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A Sky Full of Leaves

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A Sky Full of Leaves

Chapter I

The ruts jarred as Jack was driven towards his new posting. The conversation, never free flowing or genuine, had ceased long before the rain had started to fall. He held his cap, protected from the elements, in his lap; the truck's open top providing little by way of shelter. A shiver of cold traced its way along his spine as the truck lurched once more, a man a few seats away broke wind, trying to disguise it with a forced cough.

The faceless landscape stretched out far beyond the horizon; an infinity of mud and despair, matched only by the drab grey sky. Two trudging figures forced off the road made their feelings clear as they passed by, outstretched fingers disappearing as quickly as they'd been raised, words swallowed up by the engine. Gone, returned to the muddy earth. The only constant was the faint thump of artillery carried on the chill. Rumbles. Deep visceral crumps.

A man-made storm was drawing ever nearer as he sat motionless, water invading every gap, every crevice. Opposite him, equally as wet, was a young man. He was no more than twenty, his brown hair, waterlogged, black as coal. Icy cobalt eyes stared beyond him, impenetrable. His small body was buried in an oversized greatcoat, arms wrapped madly around his chest grasping eagerly for what warmth they could find. Jack smiled. There was no response; nothing bar a faint whistling.

He winced and shrunk back in his seat. Dirt showered over him. Blinking, the sound muffled, he heard vague voices. 'What the hell? Everyone ok?'

Then laughter that rang like the bells in his ears.

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The truck continued to shake and rock as it carried on down the road. He looked back at the black gouge in the earth, staring defiant at the enemy's impotence. It was then he noticed the birds, they were singing.

The landscape became increasingly alien as the war grew nearer and began to impose its all enveloping will. Now and then in the gullies alongside the road lay the half-covered bones of horses hastily dumped, their burdens lifted by the unforgiving shells. Barely a sod lay undisturbed.

Jack noticed the young man opposite him shift uncomfortably as wounded soldiers began to stream past. Children; their years betrayed by screaming sunken eyes. One, his face streaked with mud and blood from a scalp wound bandaged with little care, supported the weight of a crippled friend. A second; further behind, stepped aimlessly, muttering as he passed them. 'How lonely they look. Those poor boys, how lonely,' Jack heard him saying over and over.

It took ten minutes for the last of the wounded to pass and finally, the truck began to pick up speed once more. Now there was a clawing stench in the air, one Jack had smelt before, one that had never left him. Thick, sulphuric, it clung to the back of the throat in lungfuls. Still no one spoke, still the rain came down.

'Right. Mr Moreton, Mr Proudfoot, this is your stop. Off you get.' The wet, weary mass rose automatic, eager to stretch taut limbs while letting the chosen two by. The sky had lightened, the rain had relented but they were in no state to care. The door to a wooden hut opened and a small group of men peered curiously at the new arrivals. One pushed his way to the front, a beaming grin, half covered by his ample moustache; thick as a yard brush, menacing as a curled hedgehog. He and another

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man strode over to the bedraggled newcomers now standing behind the truck, dripping.

‘Replacements?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’

He looked them up and down, never losing his cheery demeanour. ‘You lot certainly picked a good day to travel down.’ His laugh boomed around the still aerodrome, an engine thundering to life. ‘I’m Green. Welcome to Twenty-Seven Squadron.’ A broad, effusive grin poked out from beneath his moustache, then disappeared. ‘Ok,’ he said, pointing at Jack, ‘this is Carter, you go with him, he’ll show you what’s what,’ then turning to Moreton added: ‘You however, get to come with me.’

Jack did as he was told and followed the small, balding, otherwise unmemorable man who had stepped out of Green’s wake to a hut on the opposite side of the aerodrome. Carter took his leave as Jack stepped inside.

It was small, poorly lit, liberally dotted with Kirchner girls, photographs, feeble shelves groaning with books. A man of about thirty, his tunic unbuttoned, was sprawled on a camp bed, reading and smoking a pipe. He looked up over the top of his novel. ‘Hullo, replacement are you?’

‘Yes, Proudfoot. How do you do?’ Jack instinctively went to offer his hand, remembering just in time he was still carrying his suitcase.

‘You can put that down over there, that’s yours. Sorry about the photographs, haven’t had time to get Roxborough’s things packed away yet.’

Jack took a deep breath and forced a smile. ‘Right, thanks.’

‘I’m Trubshawe,’ the man on the bed added and after a pause, asked: ‘Do you like cricket?’

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‘Absolutely. I can’t say I’m any good though.’

‘I see. Well, we do need a new wicket keeper, if you’re game?’ He closed his book, and leapt to his feet. ‘Put your luggage down and come along with me, I’ll show you around.’

The two men cantered down the steps from the hut onto the aerodrome. The blades of grass were bent double, tiny prisms of light dancing on their moisture laden tips. As they began to walk off towards a larger hut at the far end of the base, a black and white cat emerged inquisitively from beneath one of the timber-framed buildings. He slowly, purposefully, made his way towards them. ‘Hello old chap,’ Trubshawe said, stooping and dropping a hand to greet him, the cat avoiding it with great dexterity. ‘Oh, it’s like that is it?’ and laughed as the cat began to circle Jack warily. ‘That is Fokker.’

‘Fokker?’ Jack asked.

‘Yes, he’s from the village. He adopted Green a few months ago and he hasn’t been able to shake him since. Hence the name; comes out of nowhere, at the least appropriate moment.’

‘Ah,’ Jack said, as the cat passed cautiously between his legs.

‘Think he likes you.’ They stepped over Fokker and carried on to the mess hut. ‘This is the Connaught and this lot are B Flight.’ There were a group of men standing around on the steps in front of the mess, their pipe smoke palling above their heads. ‘Morning,’ Trubshawe said after a moment. Turning to face him, the men instinctively raised their hands to their eyes, an induction day salute.

Green; who Jack had already met, smiled and put his arm around the shoulder of the man Jack had arrived with. ‘You see how he did that, Moreton? Typical Hun

trick. Beware the Hun from the sun,' he started, as he began pointing the neck of his pipe at Jack, 'that's how the crafty ones sneak up on you, silently from behind.'

'So that's where you picked up your seduction technique, eh?' said an amused voice to his left. 'I wonder if those poor French girls have got that maxim off by heart?'

'Jealousy is a sin Llewellyn, you just ask the Pastor here. I'm right aren't I, Reggie?'

'Well, ordinarily, yes I suppose, but I can't see how it applies here, the man is just stating fact.'

Green laughed. Moreton ran a nervous hand through his dark curls and attempted a weak smile. 'Hun from the sun. I'll make sure that I remember that, thanks.'

Green's bulky frame juddered slightly as he took a deep breath and squeezed his shoulder a little tighter. 'Make sure you do, I might just have saved your life.' Then, looking back over to Jack, he nodded, pointing his pipe at him again. 'How are you settling in?'

'All K. F. S.¹ thanks,' Jack said, as brightly as he could.

'Well, you're billeted with our Mess President. If anything happens to our funds, we'll know where to look.'

'So where did you come from, before the Flying Corps? Let me guess, cavalry?' asked Llewellyn.

Jack nodded. 'Gloucestershire Hussars.'

'My God, they are letting things slide, they're even accepting Hussars now. Things must be bad,' said Green.

¹ Knife, fork, spoon. British Army slang for everything is ok.

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Laughter circulated lightly and murmurs of jovial agreement rippled through the assembled group, before Buxton, peering down at them from his lofty height of six feet, three inches, added: 'Well, just be thankful he's not infantry.'

The group looked down at their feet, only Green laughed. 'How right you are Reggie. Hold on a moment,' and he was gone. He clattered into the Connaught, emerging a few moments later carrying a wine bottle and glasses. He handed them out, one to each of the men and went along the line; filling them half full with flat champagne from the night before. Holding the bottle to the air above him, he said, 'The poor bloody infantry; may we never wind up stuck in a shell hole with them,' and drained the bottle.

The rest of the pilots looked at each other, before laughter spread down the line and they clinked their glasses together, repeating: 'The poor bloody infantry.'

The laughter petered out, replaced by the growl of aeroplane engines. The dawn patrol was returning and Jack watched on, awestruck as one by one the machines landed, bouncing their way to a halt, the ground crews swarming over the field while they were still in motion.

A flight had arrived home. A man, cocooned in leather and wearing thick felt fugs strode over to the assembled pilots, removing his goggles and flying helmet as he did so. They sat limp in his left hand, the other clawed at the buttons of his flight jacket. The thin man's gaunt appearance was not aided by the dark rings of grease which stopped abruptly where his goggles had been. His thin pointed chin and ponderous nose gave him an air of glum solemnity, which no one who knew him would argue too strongly against. His skin glistened with sweat and expelled castor oil.

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‘Morning, Ramage. Back in one piece again?’ Green said. Ramage grunted without even looking up and marched straight passed them, towards his hut. ‘I see he’s his usual cheery self.’

‘He didn’t die again then?’ added Trubshawe.

‘No, funny that. Maybe tomorrow?’

‘Definitely.’ Trubshawe laughed, then for Jack and Moreton’s benefit added: ‘That is Ramage, he’s convinced that every flight will be his last. The man has flown over forty times so far and every time he assures us he won’t be coming home-’ Trubshawe was about to add more, but before he had chance, Green spoke, this time to another figure approaching them.

‘Morning, sir. Any Huns about?’

Captain Law, who was busy taking off his gauntlets, nodded. ‘A few, but they were not at all interested in coming down to play. They stayed far above us, out of range, about half a mile or so, just enough to keep our interest. They followed us around for forty five minutes then gave up and disappeared.’

