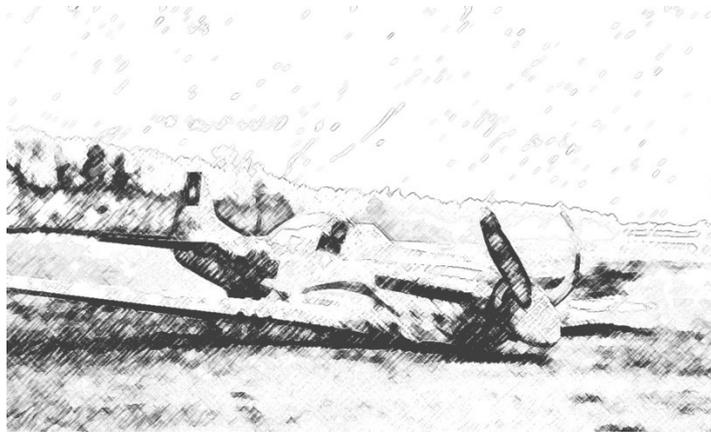


AQUILIS SERENADE

by

Stephen J. Chancellor



www.StephenChancellor.com

www.facebook.com/StephenJChancellor

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INTRODUCTION

The grass sweated from the hanging mantle of morning mist. It exhaled a soothing smell like one of a refreshing infusion. It claimed a distant relation with the evenings back home when he used to drink iced tea on the porch. It may have been the diffusion of that overwhelming chlorophyll scent that had brought him to wake. But, in truth, the man suspected that it had more to do with the lifeless fingers of the chilly dawn that soaked through his clothes and crept up his back to melt in a fine but cold dew down his neck.

He shivered and exhaled a breath that formed a small white cloud. It took Joe a long lazy minute to find the path back to his presence in a damp bed made of rotting leaves and dripping ferns which humidity clung greedily to his uniform and seemed to suck him down into a muddy cradle. He searched his mind for the reason that would explain an uncomfortable prostration entangled in a natural thickness of roots and grass. His logical mind kicked in too sluggishly. It leaned on the unconscious imprint of his training rather than proper strength of willingness. For a brief instant, his thoughts brushed the idea that a night of drunkenness had overcome his sense of direction and his seasoned, although strained, constitution with an unusually dense punishment. But that was not it. He had laid low on the booze since parties had meant little more than imposed evasions, although solitary and remorseful. He needed to look for another hypothesis. His proximate future now depended on whatever undetermined but inevitable cascade of consequences would emerge from the realisation of his unforeseen predicament.

It was so cold, so cold. The frigid penetrating grip reached for his bones and blew all pretension of heat from his face. Somehow, he knew intuitively that most of the chill that he felt originated from an exceptional weakness from which he struggled to break out.

His vision could only make up an unbroken pale grey sky through the frame of thorny branches. Paralysed and blinded by the absence of interruption in the even colourless ceiling, Joe opened his other senses. He listened for clues but the land was weaved in a reserved silence except for the occasional excited shrill of early birds. He looked at one of them as it swerved past his refuge and dived from a low branch to chase a fat and reckless insect in a mindless habitual reflex of continuity. His own stomach replied with a grumble to the simple notion of nourishment.

Lost in the timeless moment of contemplation, bobbing at the surface of an exhausted consciousness, Joe noticed a rabbit. It was hopping a handful of yards away from the cover of his natural cocoon of brushes. The animal stopped, alerted by the alien smell of human sweat. It could probably also sensed the tremor of the resonating heartbeat of the larger wrecked body. It turned and looked at him. Although inert, the fallen man retained the threatening stare of a predator. The animal chewed nervously, undecided, whether or not the shivering intruder on the ground would launch at it. The creature did not speak, instead it stood frozen. It stared directly at him, its snout wiggling its arbitration. Their eyes connected. Something passed, just for an instant, nothing more than the blink of a universal message, but tenuous enough to snap Joe out of his torpor. It was as if it shouted at him, without a tangible form of expression a telepathic warning, a purely instinctive order to awaken, fight, and live.

Joe twisted his aching body to answer the visitor with a better look but the rabbit scurried away. He gazed around. Still, all that he could make out was a hazy reflection of the diffused glow of the white light of an early winter day on the carpets of fogs that stretched in long veils of gaze over the empty silver frosted fields. He raised his head higher in the icy wind. The stranded man met the same hostility in the air that swept the ground like a dead spirit on a mission to steal the remaining life from a grass burnt in yellow blades under its chilled breath. His eyes cried from the glacial breeze and the nibbling of the unforgiving season on his cheeks. He felt helpless to suppress the involuntary convulsion in his jaws, which thrust his teeth frantically against each others. Their hollow ceramic sound echoed up his skull and reverberate disproportionately in the grove. Their clattering woke him further back to the reality of his misfortune.

