red and yellow. Flashing orange strings of tracer reached for his tail.

Ritter dropped back to the deck and did what he hadn't done since his earliest days in Spain in an HE 51.

Hedge hop.

Follow this, Bryan Catrell.

He tilted between willow trees, their long lancet leaves grazing his cockpit. Bullets shredded off their green shoots.

Sense of speed was dizzying this close to the ground. It would have been a thrill if he were the hunter instead of running for his life.

Hail clattered on his port wing. The Spitfire was arcing bullets down on him. Too far, too diffuse.

Good. *Spend a few more rounds like that.*

Ritter side-slipped into a valley.

Or why don't you tilt your nose down a little, Tommy?

The Spitfire dropped to stay with him like a tail. Ritter would give him the ride of his death if he wanted to play pilot with him. He flew so low he didn't dare bank hard.

The Englishman must have done this before. The Spitfire would not be shaken.

They were too close to the ground for Ritter to try to see what had become of Löwe and the other Spitfire.

The nearness of death gave back his thirst for life. Suddenly he didn't want to die. His blood rushed with battle lust and will to fight.

I want to live.

I want to win.

Tattoo of guns drummed behind him. He flew around an elm tree, his wing in the weeds. Bullets tore into the boughs above him.

Ritter led the Spitfire over a lake. Sent the rowboats rocking at their little docks.

It occurred to Ritter, if he won—and he intended to win—and ran out of petrol over land, he would still lose.

Victory must be over the Channel. The Channel was his ground. There would be E boats from air sea rescue to pick him up when this was over.

East. He checked his compass. Find east.

He drove all out for the coast.

Bryan had seen the mass of black marks on the ME's yellow rudder, and names ran through his head like a roll call: Vicky, Asp, Collie, Burrows, Teddy, Randy, as if this one Hun had killed them all. Bryan wanted more than anything in his life to shoot off that black dashed rudder.

Then the ME dove. Bryan followed him into the dive. The ME was quicker off the mark. Bryan half-rolled and tore down. ASI 470 miles per hour. Ailerons solidified.

At the bottom of the dive Bryan still had the ME in sight. Couldn't believe the Hun kite hadn't pranged. Bryan set his lips in a hard line.

I am going to wipe a greasy black streak across the sky with the guts of your Messerschmitt.

Now the ME was whistling along the ground low as a snake, so impossibly low, Bryan thought if he just let Ritter continue, he would take care of himself. But it didn't happen.

First of a long list of reprimands Bryan Catrell the cadet received had been for flying too low.

I know how to do this.

So did Paul Ritter.

Bryan chased the ME low to the ground. Trees nodded madly in the sudden windstorm of their making. Torn off leaves buzzed through his propeller.

Ritter charged up a slope. Pulled up over a farmhouse.

The sharp crack that sounded off Bryan bullet-proof windscreen may have been a bird. Sounded like a bullet.

The ME slipped into a riverbed, and banked around the bends.

The red bead of Bryan's gun sight bounced on and off the fleeing shape of the high-set, strutted tailplane.

Bryan pressed the firing button. The stick nudged forward with the

pressure, and the Spitfire's fine responses threw off his fire. The long nose dipped and his bullets fell down behind the fleeing yellow tail. He cursed the Spit's sensitivity, his own heavy-handedness. One more mistake like that he would be in the ground. He held the stick with his left hand, right hand on the spade grip. Fired.

His own recoil cut into his speed.

Suddenly a net of high-tension cables rose 20 foot high in their paths. Bryan gasped, lifted and cleared the cables as the ME 109 went slashing underneath with ten foot of airscrew. The ME's prop measured two inches less than Spitfire's—probably the two inches that he cleared it by. Paul Ritter was either insane lucky or the best pilot Bryan had ever seen.

As Bryan lifted over the rise, he glimpsed wide open sky up ahead—The Channel!

At sea level the Spitfire with override was faster, but Bryan still had his canopy open and it dragged. It was hard to close at speed and he couldn't spare the motion of pulling the canopy forward.