‘Let’s hope we have similar luck later, sir.’

Law smiled and removed his goggles. ‘Let’s hope so, Marland.’ He paused and looked at the men in front of him. ‘Celebrating?’

Green looked down at the bottle still clutched in his left hand. ‘Just the fact that it’s not another dud today.’

After a short pause while he removed his helmet, running his hand through his hair, Law said, ‘You know Green, half the time I don’t believe the things you say to me and the other half, I’m really not sure I want to.’

He paused and smiled before Green said, ‘Thank you, sir.’

‘I’m not entirely sure if that was a compliment.’

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‘Oh, I’ll take it as one anyway. If it doesn’t hurt, it’s got to be doing you some good.’ Law raised his eyes to the heavens. ‘These sir, are Lieutenants Proudfoot and Moreton. Replacements.’

Law smiled and offered a hand. ‘Welcome to Twenty-Seven Squadron. Don’t worry too much, Green is unique, we’re not all like him.’

Jack stood to attention. ‘Thank you, sir. It’s a privilege to be here.’

Law smiled at Jack with disbelieving eyes. ‘Quite,’ he said. ‘Jolly nice to meet you both. Anyway, if you’ll excuse me.’

Green, Jack and Moreton nodded and watched Law’s back as he walked away, then Green said. ‘Come on, let’s go and have a look at his bus, something’s put Ramage in a good mood, I wonder what it is.’

The three officers left the shade of the Connaught and walked purposefully over to the newly returned machines. The ground crew, fitters and mechanics were already hard at work making sure that the planes were still airworthy, and, sure enough, there was more than the usual amount of activity centred around Law’s machine. As he got closer, Jack could see a fitter, counting bullet holes. The large hole in the fabric near to the observer’s seat meant that Archie had been busy too. ‘Another few inches to the left, and Singe, I mean, Major St. John, would have been requesting another couple of replacements.’

‘The bus seems a bit of a mess,’ Jack said, genuinely shocked.

‘I’ve seen worse. Archie seems to be quite fond of Law and Ramage. They’re always getting blown about. Their Sailmaker is busier than Nelson’s. Huns never seem to get them though.’ Green stopped and frowned at his pipe, ‘Got a light Proudfoot?’

‘No. Haven’t smoked since Gallipoli.’

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‘Why’s that, bad memories?’

‘No, there just isn’t the need to burn the damn lice off my clothes since transferring to the RFC.’

Green laughed heartily. ‘Don’t say that too loud old man, we don’t want all the riff raff applying. It’s already bad enough they’re giving the ticket to the likes of you.’ He paused and looked down to the ground, where the black and white cat had appeared again. ‘Isn’t that right Fokker?’

Fokker, put out by all the activity, had, like a magnet, homed in on his adopted owner, and began to purr loudly. He rubbed his head against Green’s pristine boot with such force that he lost his balance momentarily as he slid unexpectedly off the polished leather. ‘I think he is trying to remind me that it’s time for lunch,’ Green said, looking down at him. ‘Hungry?’ He rubbed against his boot once more. ‘I think that’s a yes. Come on.’ The three men headed back towards the Connaught, Fokker trotting along behind them, tail up, listening intently.

Chapter II

B Flight's machines were being rolled out of the hangars and Jack was fastening the numerous and varied straps which adorned his leather flying jacket, helped by Carter, his newly assigned batman.

The first time Jack had worn a flying jacket had been during training when he'd gone up as an observer to get a feel for things. Impatience getting the better of him, he'd decided that he didn't really see the point of all those different straps, especially the ones that wrapped around his upper thighs. At five hundred feet stood up in the airstream he had inflated like a gasbag, almost being blown out of the aeroplane. That day he'd had a dramatic change of heart. Ever since, he'd made a point of fastening every single buckle. Now he double checked them all before stepping anywhere near a machine.

That moment of panic was still as vivid today, even five months later. He'd survived thanks to the reactions of the pilot, who'd seen what was happening and had banked the machine sharply, tipping him back into the cockpit. 'In every war they find new ways to kill Quirks like you Proudfoot, but stupidity is still the most common reason,' or so his instructor had barked at him when they had landed. He had yet to discover whether the enemy would get him, but he was determined to make sure stupidity didn't.

Securely strapped into his flying jacket, helmet in place, fur lining tickling his forehead, otterskin gauntlets making his palms moist with sweat, Jack was ready. He thanked Carter and looked around at his hut mate, Trubshawe, who was busy getting helped into his Fugs; large sheepskin-lined hip flying boots. 'All ready for the off?' he

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asked, as he caught Jack's eye. Jack nodded. 'Good, good. Come along then, the Hun won't photograph themselves.' And to the sound of Trubshawe's whistling, the two men trooped out of their hut, down towards their waiting machines.

Jack's was sitting second in a line of three; a large white letter P hastily painted onto the elevator and fuselage. It was surrounded by his ground crew. One man was standing next to the plane, wearing flying gear. He was deep in conversation with someone Jack presumed was an armourer, on account of the machine gun he was holding. Two mechanics, in brown overalls were busy with the engine. 'Hello,' Jack said to the man talking to the armourer as he got near enough.

The man jumped. 'Hello, sir. You'll be Mr Proudfoot I take it?' Jack nodded and, relief on his face, the man continued: 'I'm Darley, sir. I'm Mr Roxborough's, that is to say, your fitter, sir. Mr Buxton asked me if I'd go up with you on this job instead, sir. Hope that's all right, sir?'

Jack smiled, his eyes narrowing slightly. 'Have you flown before, Darley?'

'Flown, sir? No, but as an observer once or twice right enough. Even had a shot or two at the Hun, not that that came to anything mind.'

'Well then, you're more than welcome. Glad to have you on board.' Jack paused, taking a breath before adding: 'and if they get too close, don't be afraid to give them a burst.'

'Oh I won't, sir. No mistake.'

'Good fellow.' Jack smiled and moved forward towards the two mechanics, while Darley turned back to the armourer. 'Afternoon men, how is she today?' Jack asked.

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‘Hello, sir. I’m Skingle,’ one replied, head still buried in the engine. ‘She’s fine, sir. Just checking her over before we start her up, what with her not running for a few days.’

Jack nodded. ‘Any problems I should know about?’

‘No, sir. There was a slight pull to the left on her, but Chisholm took care of that for you,’ Skingle said, finally looking up and flicking a nonchalant thumb over his shoulder at the small, grimy man standing next to him.

He flashed a gappy smile at Jack as he made eye contact. ‘That’s right, sir. There was a bit too much tension in the cabling on the rudder, is all. I’ve slackened it off, it should be right as rain now.’

‘Thank you, Chisholm is it?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Jack motioned to Darley. ‘Let’s get underway shall we?’ he said, then checked that the straps of his flying helmet were still tight under his chin, before athletically levering himself up into the cockpit.

Manoeuvring his way into the plane and settling himself into the pilot’s seat was no easy task. It certainly wasn’t like mounting a horse. The one and a half Strutter got its nickname from the w-shaped struts that held the top wing in place. They were not designed for ease of access to the cockpit and the mechanics worried nowadays if they didn’t hear the pilots cursing from the cockpit as they got on board.

As Jack was busy berating Tommy Sopwith while nursing his skull, having also fallen foul of the unique design, Skingle turned to Chisholm and whispered, ‘I think he’ll be all right.’

Darley clambered into position behind Jack and began stowing ammunition drums on the floor.

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‘All set, sir?’ asked Skingle, who was ready, gripping the bottom of the propeller, while Chisholm and the armourer held the sides of the machine, bracing the fuselage against the coming torque.

Jack nodded, pulled down his goggles and flicked the switch that turned on the fuel pumps, shouting: ‘fuel on.’ Skingle cleared his throat and began to turn the propeller counter clockwise. He gave it two complete revolutions, and Jack echoed Skingle’s ‘switch on,’ before flicking the magneto, yelling: ‘contact.’

This time, the engine caught as the propeller was given one final heave. As it began to spin, a great wash of blue-grey smoke erupted from the mechanism; it’s throaty, insect like growl buzzed intermittently as Jack blipped the engine.

Skingle scurried quickly out of the way. The other mechanics followed, moving clear of the machine, only Chisholm remained. He was gingerly crouching under the wing, attempting to remove first the left, then the right chocks, desperately trying to avoid the spinning propeller.

Jack turned around as best he could, awkwardly giving the thumbs up to Darley, who was busy studying the map of the front. It was all new to Jack, but the ground crew often went up instead of the observer and Jack for one didn’t object. ‘If an Ack Emma was going to be flying in a plane, hopefully he would also make a bit more effort maintaining it,’ he thought to himself.

After a few minutes the needles on the pressure gauges stopped dancing. Life slowly returning, pistons laboriously beating out the dampness of the last days and nights; oily exhaust fumes catching on the breeze, blowing back into the cockpit.

Jack looked over both sides of the fuselage and, once he was sure that Chisholm was clear, moved the selector switch fully open. The light structure lurched violently from side to side, the heavy, powerful engine pulling the wooden frame

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along unwillingly. Every bump, every hollow exaggerated, and Jack fought with his machine, blipping the engine, adjusting the rudder. The plane slewed and snaked wildly, yawing across the flat, a pursued gazelle on the savannah. Then, as suddenly as it had begun to fight, it relented, the rudder bar settled at Jack's feet, the tail rising gracefully.