Invited by a determination to survive, Joe was faced with no other choice than confronting his lethargic frailty. The denial of normally fluent movements taught him that the worst news about his condition laid in the absence of vigour in his limbs. Their numbness insinuated that part, actually most, of his vital warmth had escaped in the avid frosted ground. He was imperiously made aware that his body was unwilling to further cooperate in his adventure when it refused him the unpretentious motion of rising onto his elbow. The modest effort sent starry explosions in his skull and blurred his eyes with heavier tears. For a wobbly

instant, his vision switched to blackness, deprived of its life blood.

The wounded waited to recover his breath, his gaze fixed on the grey lid of mist above him. He struggled to swallow. His throat was dry, irritated by a taste of ashes, a mix of oily combustion, and a dehydrating excess of smoke which he recognised. He had tasted it before, he remembered vaguely. He was tempted to cough, if only he could be sure that it would not shake his bruised body. His mind teased his tongue with the suggestion that licking the water drops that hanged on the leaves within reach and blown out of proportion under his obsessive stare could quench some of his thirst. He abided to appease momentarily his dryness and distract himself from the irrational panic gaining him.

Consciousness and its trail of realism progressively returned and, with it, a procession of shuffled fragments of memories. He felt himself adrift, caught in a swirling stream of solitary pain. The fatalistically consuming understanding brought a question to his mind. *'If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it... what then?'*

He felt inexistent as if his torments were mute. He struggled mentally against the elements but also the deeper distressing corporal sensation that his vitality hanged by a thread. The fragile evanescent brumes that stifled his mind began to lift along with the wet morning fog, which pinned him down and freed him from the confused amnesia of his fall. Discernment returned but so did his perception of the real world and his wrecked condition within. *'How far lost am I? How far from being forgotten?'* He immediately regretted the down-to-earth alternative scenario. He would have preferred the one of a degrading but more conventional hangover.

Joe tried to relax with long and regular breaths to discipline the cries in his body and the anguishes in his head. He recalled the fear of the past night and wrapped himself again in its arms against his better sense. He was down and nothing more than a cornered and wounded animal. None of what he had done, nor what he would do, mattered at this moment, only the necessity to control and restrain the surges of panic. He retreated in the military proclivity, which had defined his short entry into adulthood, the one of codifying his environment and preparing for the next ambition of action. There was nothing else, nothing more that he could do for now...



His shoulders were sore from the debt of spending the night in a ditch and the marks of the preceding shocks that had rocked him before he had buried his fatigue here to expire. Fed by the adrenaline rush imposed by the last of his survival instinct, Joe tried to move into a better position, a slight improvement from the awkward one in which fatigue had dropped him. His stomach was an uninterrupted lamentation of hunger. Yet, it was a negligible affliction in comparison to the throbbing of his wounds. It rippled shouts of agony up his muscles when the weight of his foot became an unbearable responsibility to uphold.

He rolled over, just enough for his hand to brush a sticky patch on the side of his pants. He was a poor liar even to himself. The pretentious bravado of the bluffing poker player who knows that he is facing an adversary with a better hand was all but a short illusion. It only lasted until he brought before his face his fingers smeared with a proof of thick mucilaginous ruby sap. He rubbed for a minute the evidence of blood that gave credibility to the moaning in his body and accentuated the gravity of the benumbed gash in his hip. He closed his eyes and sighed with a resigned sense of defeat. The odds were stacked high against his future, itself precariously bound to few unlikely providential options. The wound had hibernated against the frozen ground but Joe was now forced to admit that his undeniable general weakness may have been from the coldness but had mostly come from the spilled vital fluid, his own life, heartily drunk by his earthy bed. He poked the scar. It was wide as it was deep, forbidding. *'I suppose that it is what can happen when you strap soft meat to a metal projectile catapulted at unnatural speeds,'* he thought for himself with the typical dark humour of aviators. *'I am one of the missing men now,'* he surrendered.

He sunk back with tiredness and deprived of any sensible perspective. His consumed initiative laid there, drained and wrecked like a modern Robinson, staring up at a window in the low roof of an underwood raft, out of valid optimism, lost in the middle of sea of deadly sharks. Caught in a timeless idleness, he waited for his will to grow with the daylight. Like in a dream, he followed the halo of diluted sun as it climbed the sky like an old man hiking a snowing slope to another stage towards the hump that would eventually open onto a better season.