Had to. He reached up, tugged, lost grip on it. The canopy slid back. He tried again, got hold and slammed it forward over him. He had let the ME get ahead. But Bryan was now the faster.

Bryan glanced at the temperatures. With the override on he was approaching redlines. Well the ME had to be seeing redlines too.

Closing now, Bryan dropped onto the ME's tail, aimed. The ME launched into a steep climb. That was the ME 109's one trick play. Bryan stayed with him but couldn't line up a shot. The angle was too steep. His bullets would drop away.

Don't waste rounds.

Long blue flames from his high-set exhausts burned brighter in the fading light. His Merlin engine thundered full bore. Smells took on a burned edge.

His compass read north. Bryan drifted to the right, waited for the ME to turn. Ritter must turn to reach the water.

Ritter closed the radiator flap to the low drag position. Temperature soared, but he couldn't afford the wind resistance now. This kite would never see France anyway. He smelled scorching metal.

Get to the Channel. Get to the Channel.

He usually switched hands when his arm grew tired, as he could steer equally well with either, but he'd been using both and he was exhausted, running on adrenalin and raw nerve.

Ritter had somehow let the Spitfire get between him and the coast and there it sat on his right flank, waiting for Ritter to turn into its eight guns.

His left foot had grown tired maintaining rudder pressure against a sideslip. If Bryan Catrell knew Messerschmitts, maybe he would not expect this.

Ritter jammed both feet on one rudder pedal and stamped hard.

The Messerschmitt made its turn.

Left!

Wrong way!

Bryan reefed around with it. Knew he was only going to get one more shot at this. He had to find the ME's flank or it was gone for good.

Ritter dragged the stick into the steepest, fastest turn he'd ever made, or perhaps anyone had ever made in an ME 109. An engineer had told him the ME 109 could turn inside a Spitfire.

Do it.

Head vacant. Colors went. Ritter saw as through a gun camera all in black and white, the image breaking up round the edges. Tunnel vision narrowed. Closed.

He heard a crashing, and the light never came back.

White-silver flashes of metal fragments splintered off the fuselage. The ME spouted a long white plume and dove almost gracefully for the Earth.

Classic, Bryan thought as he watched it go down. He pulled back the throttle, eased out of his crushing turn, and watched his foe's descent.

"Bale out." He heard his own voice.

He swallowed, dry.

He hadn't spoken since Ritter had turned around to face him, forgot he could talk to him. They'd been on the same frequency.

He lifted his oxygen mask to his face, thumb on the switch. "Paul?" His voice cracked. "Paul, get out of there."

When the ME hit the treetops Bryan knew no one was piloting it down.

Never watch a victim go down. MEs fly in pairs. He thought of it even as the first bullet—he could swear in the dilated time sense of emergency that he could count the individual shots stitch up his machine from tail to engine—struck. Holes appeared in the Perspex.

The other Messerschmitt.

By the time he saw it, it was streaking past him on the way back to France and it was all done. There was a moment's lag for the nerves to relay the message to the brain—like the disconcerting gap between the flash of distant gunfire and its report reaching the ears—a moment between knowing he'd been shot and the agony. Searing pain like a glowing poker drove into his shoulder and continued through his whole body. He caught in his breath and could not let it out. Pain expanded and filled his chest, and crept up to his bulging eyes. A physical entity pain clawed from his insides wanting out, but wouldn't go. He gasped.

The Spitfire was flying herself, the faithful steed that knew its way home with the wounded knight collapsed in the saddle. The steaming engine ground on gallantly, grunting and stinking like a pig.

He was too low to bale out. He looked for a place to set down.

The coastal fields were well defended against the Germans. They bristled with uprights and stakes and barriers to keep anything from gliding in.

He coaxed his suffering engine to give him a few more feet of altitude. It struggled upward, grating and banging a death rattle.

Then it coughed. Popped. Its great heart gave out. She'd given all she had. The prop windmilled in the deathly quiet.