A jolt. A lurch in the stomach followed a violent dip to the right as Jack eased back on the stick. 'Damn,' he said as he fought the plane and his instincts, quickly bringing it back under control. A deep breath, crisis averted, and there they hung, just above the earth's surface, suspended, cupped by invisible hands. It was hardly noticeable at first, but as they picked up speed the engine noise began to lessen, replaced by the howl of the wind. Slowly the machine gained height and only now could he look around for the others. They were behind and to his left, slightly above him. In one effortless manoeuvre he brought the machine around, slowly catching them up and taking his place at the rear of the loose formation of three. A Sopwith with a large G sat directly to his left. The observer; Moreton, his Lewis gun pointing harmlessly off into the distance, waved. Jack had been told repeatedly that hand signals were reserved strictly for instructions and warnings of impending dangers. He smiled. 'He doesn't have a clue,' he thought, yet here in the fresh afternoon air, it didn't seem to matter all that much. Jack waved back.

The engines of the Sopwiths strained and struggled to propel them higher. They ponderously circled the aerodrome, climbing to five thousand feet, taking the best part of fifteen minutes. Only then did they turn south-east for Arras, leaving the aerodrome and safety behind. Pressing on, the planes bobbed up and down as the pilots struggled with the wind currents, attempting to maintain their position in the flight. All the while he kept one eye on the sky above, praying not to see any of those

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menacing grey specks that he'd been told about so often during training. However, the sky remained free from Germans. Partially cloudy, otherwise brilliant blue, it stretched away to the horizon, devoid of life.

They'd reached ten thousand feet, the cold air starting to needle at slithers of exposed flesh, and as they flew eastwards towards the Front, Jack spent more and more time looking high up into the light clouds that hung effortlessly above their heads, singing to himself.

Below, the landscape was changing. Gone was the lush lime-green of France, in its place the scabbed, pocked ground of conflict was beginning to impose itself.

Arras was directly ahead. The partially collapsed Cathedral spire dominated. The majority of the buildings were damaged from the years of shelling. The outer suburbs much more so, many reduced to piles of brick, occasionally interrupted by half-burnt timber frames. Beyond, the ground was scared, molten pools of black shimmered and glistened by the hundred. Only a few ruined farm buildings and an occasional patch of grass had escaped the full fury of the shells. And there it was: the Western Front. It wound its way left and right, a hellish man-made river of death that had formed and stagnated over two long years. Jack glanced away and over to Green, who was rocking his machine's wings left and right and pointing upwards. 'Now you're for it Jack,' he thought as he looked up.

Above them, only just visible on their port quarter, were five or perhaps six dark flecks, standing out against the empty background. Jack could feel his chest tighten, an involuntary shiver coursed down his back. He took a deep breath. It did nothing to calm his tensing body. He raised an unsteady hand in acknowledgement and turned to Darley, straining to see him over his left shoulder. He could just make out his passenger and he motioned in the direction of the enemy. Darley raised a

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thumb and pointed off in the direction of the planes, finger outstretched. Jack nodded and turned back. There was nothing to do now but keep close formation and wait.

Jack didn't take his eyes from those black dots. With every passing minute the pounding of his heart grew stronger in his neck and ears, dulling the sound of the wind and the engine. The flecks seemed to remain constant, neither growing larger nor smaller. They merely danced around in the periphery of the sun, his eyes streamed with water if he stared too intently, but despite the discomfort, losing sight of them would be far worse. Troubled, the formation clung to each other. Below, the front line came nearer, the desolation grew starker.

Ahead, slightly below them, Jack noticed there were now infrequent bursts of Archie appearing. Soon, these tiny black clouds, thick with hate began to fill the sky around their planes. Glancing away from the threat looming above, he took another deep breath and instinctively gripped the joystick tighter. The Archie only meant one thing; they had crossed over into Hunland. Jack looked down to his left. He followed the white and black lines of exposed dirt, in some places so close they were almost touching, tracing them off into the distance. How many eyes were cast aloft right now, allowing themselves envious glances at him and his freedom?

It didn't take long for Jack to start catching sight of the individual flashes of the German guns. Their effects, he felt a few moments later whether he wanted to or not. Awash with shrapnel, the sky had become a tumultuous bubbling, snapping beast, determined to shake him back down to the ground. His machine was buffeted and rocked more and more with every explosion. Occasional bursts pushed his plane off to the side, and after one particularly loud crump, there was a terrifying sound of tearing linen. His eyes moved to the left instinctively. There were a few streams of fabric trailing back from his bottom wing, fluttering in the airstream. Jack tested the controls

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gingerly, fearing it may have cut a control wire. The plane gently moved to his orders. Jack exhaled deeply. It had left a couple of ribs exposed, but everything vital still seemed to be working.

It took all of Jack's skill and a fair amount of luck to keep his plane on course and in contact with the rest of his formation, who seemed to be fairing no better. Though they had passed over the front lines, there was no let up in the fury. Suddenly, a white flare arched through the sky and Coddington's Sopwith banked steeply, turning back to the west, losing altitude at an alarming rate. Jack saw Green turn after the first machine. He did likewise, dipping his left wing and taking a final glance at the front, which disappeared over his right shoulder. He found it hard to keep the ailing machine in sight and he lost it more than once against the landscape.

Jack eased down through nine then eight thousand feet, leaving behind the furious puffs of Archie. The rattle of machine guns set Jack's heart pounding like the pistons of his aeroplane. It was coming from behind.

A hurried glance over his shoulder. Flashes of wing, fuselage, undercarriage, a blur of movement, the staccato beat of industrial death. Instinct replaced reason; Jack tried his best to keep himself and his observer alive, nosing over and spinning out of danger. It wasn't pretty, his instructors would have been furious, but he didn't care. He wanted to live. Through bulging eyes, vision half obscured by panic, he caught sight of a second machine coming closer. The large black crosses emblazoned on its lower wings were all he could focus upon. It was perhaps two plane lengths away. It had followed them through all their manoeuvring. Mottled red, more beast than plane, it ducked and bobbed in the dirty air behind him. A cobra waiting to strike. It started to rear up as it got ever closer, yet it still hadn't fired. It felt like it never would. It

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grew larger and larger, the pilot visible, crouched over his guns. Still nothing. ‘Why aren’t you firing?’ Jack yelled in frustration. He had no way out. This was the end.

Yellow sparks flashed and spat from the machine, the propeller occasionally obscuring them. Darley’s Lewis gun began to answer. Splintering wood, shattering glass, frenetic grappling with the controls, falling, disorientation, panic, silence.

The sky, which had been blotted out by impending death, was clear, vibrant, fresh. Jack closed his eyes, squeezing them together tightly, as if waking from a dream. They were totally alone, the sky was empty. The tree line was flashing past underneath the fuselage, the wheels catching in the tallest of the branches. Jack jumped involuntarily every time one snapped. There was no trace of the German, or the rest of his flight. The compass said they were flying south-west. It wasn’t long before Jack began to regain height and with it his bearings. To his right he spotted a small village sitting benevolently on the horizon, bisected by a river. It had to be the Scarpe. Jack flew in line with it; it took him straight back to Arras and from there, he knew that flying north-west should take him back to the aerodrome.

Within fifteen minutes the huts, fitting sheds, hangars, appeared in front of him. He increased the fuel mixture on his engine, then depressed the coupe button on his joystick which allowed the engine to keep turning but which grounded the magnetos, preventing the spark plugs from firing. Then he turned his machine into the wind. As he got closer to the ground, he released the coupe button momentarily, the engine snorting back into life; short bursts of power that kept the airflow moving over the control surfaces, keeping the plane responsive. Almost down, his speed decreasing rapidly, he danced with the gusts of wind that blew across the field, rudder wagging; a playful pup happy to have returned. With a jolt that blurred his vision for a second, he touched down, rolling to a halt just short of the mess huts. The buckle on his lap belt

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was unclasped even before he had come to a complete halt and Jack turned around to check on Darley, who was busily removing his helmet and goggles. 'Are you all right?' he asked.

'Yes, sir, but I thought we was going to stop a packet and no mistake. I could actually see the pistons on that Hun's engine moving.'

The ground crew had already gathered around the damaged wing; clasped hands and serious faces assessed the amount of sleep they would have to sacrifice in order to get the plane ready for flight again. Oblivious, Jack clambered out of the cockpit.

There were a good few holes in and around the tail, some had come dangerously close to hitting Darley, the petrol tank and him too, but somehow they had all passed harmlessly through the fabric, doing no great damage. Jack looked around for the other planes. Green's machine was already in the workshop, his fitters and riggers seemed to be hard at work, but Coddington's plane was nowhere to be seen. 'Looks like you were in a bit of a scrap sir?' Skingle said, his tone businesslike and matter of fact.

'Yes, there were a pair of Albatri, not to mention the few kind words from Archie.'

'Mr Green said he thought you'd gone west,' he paused briefly. 'Only he's back so far, but I'm very glad to see you back sir, if you don't mind my saying.' Jack smiled; he hadn't considered that his first flight might also have been his last.

Green, as if prompted by the mention of his name, appeared out of the telephone hut, and came bounding over. His pipe, already lit, sat in the corner of his mouth, gently caressing his chin as he spoke. 'Welcome back. Complete bloody

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ragtime up there, eh? I didn't think I'd be seeing you again, that Hun looked as though he had you cold.'

'I know, he came from nowhere and was gone in a flash. The second seemed to sit there forever. Bloody big black crosses and red paint. Waited until he couldn't miss us.'

'Well, looks like he didn't get anything too vital. All good fun, eh?'

'Not sure about that.'

'Well, I saw you stunting about, must have made him dizzy trying to keep up.'

'I'd love to say that it was all part of the plan.' He paused, smiled and then added: 'Any news on the Captain?'