In a thought, more a reminiscent twitch of his delirious mind, Joe recalled this particular landscape with a sentiment of *deja-vu*. *I have been here before.* He remembered that he had, in a painting of the flat lands of Holland by a young Van Gogh which was now exposed in a London museum. He had contemplated the same frail aster on the canvas. Except that, today, he was not a passing traveler browsing the artistic frame. He was prisoner of it, merged within, another small patch amongst thicker brush strokes of dark brown and deep green paint drowned in the first plan of trees. Back then, he had found the piece addictively melancholic. How could have he known that it had been more than a mere captivating panorama? Some impression whispered a peculiar sense of truth. It suggested that if he had stopped before the picture, it may have been because he had been called by it, captured by its prophetic power. The painted omen had looked back at him and invited him onto an inevitable fortune, pre-written for him. It had dared him to take the first step towards an unavoidable destiny. It was now displayed before him, around him. It defined his life henceforth.

PART I

The in-bound flight that had taken them across Germany had gone as well as any mission of escort could have, nearly uneventful. The main of the Luftwaffe's elite had been thinned by a year of relentless assaults on its borders. The allied forces had begun to assert themselves. They were now better equipped, more experienced, and steadily more prevalent in the air since the American industry had turned a good share of its attention to the European theatre. The patient eroding strategy had paid off and the tide had finally turned.

In March 1944, Joe and his compeers had penetrated deep into the Teutonic realm. They had flown above the enemy capital concealed by the cover of heavy cumulus. The occasional stabbing attempts on the box of bombers under the guard of the 335th had been discouraged. The wing of aggressive Mustangs, amongst which Joe's, had dispersed them, their roaring Merlin engines charging with an eagerness to retaliate. Minutes later, they had swung over the Northern industrial suburb of Berlin where they had spilled the destructive bile carried in the bellies of the *forts*. Lightened, they had promptly swerved due east to a red-controlled airfield for a pit-stop on a double route designed to provide them with the opportunity of a second punishing drop on their way back home.

In the last weeks, there had undoubtedly been a particular satisfaction to go on the offensive after years spent waiting to scramble with the alerts of the whining sirens. To poke at the heart of the beast had also added a bolstering sentiment that the enemy's strength was buckling and the conclusion of the war may be nearing. For a veteran of the earliest hours of the conflict, this optimism had been the early reminder of the hopes that a fighter, such as Joe, had shelved long ago to be forgotten as dangerous illusions. Yet, he would not have denied that he too had experienced the general impression of reaching the end of the night, in its last hour, when the sunrise approaches but is still little more than a faint and distant radiance, when the sensation of its advent invites the fervent tension of its anticipation. A matured officer, Joe had been intimate of his wingmen's moods and nature. This intuition, no more than an indiscernible expectation, had permeated in all men's behaviours at the mess of the base or during their flights. They were the men next and with whom he had so often speculated and projected prayers to ascertain such a final prospect. Now, remembering the easing atmosphere amongst the exhausted aviators, Joe wondered for a fragmented instant of doubt if he had not prematurely succumbed to the seduction of the easing but perverse confidence that they were drawing near a quick victory.

When a notably larger group of spiteful predators had prowled on the herd of bombers travelling underneath the watchful wing of guarding fighters, although his own manoeuvrability had been impaired by the unnecessary burden of the extra fuel tanks, Joe had plunged unhesitatingly, hungrily, craving for action, to relieve the lassitude of the placid chaperoning. Three other friendly Mustangs had followed behind, joining him in a four finger formation. He had swooped down on the stalking specks with the obsessive single intention to clear them off their claimed box of sky, and his drowsiness with them.

His squadron had scattered the younger inexperienced wasps, which had been left to defend the hive that star-marked planes regularly kicked, sending them charging feverishly. They had brushed some of their adversaries with fire and downed the most cautious ones. They had made a full and remarkable use of his recently issued silver lined bucking mounts. Joe had known all too well that casualness and overconfidence were two deadly traits that often segregated the returning aces photographed in the newspapers from the heroes whose names were chiseled on tombstones erected from the ground of a foreign land. But, on that day, his avidity had made unusually brazen. The enduring veteran had met his enemies with his usual punching impact and had opened fractures in the dispersing adverse formation. He had done his job. He had kept the unproven offspring of the black eagles at bay from the vulnerable skins of his sluggish flock.

The proven aviator had claimed a consolation kill, crippled another opponent, and returned to his position of shepherd within the lethargic humming of his escort. The satisfaction of a duty convincingly performed had soothed the anxious anticipation of landing safely back home, on the wet English soil. The vision of another cross painted on his armour had begun to flirt with a reverie rocked by his purring flying machine.