He tried to open the canopy. It was jammed. Trying to pull it sent a spear of pain through his body and he was sick to his stomach. When he stopped retching, his altitude had dropped again. He had to set her down after all.

Dammit. Dammit. It gave him time to regret his stupidity. It was always the one you don't see. If he had those two seconds to live again. Just two seconds in which to glance up.

He leaned slightly forward and pain bolted up him again with a resharpened edge. *God. God damn.*

Seconds. What price for a few seconds inattention.

He pulled the airscrew speed control right back and set the radiator flap in its low drag position. He pointed the nose down to try to pick up speed so he wouldn't stall in the approach glide, both hands on the stick except to tear off his goggles and wipe sweat or tears from his eyes.

Sighted an open field.

Take it.

He approached, nose down to gather a little momentum.

This is it.

The Spitfire flared. Bryan lowered his undercart. Looks okay —

And O GOD THERE'S A FIELDSTONE WALL.

Undercarriage sheared off. The Spitfire fell on its nose.

Straps yanked on him. Pain blistered and exploded.

Blackness.

A brassy horn blast sound from the direction of the train tracks.

Hundreds of eyes widened.

The Reichsmarschall had arrived at JG 23.

No one had welcomed him at the station. He had come looking.

Even the Gestapo agent paled.

Doors of the follow car swung out. Men scrambled out with the Reichsmarschal's standards and planted them even as the large figure emerged from the lead car.

Hermann Göring marched down to the beach. He wore a simple coat and boots. His only embellishment this time was his elaborate baton.

The men on the shore in un-German disarray snapped to attention.

The Reichsmarschall halted face to face with Johann Löwenstamm. Löwe was wet and muddy to his armpits. His boots sloshed as he brought his heels together. There was liquor on his breath. He hoisted a military salute.

Göring's hard blue gaze darted over the crashed Messerschmitt in the

water, then raked Löwe up and down and took in all the men.

"Well?"

Löwe told him as briefly as he could exactly what happened.

"Why? Why did Ritter go off like that?"

"He was depressed. He lost it, I suppose."

"Depressed. What kind of Jewish mind shit is that? And you had to chase him!" Göring finally showed anger.

"I couldn't very well let him go," Löwe said. Then he translated into terms an old ace might understand, "Someone had to be there to confirm his last kill."

There was a dangerous silence. He could see the Iron Man behind the pink face. Small eyes moved toward the water. Finally Göring spoke, "Did he get it?"

Löwe nodded. "Yes, *Herr Reichsmarschall*. It brings him to forty."

"Anyone besides you see it?"

"Winter did."

"Pilots don't get depressed," Göring said. "Ritter was always different. This is very bad for morale. Fighters don't lose control. It did not happen like that."

"I rather doubted it had," Löwenstamm said, and he waited for the Reichsmarschall to tell him how it did happen.

"I won't decorate him! He thought he could get Oak Leaves like that—he can't! It's too high an honor for the likes of him."

"No, *Herr Reichsmarschall*."

"He was never one of us." Göring brought his baton across his wide chest. Fritz von Soden stood behind him, nodding.

Löwe stared at the two of them. "No, *Herr Reichsmarschall*. Quite right."

"Your uniform isn't fit for a swine."

Löwe gave a graveyard smile, suddenly light-headed in the shambles of it all. He could feel sand in the bottom of his damned boots. "No, *Herr Reichsmarschall*. I'm considering shooting my feet off."

Göring went coldly silent.

And he laughed.

"Just out of curiosity," Göring said, abruptly amiable. "How did *you* do? Unofficially."

"One definitely," Löwe said. "And I hit the one that killed Ritter, but I couldn't follow him down. He didn't bale out. I don't think he made it."

Woke. Blinkered up at a painted ceiling. Smells were wrong. Not cockpit fumes. Medicinal smells.

Disoriented.

When Bryan's swimming thoughts organised enough for him to realise where he must be, he reached for his face.

Only one arm moved. Fingers groped. There was the nose, eyelids, lips.