'Just got the call, he's fine. Put down on our side of the lines. Apparently he's bunking down with some artillery types, wants us to send the tender to pick him up, toute de suite.' He paused, took his pipe out of his mouth, then continued, 'and the tootier the better. You should come along; I can introduce you to some country delights.'

Chapter III

Jack was squashed into the back of the Crossley, Buxton's oversized frame pressing against him, the red leather sticking to the palm of his hand as the car swayed violently. Green, who was acting as driver for the evening, was muttering to the steering wheel, the gears squealing wildly as they lurched their way down the main road leading away from the aerodrome.

Buxton waved continually at his blond fringe, as one would an annoying fly, catching Jack on more than one occasion. 'Sorry old man,' would come the automated response, but apart from that, he said surprisingly little.

Green however, was not at all affected by Buxton's silence. 'You know, it's a stroke of good luck Codders getting forced down out this way. I haven't been into Mont St Eloi for a good few weeks. I bet my girls are missing me.' A beaming grin lit his mischievous face as he shot a glance over his shoulder to the passengers, his eyes alive with possibilities.

'I bet they can't even remember your name,' Buxton said.

'Don't be so sure. Last time, they all seemed rather taken with their handsome aviator Anglais.' With that, he sounded the horn, a shrill blast which scattered a pair of white birds that had been perched in the tree overlooking the road.

They finally came to a halt half an hour later. The narrow lane had widened noticeably now, the banks on either side rose up high above the top of the car. Trees swayed leisurely in the evening air, blackbirds in full voice competed with sparrows and the occasional flat note of a bee. The drying stony ground of the road petered out, replaced by sodden earth, the water of the past few days pooled in small patches where long forgotten feet had left fleeting reminders on the landscape.

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Buxton, the only observer of the group, had been given the task of finding out exactly where they were. He wandered down the lane, map in hand, while Jack and Green scrambled up the nearest bank.

The fields, fallow, ribbed from centuries of ploughing, looked completely unspoiled. The soil, churned in large clumps, flecked with the first sproutings of spring, had a ruddy hue, yellowing significantly as it stretched off towards the horizon. Dabs of black against the skyline; a distant village, at its centre, a spire reaching up into the heavens.

Jack scanned to his left, looking down into the shallow valley. His home looked so similar. 'Beautiful isn't it?' There was no reply and after a moment, Jack turned to see what had happened to Green. 'I said, beautiful...'

Green had dropped down the other side of the bank and was standing in the field inspecting a large crumpled mass of fabric, wood, metal. The frame of the aircraft was completely mangled; it was difficult to tell what it had once been. The fabric was shredded, tiny fragments clung to the framework in places, flesh on a decaying carcass. There were no identifying marks on what remained of the wings, removed by the victor or souvenir hunters perhaps. To the right of the wreckage were two simple wooden crosses that stood dutifully beside the curled up remains. The ground around the wreck was disturbed but not charred. Jack took heart in that, he didn't know an airman alive who wouldn't. Burning all the way to the ground, if he allowed himself to think about it, terrified him to the point of paralysis. So far, he had only witnessed it once. One time too many. The image always came back far too readily. They had been watching one of the newer recruits attempting to land and, as he was turning in on his final approach, the plane had suddenly become engulfed in flame. It had been a truly awful sight. The pilot and the instructor both stood up in the

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machine surrounded by fire, flailing their arms in vain, flames dancing along their extremities. Jack had felt sick; he had been as he saw it crash. He never took off without his pistol after that.

‘Huns,’ said Green, his voice raised slightly. Jack went over to look. Hastily scratched into the wood, it read simply ‘A Captain of the German Air Service’.

‘Hope the Bosche do the same for me,’ Green said, as he turned and walked back towards the road. Jack looked over at the wreck, then at the crosses and at a small goldfinch that had fluttered to a halt on the nearest one. He sighed to himself, then turned on his heels.

Buxton was already back at the car waiting for them. ‘What the devil are you two up to?’

‘Scouting for picnic locations. So, any joy?’ Green said, while Jack tried not to lose his footing coming down the wet embankment.

‘Yes, I know where we are now. Keep going straight ahead. It’s only a few minutes drive from here.’

Forty minutes later, they arrived stony faced at Boisborde; a farm occupied by an allied artillery battery. Coddington and Trubshawe were waiting for them and were keen to get going. Along with the others, they all squeezed into the tender and before long were disappearing down the lane heading towards Mont St Eloi.

It was just drawing dark as they reached their destination. Green, at the head of the party paused, looking up at the windows, which glowed furnace orange. ‘It’s not the Leicester Lounge, but it’s still a sight for wandering eyes.’ Laughter erupted amongst the group and continued as they ducked one by one into its intimate surrounds, the western front slipping from their thoughts. The warmth deadened their

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senses to the monochrome night and drew them deeper into this sensual world. Piano music drifted on the air, mingling with bouillabaisse, pipe smoke, warm cognac. As Jack's eyes adjusted, they settled onto the far table, where three French pilots sat cradling brandy balloons and women. The orange burned against the silk of their underwear, Jack's face was burning too. Green loosened his tunic, ran a superfluous hand through his hair and headed off towards the French pilots.

Trubshawe leaned over to Jack. 'Gun now firing; two o'clock A.' Jack looked up and to his right and sure enough, two of the younger girls had already moved in and surrounded him. Jack smiled as he watched Green slump down into the chaise longue, and the two women sit either side of him, one coyly twirling a stray lock of her brunette hair, the other fending off an errant hand.

'Fine business,' said Jack.

'He'll be a while. Come on, let's sit down over by the piano.'

Drinks were flowing freely, the red wine and the champagne was disappearing in equal measure. Jack and Trubshawe watched intently as Green slowly became lost in a sea of bobbing heads and exposed flesh. Laughter, mostly his, was interspersed with occasional squeals of mock indignation and surprise. 'I don't know how he does it,' said Buxton, who was sitting staring at one of the French girls tangled up in Green's charm.

'I do. I just don't know why they fall for it,' Trubshawe said, before taking a long sip of his drink. 'Don't worry Reggie, she's not there because she likes him, it's her job to be, nice,' he added in consolation.

'Well, she doesn't need to be that nice. I mean, I don't mind a girl being friendly, it's actually rather endearing, but well, she's-'

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‘French,’ said Trubshawe, finishing his sentence for him. ‘We’re in a room full of people and you’re still unattached aren’t you Buxton? Don’t get target fixation. What did Hawker always say? Attack everything.’

Buxton nodded. ‘Yes, and look what happened to him, shot through the head by Richthofen.’ He paused and shook his head. ‘No, I’m putting my faith in the Lord. He’s got a plan for me.’

‘Oh dear. Now listen here, trust in God when you’re being attacked by the Hun by all means Reggie, but don’t leave it to the Lord when it comes to French girls.’ Trubshawe clamped his pipe firmly between his teeth and went and stood behind him, placing his arms on his shoulders. Leaning in, he said in a low voice, ‘If you want to talk to her, now is the moment. Don’t sit here watching her and wishing, wishing is for those who have their whole lives ahead of them.’

‘Well now there’s a cheery thought,’ Reggie said, as he went to stand. Once up, he straightened his tunic and flicked again at his wayward fringe. He looked at his three companions and, with traces of a condemned man’s stare in his young blue eyes, took a deep breath, striding purposefully away.

‘Good luck,’ said Jack, as he watched him going into action.

Coddington had remained silent until this point, but now, as he watched Buxton nervously approach the French girl, words began to tumble out, his third brandy finally taking effect. ‘I don’t know why he’s so nervous. They’re all just as lonely as he is. All they want is someone to talk to, hold and be close to, just for a minute. Just to forget. Look at him, poor young fool. It’s all bluff, he really thinks she cares about what he looks like and how he acts.’ He went silent and looked intently at his half empty glass. Trubshawe glanced over to Jack who was only paying scant attention. His mind was elsewhere; a small brunette had taken up station at his side,

draping herself over his lap, her fingers caressing the fine patina of his Sam Browne belt.

Coddington continued oblivious. 'Take those artillery chaps we met today. All Canadians. They were from the same province as me. Knew all the places that mean anything to me. They're stuck in that farm, a barn as shelter, miles from anywhere, but at least they have each other. It didn't all feel so far away, at least for a few hours anyway.'

'Do you miss Canada, sir?'

'When you get leave, what do you do Trubshawe?' he asked.

'I go home and see my wife.'

'Exactly,' he stopped for a second, balancing the stem of his glass between his thumb and forefinger. 'When I get to go back to England, I'm still not home. I've been here since January 1915. I haven't seen my wife since November 1914.'

Trubshawe was as straight forward as a shell burst. 'Next leave, sir, you're more than welcome to come back to the Midlands with me, if it's not an imposition my suggesting it.'

'I'm sure your wife and children would not take too kindly to a stranger showing up unannounced.'

Trubshawe laughed. 'She'd be happy enough for you to be there keeping me from under her feet. She likes the house and children just so. I think she's glad once I've gone back.' Coddington raised an eyebrow. 'No, I don't really mean that, sir, but she would be rather dark with me, if she knew I had let the matter go quite so easily. My home can never be a replacement for yours, but my wife and my boy, Samuel, would both very much like to meet the man that is keeping me alive while we're all over here.'

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Coddington nodded. 'All right, thank you Trubshawe.'

'That's agreed then. Now, how about another drink?' He reached over to the silver ice bucket that sat in the middle of the table and grabbed the bottle by the neck. It was empty. 'Jack, be a good man and fetch over some more champagne will you.'

Jack, who was deep in conversation with a French girl, didn't hear a word.