He was all here.

He let himself slip back under.

Woke again. First thing he saw was a shiny vomit bowl by his flat pillow. It was clean and unused. That was a mercy, because Maud was there, standing next to his low cot.

"Hullo," he croaked.

"You should carry these," she said. His identification disks jingled from her finger.

"Those are in case I die."

"Yes."

"I wasn't up to dying to-day." He tried to sit.

"There's no hurry to get up. Your squadron has been moved north for a rest, so don't imagine you're missing the show. Not that there's been much of a show in the daylight."

"How long?"

"You? Just thirty-six hours."

Bryan rolled to his right side, pushed himself up to sit, pulled back the sheet. "Have you a motorcar?"

"If you promise not to insult it, and let me drive."

Maud smuggled Bryan out of the hospital, not that she thought it was wise, but she knew he would do it with or without her.

He was such a quiet passenger she wondered if she had not made a terrible mistake. She was accustomed to him switching on her wipers, adjusting her mirror, switching on her trafficator, and sneering at her Vauxhall Cadet. Now he sat so still it worried her.

They travelled in silence, jolting on the road. She looked over from time to time to make certain he hadn't died.

"It was just a bullet," he mumbled.

ME's had cannon, too. It could have been much worse.

There were no signposts. Barbed wire and pillboxes had sprouted at every crossroads. Bryan told her the place was around here somewhere. Things had looked different from the air.

They arrived at a small village on the coast. Maud stopped at a pub. "Maybe someone here will know something."

Bryan hadn't realized the brightness of the grey sky until he and Maud passed into the pub's dimness. Bryan stood blinking away red and green clouds. He heard Maud asking if someone knew where a German plane went down.

When his vision cleared, Bryan stalked to a dartboard. Onto it, an iron cross on a red, black and white ribbon, along with a silk scarf stiffened with rusty brown blood were pinned with a dart. He pulled the dart out.

A hand closed on his shoulder as he was taking the trophies down, "'ere now—"

The publican paused as Bryan winced, and he noticed the sling and the

ribbon of the DFC.

Without touching him again, the publican started over, quieter but insistent. "Here now, you can't take those."

"You don't understand."

"No! *You* don't understand. I see you're RAF. You don't know what it's like down here. Folks down here are hiding in holes like rats in a barn—in our own homes we're like the ruddy rats. You're up there with guns—and we're grateful t' you, lad, don't think we're not—but if something of *them* falls into our fields don't tell us what's right t' do with it!"

"It's over for him!" Bryan cried. "He's dead! You can't get your own back like this. He's gone!"

"Then what's it matter?"

Bryan's voice broke. God, he did not want to cry now, "It matters to me."

He tried to stop his chin from quivering.

The publican growled for a boy to lead Bryan to the Nazi aeroplane.

He spoke after Bryan, leaving. "He wouldn't do the same for you, lad."

Bryan clutched the silk scarf and the Knight's Cross in his good hand. "He's not here."

A constable stood guard in the lonely field. He warned Bryan and Maud against souvenir hunting. "There's been enough o' that."

Maud said, "This is the pilot who shot this aeroplane down."

The constable took a closer look at Bryan. "Good show, sir."

He let them pass.

The Messerschmitt lay at the end of a long path of debris and diagonal gashes gouged into the earth by its propeller on its final approach. Slats and ailerons and flaps were strewn in fragments behind it. The metal fuselage itself was crumpled, broken behind the cockpit, its grey-green body and yellow nose coated with dirt. A white numeral 1 was still visible on its side. It was perforated with bullet holes and a larger methodical hole in the sheet metal of the cowling, sharp edges still gleaming fresh, where someone with metal shears had carved out the red heart that was the Staffel badge.

The yellow rudder with all its victories was also gone.

A tidy squarish cavity gaped in the painted Balkenkreuz where the small access panel was missing. The compartment was no doubt empty by now.