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Chapter IV

Jack woke with a start. He sat bolt upright as his eyes registered on the clock next to his bed. It was twenty-five minutes to eleven. 'What on earth is Carter playing at? The C.O is going to go spare,' he thought as he flung the covers off him, then, as he caught sight of the rain streaming down the window of the hut, he laughed and took a deep breath. He looked over at his hut mate, still fast asleep. Jack wandered over to the window and peered out at the heavens through the thick drops of moisture. It was a wet, grey day. The clouds low enough to touch, the windsock flapped with enthusiasm. Two figures, hunched from the driving rain, were scurrying off towards one of the hangars, one holding a newspaper over his head, a vain attempt to keep dry. Jack sat back down on his bed, and set about writing.

Dearest Old Ones,

I am dreadfully sorry that I have not dashed off a line to you sooner. I can assure you that you are in my thoughts almost daily, but oh, I have been so dreadfully busy. Yesterday I arrived at my new squadron. It is so difficult to express adequately my joy at training being behind me. It is such a wonderful feeling, knowing that I am able to finally do something of value. There were some miserable days at St. Omer, while I was waiting for orders; the weather has been terrible just lately, certainly not fit for flying.

I finally arrived at my squadron yesterday morning. It felt as though I had hardly had a moment to get settled in before I was sitting in my new machine, ready to take off on my first job. And what a job it was.

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I was assigned to B Flight, who seem a wonderful group of men, and we were sent out to expose photographic plates of the German positions. It certainly isn't a job for those who get windy easily as once you cross the line, Archie (that is what we call the German anti-aircraft fire) is terrific and sprinkles the sky liberally with shrapnel.

And I have not even mentioned the German scouts yet. Yesterday I actually had my first encounter with the Hun. It all seemed to happen very slowly. I only remember the most curious of details. He came belting towards me from behind and above, spitting lead in my direction, but I only recall thinking how odd it was to be so close to a German, in such an open and vast sky. I was not at all scared, as you would imagine I should be. I was actually rather grateful about that, one never knows how you will react after all, until you find yourself in such a situation. But dearest ones, you must not worry about me unnecessarily. Of course it is hot work, but so far, they have not been able to so much as scratch me and I am certainly not taking any silly risks, which is all that counts.

I think that I shall rather enjoy my time here. The men I have met so far have all been absolutely first rate and I am in the very best of spirits. I have been billeted with a man called Trubshawe. It seems that he is somewhat older than the rest of the squadron. I wonder perhaps if this was done on purpose, in order to better help me settle in. If so, it has certainly had the desired effect, we have hit it off famously. I have not met the C.O. yet, though from what Trubshawe tells me, Major St. John is a splendid man. It seems he has a

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passion for golf and can often be found up on the hill near the ruined abbey practicing his swing.

Last week, Trubshawe said that he had his plane brought out of the hangar and positioned in the middle of the landing field where he then attempted to land a shot into the cockpit from some 200 yards. According to Trubshawe he almost made it on more than one occasion too. If only I had been here to see that; it sounds as though it was a marvellous wheeze. I feel very fortunate to have been posted here.

Jack folded the letter and delicately slipped it into an envelope as Trubshawe finally began to stir, in much the same state of confusion as Jack had been.

‘Weather’s a dud then?’ he asked between yawns.

‘Yes. It looks set for the day.’

‘Well, looks like someone up there cares after all.’

‘You’re starting to sound like that fellow Buxton.’

Trubshawe laughed and began to plump his pillows, ‘I hope not, but you could be onto something.’

‘Why did Green call him Pastor yesterday?’ Jack asked.

‘As you’ve probably noticed, he’s a rather fervent believer in the Divine. It has a lot to do with his father; went out to do missionary work in South Africa, I think. Buxton has picked up a lot of his father’s traits. He’s not anything to do with the priesthood though, it’s just Green being his usual self.’

‘Oh, I see.’

‘Well, I enjoyed last night Proudfoot, but my head feels like there is a Lewis gun going like stink inside it.’

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‘Not enough sleep?’

‘No, I rather think it’s the last drops of champagne talking. You know, you can always tell when it’s Green paying for the evening, because I never get a headache after a good Moët and that was most definitely not.’ He paused, his face contorting, ‘Hmm, the thought of German boots trampling across the Marne.’ He cleared his throat with a low growl, ‘It’s criminal. All those grapes, such a waste.’

He struggled in his bed, that perfect position of comfort eluding him. Eventually, after a torrent of energetic twirling, he gave up, clambering out unsteadily. He walked over to the window on his side of the hut, picking his pipe up from the dresser as he went. He pulled back the netting and glanced up at the sky, then down to his vegetable patch. He had spent all last week planting and cordoning it off with large, specially selected rocks, chosen for their size and brilliant white colour. Dover was its affectionate nickname. Trubshawe had even gone so far as to have his mechanic make up a sign which was proudly standing next to the door.

‘Well, at least my carrots will be enjoying this weather. They need all the help they can get at the moment.’

‘You’re growing vegetables?’ Jack asked.

‘I am. Nothing too involved of course, it’s all up to Mother Nature really, you could say that I am just the custodian. Perhaps I should have a go at grapes while I’m at it?’ He smiled to himself at the thought, ‘I’m sure the mechanics could rig up some type of press, God knows they make enough racket in those hangars. What do you think?’

Jack laughed. ‘A Twenty-Seven Chardonnay. That sounds nice enough.’

‘It does, but Singe would never go for it. He despairs enough at our antics as it is, turning the aerodrome into a winery...’ he laughed and let the netting drop from his

fingers. 'How's your French?' he said, looking at Jack intently. 'Good enough for some bartering with the locals?'

'Afraid not, sorry.'

'Hmm, don't give it another thought.' Trubshawe replied, his back to Jack, looking intently at an oil painting hanging on the hut wall. It was a modest cottage, white paint mellow beneath moss and ivy, surrounded by apple trees, bent double, ripe with the fruit of summer.

Jack noticed that Trubshawe's finger was tapping the head of his pipe. 'Is that one of your pieces?'

Trubshawe didn't reply immediately. 'Yes, it's my home. I painted it last leave. It's not very good, so many little mistakes jump out at me as I look at it now, can't believe I didn't spot them at the time, but it's nice to have a reminder of home all the same.'

'I can imagine.' Jack went and stood next to him, peering at the thick smears of oil layered on the canvas. 'There is some skill gone into that,' he said after a few moments.

'I'm going to paint a few scenes of the aerodrome and the village when I get chance. I think the abbey church would make a perfect subject.'

'It would. It looks quite impressive, even from down here.'

'Of course, you've not been into the village in daylight yet, have you?'

Jack laughed. 'No, not yet.'

'Well, we'll have to remedy that. If it brightens up later, we should go for a stroll into St Eloi. What do you say?'

'Thank you, yes, that sounds like a lovely idea.'

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‘Good man. Say, do you fancy some breakfast?’ Jack nodded and as the hands on the small clock by his bedside reached eleven, he dressed leisurely, slipping into his khaki undress trousers, shoes and a cream jumper. Then, Trubshawe opened the hut door and the two men braved the inclement weather.

They ran out, down the steps, avoiding a large puddle forming on the path, and headed in the direction of the Connaught. Jack could hear one of the pilots, with a surprisingly good voice, singing along to his favourite gramophone record as he passed by his hut. ‘That’s Llewellyn.’

Jack nodded and began to murmur along to the words of the tune: ‘I wonder who’s kissing her now...’ and Trubshawe laughed.

‘That’s the only song he plays, you’ll be tired of it soon enough.’

‘The only one?’ Jack asked as heavy drops of water bounced off his upturned palm. They felt cold, and even as Trubshawe nodded, it put pay to his questioning mood and instead he found his hurried jogging pace gained more urgency as yet more drops of water found their way down the back of his neck.

They eventually reached the cover of the mess hall. As Jack opened the door, spitting, sizzling bacon filled his nostrils, lifting his dampened enthusiasm. Iorwerth, Ramage and Fitzroy, all from A Flight, were deep in conversation, sitting around a table in the far corner of the room. Coddington was sitting alone, pouring over a maintenance logbook, exhaling frustration occasionally, the Daily Mail sitting untouched beside him. Jack didn’t envy him his job; being in charge of a flight seemed very lonely and thankless. Behind Coddington, displayed on the far wall, was a tangible reward for all his hard work: The squadron’s trophies.

Jack was rather taken aback as his gaze dropped onto a large piece of wing. The first time he’d seen something similar had been yesterday. He walked over to get

a closer look. The linen was slightly frayed around the edges, the vivid black German cross peppered with holes. To the right, serial numbers from other planes shot down by the squadron and, in the very centre of the room, flanked by other mementos of their downed enemies, two Spandau machine guns.

Trubshawe, standing to Jack's left said. 'Those were taken from the only Albatross forced down under control by our squadron. The pilot was a Bavarian called Schausberg, he'd been wounded in the thigh and put his kite down on the nearest flat ground he could find. Unluckily for him, he was still on our side of the lines. He didn't even have chance to get out of his machine before our infantry were on top of him. Must have been scared witless. He more than happily surrendered.'

'I can imagine,' Jack said.

'Green, Roxborough, myself, Yates and Cumberbatch spent the evening in his hospital ward, drinking, laughing, sharing tales, much to the annoyance of the nurses.'

Jack smiled. 'What was he like?'

'The Hun? He was jolly decent, his English was better than mine. Glad he didn't buy it actually.' Jack frowned. Images of yesterday's German firing at him filled his mind. 'The machine guns were Cumberbatch's choice. Only fair he got a souvenir, him being the victor.'

The guns fascinated Jack. They were the teeth of the enemy, yet now they were sitting on their wall.

'Admiring Cumberbatch's guns are you?' asked one of the men from the group in the far corner, looking up momentarily from his steaming plate of food. He carried on steadily emptying it as he waited for a reply.

Jack looked over in their direction and then back to the guns, offering one last admiring glance. 'Yes,' he said. Trubshawe guided him over towards the table. 'I'm

Proudfoot, pleased to meet you.' he said automatically, the men's eyes burning into him.

'Our two seaters might not be as glamorous as the scouts, but we can still get the job done, eh Proudfoot?'

'Yes, and I'm jolly excited about the Bristol we've been hearing about.'

No one replied. Then one voice said, 'Take a seat next to Ramage here.' Jack did as he was told and the young officer who was speaking took another mouthful of his meal, before pointing to his chest. 'I'm Iorwerth, this is Captain Ellison and that's Ramage.'

'Nice to meet you all,' Jack said to silence. Ellison offered a weak smile as Jack made eye contact, but Ramage kept his eyes fixed firmly on his plate, chewing steadily. Jack squirmed in his chair, the silence pressing on his shoulders. 'I imagine, if we get the Bristol Fighter, we'll be adding a lot more Germans to our wall, eh?'

Iorwerth didn't look up from his meal. 'I prefer to leave all that to the scouts, they're welcome to it, they are.' Then another mouthful of his breakfast disappeared eagerly, blotting out any hints of his Welsh accent. 'Just so long as I get home in one piece.' Before Jack had time to answer, a steward appeared at his side.

'Can I get you anything at all, sir?'

'Thank you Corporal, a cup of tea would be wonderful.'

'A cup of tea it is, sir.'

Five minutes later, Jack was holding a steaming mug of strong black tea, rain hammering incessantly against corrugated roof. As the morning gave way to the afternoon, more and more bedraggled pilots began to stream into the warm, dry mess in search of sustenance and a place to pass the time. Dud days were a mixed blessing.

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They acted as an enforced break from the danger, cold, pressure, fear, excitement. They all knew though, even if only in the back of their minds, that at the moment, the weather really was putting them behind schedule. Only Major St. John felt no twinge of relief when at five-thirty, the batman whispered that the day was a wash-out.

The Major had walked into the mess thirty minutes ago. His large frame was silhouetted against the window, his thick black hair seemed grey as what little light there was, trickled in from the window, catching it. He was standing oblivious to the men, a mug of coffee cooled in his lukewarm grip. Jack wanted to go over and introduce himself, but looking at the stooped shoulders, dark rings under his eyes, the distant stare that had a hold of his face, Jack could hardly recognise the man that Trubshawe had described. 'Stress buries even the strongest of men. Digging yourself out of it intact, that's the hard bit,' said Trubshawe quietly, as he leaned in to Jack. 'Singe is as strong as you care to imagine. Go over, he'd love to meet you.'

Jack shook his head. 'No, I should let him be, he looks preoccupied.'

'Nonsense,' and with that, he helped Jack to his feet rather forcefully and said, louder this time. 'You've not met the replacements yet have you Singe?'

Awkwardly, Jack stood tightly to attention, as Singe reconnected with the room. 'No, I haven't. Welcome to the squadron Lieutenant-'

'Proudfoot sir, Jack.'

'I see you've met Trubshawe, so you should be in safe hands. I trust you've not been given too bad an impression of us.'

Trubshawe interrupted before Jack had time to reply. 'He's met Green, but only briefly.'

Singe contained a laugh, but for a second, his eyes lost the heaviness that surrounded them. 'Well, then you've met both sides of the coin. Welcome again.' He

put a hand on Jack's shoulder, a fatherly, caring hand, then moved away, back to the window.

Jack caught sight of something else, a chalk board on the wall and walked over to it. It was the squadron's unofficial tally board. There were sixteen names.

Trubshawe followed him over. 'That's the official record of our time here in France.'

Jack scanned down the list: St. John, Coddington, Law, Ellison, Green, Trubshawe, Cumberbatch, Ramage, Llewellyn, Thouless, Simonite, Yates, Iorwerth, Fitzroy, Buxton, Angood, Dudman, Roxborough. No one had thought to remove the latest casualty yet and further down, he could still manage to trace the letters of other, long since erased names: Collins, Forsyth, Cliffe. Their names now scratched into small pieces of stone instead.

'I suppose we'd best add you and Moreton,' said Trubshawe, reaching for a small swatch of dirty, yellowing gingham cloth and quickly rubbing over Roxborough's name, before scribing the names of Proudfoot and Moreton.

Jack shivered involuntarily as Roxborough's name disappeared. It seemed so effortless. There in one instant, and as Trubshawe banged the cloth against his hand, in the next, consigned to dust.

'I say, Singe, any chance of going off to town this afternoon, I can't imagine we'll be flying unless the wind shifts?' Jack recognised the voice; it was Green, fresh from his slumber.

'Yes, fine, but remember, your flight is on for the dawn job tomorrow, don't go acting the clown tonight. We're already too far behind on our photographic work as it is; I don't want to have to send someone else back because you can't fly in a straight line.'

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Mock indignation from Green and laughter from the others drowned out any further words from Singe, but his face, bowed with lines and worry spoke loudly.

‘Trubshawe, come on over here, you too Proudfoot,’ said Green, who, buoyed by thoughts of his trip to town again this evening, was looking to start a lively debate.

Jack took another look at his name on the board and by the time he had taken a seat, the others were already huddled together in vigorous conversation, their pipes glowing as they inhaled between exchanges.

An animated Green, always free with his thoughts, was tackling the weighty subject of marriage and its ills. Trubshawe was, in Green’s eyes, the perfect foil, having been on the opposite side of that argument for several years now. ‘All I’m saying is that even if it is the accepted state of affairs, I’m still not entirely convinced about this marriage lark. You lose far more than you gain in the long run. Take last night. While you and Proudfoot were getting friendly with each other over by that piano, I was being kept warm and happy by beautiful women. What more could a man want?’

Jack raised an eyebrow. Green, as enthusiastic as on any other topic he raised, needed no encouragement, the silence was there to be filled and he was more than happy to do so. All it took was a willing ear and even that was optional. ‘But there are lots of good things about marriage you know, Marland,’ Trubshawe said.

‘I’m sure there are. I’m sure it’s all very admirable.’ At that point Green took up his sherry glass, swirling the contents in the schooner, studying the deep golden liquid as it whirled gently, lapping against the edges, before taking a small sip and setting it back down on the table. ‘But it’s the pressure I’d find unbearable. Constantly having to think about what you’re doing and who you’re doing it with. No room to breathe. No, not for me. A ring is as good as a Blighty one.’

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‘Whatever do you mean?’ Jack asked innocently.

Green stopped and looked earnestly at him. ‘It puts you out of action,’ and as though no more needed to be said, he leant back in his chair, and inhaled on his pipe. ‘Oh blast,’ he said and his hand set about searching his breast pocket, until it emerged triumphantly a few moments later holding a book of matches.

‘You just haven’t met your perfect woman yet. As soon as you do, you’ll be straight up the aisle like the rest of us,’ Trubshawe said, trying his best to counter.

‘But there is the thing, I meet plenty of perfect women. The girls of St. Eloi are the finest specimens of womanhood you could ever hope to meet and therein lies the problem. They’re all absolutely perfect, how is a man to choose?’ Green’s eyes adopted a glazed look, his mind wandered, as free as his hands the night previous. ‘You see, could I have enjoyed the company of those fine women last night if I’d been married?’

‘You could, but only if you were a complete cad.’

A wry smile flashed around the assembled faces. Green struck a match, slowly and deliberately wafting it after he had lit his pipe for the third time that afternoon.

‘And that is why I know, I’m not the marrying kind.’

Chapter V

By late afternoon, watery shadows stretching across sodden ground, leaden skies threatening yet more precipitation, Proudfoot and Trubshawe, joined by Buxton had finally decided to walk out into the village of Mont St Eloi, a weak breath of easterly air chilling their faces. They had paused momentarily at the crest of the incline, breathing heavily while admiring the ruins of the abbey; its one remaining intact face standing proud, flanked by grand trees. Its once mighty red sandstones now half reclaimed by vivid yellow and green moss.

‘What do you think?’ Trubshawe asked.

‘It’s fine. Wonderful detailing on those sculptures. I can’t believe they’ve let it go to ruin like this.’

‘Yes, it is funny how soon nature takes over again, isn’t it?’

‘Sorry?’

‘The stones.’ Trubshawe pointed at the yellow masonry that was strewn around the base of the abbey. ‘Look at them. In a few years no one will even know any of this was here, bar this wall.’

‘I can’t see nature ever reclaiming the front, can you?’ asked Buxton, who was looking down over the aerodrome.

‘Well, once we get up on Vimy Ridge, it may not be long before it has a chance to try,’ Trubshawe said confidently.

‘You really think we’ll take Vimy?’ Jack asked.

‘I do,’ said Trubshawe, starting off again, looking up at the buildings as they entered. Cobble stones took them down towards the centre of the village. The houses staggered down the rambling lane. They were older than Jack even cared to guess.

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Two storeys high, wooden shutters open, lying flush against the walls. He noticed the odd tile missing or out of place on their sloping roofs, and at their foundations, large tufts of bright green grass thrived against the wall, along with infrequent upturned kegs next to open cellar windows. Occasionally in doorways sat old men and women, enjoying what remained of the day. Jack's smiles went unreturned as they moved further into the village, wild fowl scrabbling along the puddle soaked lane, children in motley clothes shying away from them as they passed.