The Perspex canopy had been pried off. It lay to one side, riddled with holes. Bryan looked inside the cockpit. Harness straps were darkened with dried blood. Imbedded bullets dimpled the metal seat. The pilot was gone.

The constable's voice was an intrusion. "'e was right dead, sir."

Bryan asked who had the body.

"Aerodrome mortuary, sir," the constable said, then blurted, mystified, "They're t' give him a bloody military funeral!"

Maud, who had been waiting at a distance, suddenly picked her way over the clods, and with her bare hand, rubbed clean a spot under the cockpit. The

script came to light: *Die Frau*.

She stared a moment, numb. "You didn't tell me it was *Die Frau*."

"Here, Mum! You're crying for a Nazi?"

"No. It's just—I don't know." She wiped her eyes with the clean side of her hand. "No. I'm done now."

"Was he Christian, does anyone know?" Bryan asked.

"No, sir," the constable said. "Catholic."

Bryan sighed. "Close enough."

"Found a rosary on 'im, they did. Though he may 'ave nicked it, you know. I thought Nazis were godless."

Bryan walked to the front where the long metal prop blades stood bent back and twisted, caked with dirt.

"Beaten into plowshares."

"Please don't be funny," Maud said.

"I'm not certain that I am."

A fine mist settled on everything.

If you were not such an implacable demon, what kind of hero would I be?

A knight was not a knight without a dragon.

It's the fire that proves us.

I am sorry you had to be on the wrong side.

But you have made me a knight.

He looked up at the drizzling sky.

This was the last time in his life he would ever be so sure of anything. How many times does it fall to one to fight the good fight. To kill without offending God. Valour without question. Just to do what is right.

If ever again any decision could possibly be so clear.

He wondered if he had been born German, would he have been up there anyway?

I was defending the right and life and freedom because I was born bloody lucky English. But him? I know him. Bryan remembered once he'd said the Hun was different. He must be.

He was humbled to know that he was not.

Just another pilot, part of his aircraft. They were like the Spitfire and the ME 109, conscienceless as a sword to be used in battle to its best effort by whatever power wields it.

I am going to go home, fall on my knees before God by whose grace I am a hero instead of dead in a cockpit with a swastika on it, because it was no decision of mine. I flew. I was born in England and I fought on the side of the angels.

Bryan Catrell, DSO, DFC stood in the airmen's churchyard. His arm was in a sling so he couldn't carry the casket. Six airmen did. The squadron had a German flag, taken from the wreckage of a German bomber. They kept it to drape the coffins of their enemies.

It was raining when they carried Paul Ritter to the corner of the churchyard

where they laid the Luftwaffe dead. Bryan could see the airfield from here. It was a low sky and all the birds stayed on the ground.

He imagined a line of Messerschmitts on the other side, noses up in the rain.

He knew it was raining on the other side too. This one felt like it was everywhere.

He could find hate and even fear for them, the angular nightmare birds, but he couldn't scorn them. He'd met too many in the air, lost too many friends to them, come too close to death to scorn them. He thought on all the young men who began with him in 89 Squadron. The originals were all aces or dead.

The bearer party, dressed in RAF blue with white belts, carried the casket to a plot under the boughs of an oak tree. A slight breeze fluttered the leaves. Droplets rolled off them, and pattered onto the plain casket.

The bearers lowered the casket into the ground.

When I remember thee upon my bed, and meditate on thee in the night watches. Because thou hast been my help, therefore in the shadow of thy wings will I rejoice.

The ceremony was brief. The bearers collected their hats, and saluted the grave in turn before they marched away.

Bryan felt the Knight's Cross in his pocket. He took off his gloves. He stooped near Paul's grave and pushed the medal into the earth, tucked well under a sturdy root of the oak tree, so no one would take it from him.

Then Bryan walked away under a free sky. Grey mist muted all the colors. The land never looked more English. He looked up to the road, saw Maud waiting with an umbrella.

He went to her.

He looked back once where his rival had come to rest with his own kind in the corner of an airman's field, under a tree where, in autumn, oak leaves settled on the grave.

THE END