'Wonderful place this Reggie. I'll miss our walks,' Trubshawe said looking up at the house he was passing.

Buxton's shoulders drooped slightly. 'I hadn't really thought about leaving. It will be good of course...'

'There are certainly worse places to be if one has to live in France. The scenery in particular is very-'

'Do you think that she'll want to write?' he said.

Trubshawe smiled at Jack. Buxton was deep in thought, his troubled brow, heavily creased under his cascading blond fringe. 'Well, how on earth can I know that Reggie? Only one way to find out, isn't there? Let's pay her a visit while we're here, it's about time for some tea.'

'Oh yes. Capital idea,' Jack added.

Without much confidence, Buxton nodded and murmured something unintelligible, even the tired timber beams and yellowing rough walls seemed to be leaning in towards them slightly, keen to make out what he had said.

They came to the small central square, its stones shining like hewn ice, rounded at their edges from years of foot traffic. In the centre a well had been sunk, the black handle shone, a small wooden pail sat at its side. An elderly lady appeared at

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the far end of the square. Wrapped in a black shawl and a blue and white striped dress she made her way slowly towards them. She was manhandling a small cart laden with milk churns across the cobbles. She stopped and started, occasionally pulling at her skirts as they caught against the ground, trapped under her heavy black ankle boots.

‘Bonjour,’ Jack offered. The reply was muted.

Buxton smiled. Jack looked at him expectantly. ‘Don’t worry, you don’t want to know.’

They turned off the main square and stopped at a building painted pure white. It had a different shape than the others they had passed so far. At least one storey taller and much narrower, it had two entrances. One, a double fronted door, painted deep Prussian blue had a sign above it: Chambres pour Voyageurs. The other, much smaller door was painted black and lay off to one side. The three men headed for the smaller of the two doors. In small white-painted letters it informed the passers-by that it was the Entree du la Cuisine. Buxton knocked and after a few agonising moments, the latch clicked and the wood began to scrape against the dusty, stony floor, as dry as his mouth.

That evening, the rain continued to fall. Green, along with a few men from A Flight, had gone into the village as planned. For Jack however, his evening had been relatively peaceful. First he had visited his mechanics, to check on how the repairs to his machine were coming along and had found Coddington doing the same. The pressures of being a flight commander seemed to be taking their toll on him. Jack had only seen him a few times and every time, he seemed to be looking more and more haggard. Jack also noticed that he always seemed in a hell-fire hurry, encouraging people to do things that they were doing anyway.

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Jack had no such pressures. After his visit to the hangar, his evening had consisted of updating his diary and reading two chapters of his novel. He had retired early, fully expecting to wake the next morning to the omnipresent sound of rain against hut windows. Instead, he had been woken at five by a whispering Carter, who was now helping him fasten his flight jacket once again. ‘There we are, sir,’ he said as the final strap was fastened down and the strap pushed safely out of the way.

‘Thank you, Carter.’ Jack took his gauntlets and helmet and went out of the hut door into the lightening morning.

It was cold and the clouds were hanging heavy against the magenta horizon. There was a stiff breeze which was blowing in from the east. For further confirmation, he glanced over at the windsock, which was standing proud against the flagstaff. Down at the far end of the field, four machines were being prepared, ground crew making their final adjustments. Singe, as C.O, was forbidden by regulations to fly, but was nonetheless waiting by the machines for his pilots.

The first hint of clear weather in two days had had an immediate effect; the man of yesterday had disappeared. Now he seemed almost impatient; arms were folded over his chest, left foot tapping against the ground as he watched the mechanics go about their work. Green and Trubshawe were already seated in their machine, Trubshawe busy securing the Lewis gun to the Scarff ring.

‘Ah, Proudfoot,’ said Singe as he caught sight of Jack. ‘I know that this is only your second flight, but I really can’t emphasise how important these photographs are. If you don’t get it right, I will have to send people back until we do. Do your best to make it just the one job.’

Proudfoot didn’t quite know how to respond, it didn’t sound like an order, more like a plea. ‘Yes, sir,’ he decided was the best reply.

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‘Dudman will be providing an escort, but hopefully, the Hun will be too busy with our scouts to bother you.’

‘I don’t mind saying, I certainly hope you’re right, sir.’

‘So do I.’

Buxton, fresh from his early night, joined the two officers and was scraping his wayward fringe out of his eyes once more, attempting to trap it under his helmet. He did an admirable job, tucking the one or two stray hairs underneath the lip of the cap once he had fastened the chin strap.

‘Morning, Sir. Morning, Proudfoot,’ he said, as cheerily as he could.

Singe gave Buxton the same speech he’d just delivered to Jack and excused himself, wandering over to Coddington, who had just emerged from B Flight’s hangar, a subdued chief mechanic alongside him.

‘Singe seems fairly anxious,’ Buxton said. ‘I think this lack of flying is starting to weigh him down.’

‘I don’t think it’s only him either. Captain Coddington’s been looking rather down in the mouth too.’

‘I noticed,’ Buxton said. ‘One of the Ack Emmas was telling me yesterday that he was in the hangar a few nights ago until about eleven o’clock, checking their work. Didn’t want to leave until he was sure all the machines in his flight were perfectly functional.’

‘Well, it is his job, I suppose.’

‘I know, but, there is wanting to do a good job, and then there is being a bit too involved.’

Jack smiled. ‘Maybe, but at the moment, we have plates to expose. I’ll try to keep in a straight line.’

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Buxton laughed, the sound of Green's engine sparking into life drowning him out. 'Come on, we're never going to make it on time at this rate,' he said, leaning in to make himself heard, before getting into his machine.

Vimy Ridge, their target for this morning, was heavily patrolled by German squadrons. To stand any chance of crossing the line and getting the photographs, they would have to go over with the morning offensive patrols. Everything had been planned meticulously by Coddington. They needed to be at their target by six-thirty at the very latest in order to have any chance at all. It was already nearly fifteen minutes to the hour.

Jack's engine spluttered but refused to catch. It took an increasingly exasperated Skingle numerous attempts to get it turning.

Jack lifted off some way behind the others, wheels breaking contact with the ground, spinning gently to a halt. The buffeting and jolting of the still damp ground, replaced by the buffeting and jolting of the wind.

Circling over the aerodrome, clawing through the air, desperately eking out every ounce of power from their engines, they rose slowly. Each foot of precious altitude mattered. Before turning north-east and heading for the Canadian sector and Vimy Ridge they aimed to be at five thousand feet.

The red of the horizon was finally starting to break, giving way to lighter tones of orange. The underside of distant clouds glowed deep crimson, streaked with yellow, while directly above, where they were thinning to nothing, the lightest shades of blue began to appear, the first fingers of a spring day. As their altitude slowly, painfully began to creep up, the ground below shrouded itself in darkness. Hangers, huts melted into the landscape, a giant blackened mass.

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A red flare rose into the sky from Coddington's machine. Momentarily lost against the horizon, Jack picked it up again as it drifted slowly to the earth. They turned lazily eastward. Vimy was nearly twenty minutes away, but the sound of the front became audible within fifteen. The sound was unique. A constant, low, irresistible crump that pounded indifferently day and night. Insidious, invisible, deadly.

By the time that the front lines had begun imposing themselves on Jack's vision, the ground below had changed from black, to dark grey, to a brown churned mass. The trench system negotiated its way across the pock-marked land, never running in a straight line, turning at right angles to itself every few feet. Long laborious lines ran off in either direction for as far as the eye could see. Smaller systems of trenches branched off from the larger ones. Faints, false saps, dead ends, strongpoints, observation points, shelters, clearing stations. They were all visible from the air. 'It all looks so very straightforward up here. The only thing you can't see is death.' Jack thought. On the ground at Gallipoli death had a presence. The ground spat at you. It hissed, sighed, groaned. It clawed at your legs and whispered constantly in your ears. His regiment had gone in nearly five hundred strong, only he and eighty others came out intact. Thirty days of inaction, heat, terror, cackling mechanical laughter.

Without warning, the turbulence around his plane increased, the sound of exploding shells filled his ears moments later. Jack fought with the joystick as his machine was pushed and pulled to their will. The German gunnery was rather poor, the closest bursts exploding ten or fifteen feet away, black smears hanging harmlessly in the air.

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Over to Jack's left a plane lurched. He looked on as it began to tumble over and over itself, rolling to the left in an increasingly violent spin, pieces breaking off with every turn. Jack's eyes focused upon one of the wings, which fluttered to earth, a whirligig from a sycamore. Abstract, beautiful, mesmerising; it glided serenely, almost majestically to the ground, unlike the main body that had vanished out of sight in the seconds he had been distracted. Jack felt sick, his breathing increased, his heart began to pound. The large G on the plane next to his meant Green hadn't bought it.

Coddington? Dudman? He tried to see past Green's machine, but he could not make out the other plane's letter, he could only see Moreton, leaning over the side of the fuselage. Jack tried to slow his breathing with deep controlled breaths. His brain was too numb for anything else.

The Germans guns however, were far from numbed, their success only encouraged them. The fire from the ground increased in volume, accuracy, intent. Shells popped and cracked all around, he was certain he'd been hit on more than one occasion. He could feel the eyes below willing him to fall.

The gunfire began to separate the machines, the gap growing between the formation as they fought to keep flying straight and level. After five more agonising minutes of shelling another red flare streaked into the lightening sky, the red shining out against the blue and grey. Jack looked over at the machine it had come from; he thought he saw a letter C on the fuselage. It had to be Coddington. As leader, a red flare meant rally and continue mission. 'Goodbye Dudman,' Jack thought, realising who it must have been spinning to their death.

The three planes flew on through the buffeting, which eventually subsided as they passed out of range. As he was closing the distance between himself and the rest of the flight, Dudman's machine breaking up replayed in his mind.

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There was nothing he could do about it. He knew that. It was sheer luck that it had not been him spiralling to oblivion. Jack had not even spoken to him, or his observer; sergeant pilots didn't mess with the officers, but he seemed as though he was a solid enough fellow and judging by the way he'd flown perfectly in formation, despite the strong winds, a good aviator. 'Better than nothing,' he decided.

Jack's engine was much more of an immediate concern. It had started to cough and splutter occasionally, before picking up again. It must have taken some damage during their prolonged exposure to the Archie. There was nothing to do. 'It's easier to carry on,' Jack thought, besides crashing was a better alternative to turning for home with a phantom problem, no matter how real it seemed at ten thousand feet.

By now he had already crossed into Hunland and glancing below he spotted columns of grey specks snaking their way eastwards. Jack grabbed at the speaking tube. He yelled as best he could and waited. If there was a reply, he didn't hear it and after a moment, he slat it down. 'Confounded thing,' he said, then strained over his shoulder. Buxton was facing away from him, scanning the sky above them. Jack could only think of one way to attract his attention. He moved the joystick from side to side. Buxton instinctively grabbed for the Lewis gun, then after a moment, turned around to Jack. Jack pointed down to the ground and Buxton peered over the side of the plane. He nodded to Jack then fumbled for his map and a pencil.

Vimy Ridge was now below them, the Douai Plain stretching out beyond it, deep into Hunland. Jack didn't hear anything. He felt a gust of air just as the plane began to rock violently. Registering in his peripheral vision, a streak of colour, movement, the merest flash of red, perhaps dark brown. It swept past his right hand side and was gone. Jack looked over at the rest of the flight. The others had disappeared. He scanned the sky for any sign of them and caught sight of Green a few

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thousand feet below him, under control but in desperate straits, a Hun glued to his tail. Coddington though, had vanished.

Jack looked around once more. The sky was empty, only grey clouds building around them. It was then he noticed Buxton slumped forward in his seat, his angled head resting against the padded lip of the fuselage, a cluster of holes on his back; jagged, black, oozing. 'You're beyond help, you poor sod,' he thought, and angrily turned back to the controls. He'd seen too much of that in the trenches. Brains sprayed over large distances, jaws shot away, mangled limbs. It didn't shock him anymore. Once you'd been exposed to it for long enough, any horror could be overcome. By contrast, relief that it wasn't you never seemed to fade.

He was alone in the vast cloud-filled sky. Ominous, brooding, full of intent, Jack knew they shielded his would-be hunters from view. His eyes strained to see the merest speck in the distance against the dark grey but saw nothing. 'There is no point being a brave dead man,' he thought and felt rather ashamed as he banked away to the west and safety. His compass was still thankfully intact, the needle bobbing in the alcohol as it struggled to find its way. Jack passed over more columns of snaking Germans. He dived down low, watching the grey figures scattering left and right, scabbling into ditches, momentarily forgetting his observer, dead behind him. However, the low crack of rifle fire discouraged him from returning to repeat the venture.

He nursed his machine back up to two thousand feet and, as he crossed the front, he spared a thought for the men stuck in the lines. Then they were gone. He passed over them into safety heading for Arras, which sprawled ahead. From there, a simple ten minute flight north-west would bring him back to his aerodrome.

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Arras; heavily damaged and mostly deserted, did still have occasional signs of life, sporadic dots of movement here and there caught his eye as inhabitants moved from cover to cover. A French flag fluttered from a ruined building and on the main street that bisected it, a cart, pulled by a weak brown horse, the only traffic. It all disappeared over his shoulder. After passing a dense forested area, he looked around spotting the outline of the aerodrome's many buildings. He was home.

He pressed at the coupe button, momentarily cutting his engine, the speed of the plane dropping as did his altitude. The aerodrome's buildings became individually recognisable, large wooden and brick hangars, wooden sleeping accommodation, the Connaught; the rudder from Cumberbatch's downed Albatross a makeshift weathervane.

As Jack got lower, he noted the mechanics scuttling out of the hangars to see him home. His plane growled occasionally as he let out the coupe button briefly, the engine responding in a flurry of power, torque, thrust. His touchdown, never perfect, was as good as could be expected but, as he made contact with the sodden earth, he felt himself being thrown to the left, his ribs jarring against the side of the cockpit. He tried to open his eyes, nothing made sense. Blurred vision, wires snapping, horrendous noise, unbearable pain, blackness.

Jack heard someone asking if he was ok. He couldn't tell if he answered, he knew he wanted to. He struggled to see anything at all, everything was black.

Jack woke, a tightness around his skull. His eyes began to focus. He felt his head gingerly, there was a bandage covering his forehead. Stiffness coursed through his body as he tried to defy the overwhelming urge to lie completely still. The bed

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opposite hummed gently, Trubshawe was there. 'Thank God,' Jack thought and tried to ease himself up into a seated position. The pain in his ribs was overpowering, but despite it, he sat up. Another sunny day greeted him. He squeezed his eyes shut. He lay there fighting the growing urge to get up and out of bed. Jack needed to move around. Lying about was for those that had nothing better to do.

He struggled up and out of bed, he didn't feel quite so bad once he was upright and, after wrapping himself in his dressing gown as best he could, he stepped into the cold day.

The almighty growl of Gnome engines filled the landscape. Blinking against the bright sunlight, Jack looked beyond the wreck of his machine at three more Strutters bouncing and rocking their way over the grass, lifting themselves slowly, nervously into the air. The wings seemed to sag as the pressure of the earth disappeared and they cleared the tree line.

He watched the planes until they were the merest specks on the horizon, then cast his gaze down onto the remains of his machine. The undercarriage and the lower wing were completely missing; the tail angled about forty-five degrees to the right of the rest of it. A giant split ripped through the linen at that point. Jack thought about Buxton. There was a large brown patch which stained the grass near to the engine and cockpit. The image of him lying there on the ground abandoned, choked him.

He hadn't known him well, but he seemed a splendid fellow. It was all too easy to imagine him lying there, covered by a blanket, only his boots; wet with a mixture of petrol and blood visible, the sun catching the leather and morning dew. He looked down to the ground and shook his head. He had to stop thinking that way. He sighed, dismissing Reggie from his thoughts, wondering if the French girl would be able to do the same thing, and walked over to the mess, head bowed. The sounds of a

badly tuned piano drifted on the breeze, the smell of stale smoke overpowered him as he opened the door.

The curtains were closed, the oil lamps burned in the far corners. They were hardly sufficient and the darkness hung heavily. Most of the men sat in a large loose group in the centre, Simonite on duty at the piano. Only Llewellyn and Iorwerth were off to one side playing billiards. The old table, usually on its side against the wall, for once seeing some action. 'Jack,' came the greeting as he entered. 'You're up. That's good to see. Come and take a seat down here.' It was Law.

Law was the type of man that people were at first weary of, then after a single conversation, deeply attached to. Not possessing of a single vicious bone, he compensated for their absence with a rather large stubborn streak. His brown eyes studied Jack's face. 'I didn't expect to see you up and about today.'

'I don't even know what day it is, truth be told. What happened to me after I put the bus down is a bit of a blank I'm afraid. I assume she didn't take kindly to all that Archie and was letting me know.'

'Bit of a horizontal,' Law said as he took a brief sip of a steaming liquid from his mug. His brow furrowed slightly as he did so, 'You do know about Reggie?'

Jack nodded. 'Jumped by some damn Huns. I don't think he even saw them coming. I know I didn't.'

Law shook his head. 'Coddington's borrowed the CO's plane and popped over to St Omer to pick up another angel face. He should be back in a few hours I expect.'

Jack took a deep breath. 'It's so odd, it doesn't seem like anyone is missing. Everyone is just carrying on.'

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Law didn't reply, instead he reached into his breast pocket, fishing out a gold case, engraved with CHL. He opened it and offered one of the blue cigarettes to Jack, who shook his head while still admiring the case they were in.

'A present,' said Law, before he popped a cigarette between his lips, which wobbled up and down as he went on. 'My parents gave it to me. A present for getting into the Dragoon Guards. Father was cock-a-hoop, thought it meant I'd be sweeping Huns all before me, galloping off towards Berlin.'

The two sat in silence, Law lighting his cigarette. 'Shame really, that it wasn't more like that. We could all have been back home now.' After another brief pause, a lungful of smoke went up into the atmosphere, mixing with the already heavy cloud that was hovering over the room. 'What about home for you, Proudfoot?'

'Gloucester. A quiet little place in the countryside. Nothing but rolling hills and farmland. Horses in the lane, lads frightening people from the tops of trees. It's a long way from here and no mistake.'

'Sounds lovely.' Law took another puff on his cigarette. 'I'll wager Reggie would have loved to visit.'

Jack laughed gently. 'I'm not too sure about that. I imagine he would have needed more people around him. You can't convert sheep and cows, you know.'

'No you can't. He did like to get you around to his way of thinking. Persistent too. I remember the first time I met him. I had just got back from a show. I was covered from head to foot in that damned oil. I was convincing my batman to have a go at trying to remove it before it stained my coat permanently. He introduced himself and told me that it was the stains in a man's character that were more of a bugger to wash away, but even that was possible, so I shouldn't worry.' Law's laugh filled the

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room, disturbing the smoke as it curled up from his fingers, passed his face and into the ether.