The sun was already on its downhill journey when Joe woke. He had fallen asleep without noticing. More frightfully, it was entirely possible that he may have simply passed out. His hair was permanently damp from the mix of his lasting cold sweat meeting the melted humus of the German ground.

His sharpened senses were on the alert. Intuitively, he was aware that neither the dolour nor the dropping temperature could be made accountable scapegoats for his sudden waking. It was something he knew but would be incapable to explain. He focused and switched the whole of his frail consciousness to the source of the alarm that had pulled his oblivion out of the devouring swamp where his weakening strain and injuries had sunk. He grabbed with a sense of urgency onto the steady shores of reality. He clinched his jaw under the effort of turning his hips and repelled irritably the bitterly excruciating temptation to surrender his perception to his condition. Joe mobilised all of his spirit to revolt against the alluring promises of an easier rest, a chorus of appeals resonating from the mob of his pains. They called unanimously to give up the fight and stirred in his renegade body like the tormented souls from a Dieric purgatory imagery.

Then he heard it : the characteristic growl of a diesel truck growing closer. With the grunt of an aching old man, Joe lifted the load of his bruises onto an elbow which point disappeared into a soggy soil softened by the dissipating residues of his vital energy. Up the slope behind him, he recognised the artificial camouflage of green paint. His bowels squeezed, liquefied, like gorged towels being twisted. A blame shot straight through his head, driven by a frustrated response of adrenaline rush. It levitated to the top of his concerns. *'I should have known better.'* He felt exasperated by his own imprudent inertia. He had behaved carelessly. *'What did I expect them to do?'* He had sent his aircraft *back to the taxpayer* and left behind the signature of a burnt but empty carcass of metal. Its captain was missing, somewhere alone, most likely wounded, and on the run in the nearby opened fields frozen by the German winter.

With the automatic discipline of a man customary to be cornered by unfavourable odds, the wounded pilot forced himself to remember the hours since his downfall, not so long ago, when his arrogance had been brought down to its knees, substituted for a modesty born from the knowledge of his perdition in the haze of a new dawn in the heart of a foreign and hostile land. His hurt pride was signed by a pitiless dolour which mocked his uncertain probation. In a present poor of any justification to provide for any hope, Joe felt utterly condemned. He closed his eyes. He needed to retrace the details that had robbed him of his enduring luck. Perhaps, their understanding would appease his sense of helplessness and discourage tears of despair from forming.



The superstitious mind of the fighter pilot should have forewarned him that fortune had something in store for him when he had crossed the green prairie of the airfield. He had made a habit of walking alone to inspect his *kite* before a mission. It was a personal tradition of solitary conditioning to prepare for the flight ahead. It was his way to segregate himself from the social world before taking off for another deadly mission of primitively vicious expectations during which, besides the occasional commands and jokes cracking over the radio, it would be him alone in his extending winged machinery. After months of service, the early stroll had developed into that mystical but necessary ritual of splitting his soul at war from its tenderer enduring human side. He had preferred, needed, to leave this one safely, exonerated, behind, waiting for his return to the English grass.

That day, the air had been unusually dry and had bitten his cheeks with an acute coldness, which announced a change in the weather and, as it happened to be, in his certainties. That pen-ultimate morning, the daybreak had opened on an unusually clear blue sky. The battering of the harsh Slavic winds, which freezing breaths had congealed the few enduring patches of the last snow into cracking white pancakes, had chased away the characteristically British veils of mists. In the course of the past three years, Joe had regularly, although admittedly infrequently and inconsistently, witnessed the snowy cover in the fields of Anglia. Yet, his English hosts had maintained their contradicting denials and had unfaltering disputed the occurrence of a whitening continental weather. This winter had been no exception. Its snowfalls and artic breezes had been shrugged off by his local crew as a momentary caprice to be ignored and waited out. Joe had long decided that this weather, in spite of all evidences to the contrary, would

never be part of their anticipations. Their mind was set on their own weather, regardless of the actual reality.

Joe now laid into a rough, cold, and alien ground where his existence had sunk to rest and was being slowly swallowed by the elements. He was influenced to recognise that the presentment, which he had dismissed as a trick of a tired mind, may have been the awareness of a cryptic invitation as if, on the morning of his departure, the curtain of clouds had been drawn open onto a new act of his personal play. He recalled how, for no apparent reason but an unfounded visceral sensation, his heart had felt heavy as he had walked to his mount of shiny metal on which his reputation was translated by a cartoon illustration of contrasting bright colours.

Mechanically, he had made mental note of the approving screwdriver planted before the left tire of the sleeping Mustang. That is when he had noticed the shadow of a dark bird in the grass by the tool. He had paused to have a better look at the unusually large raven. In spite of his prudent approach, the bird with wings as lightless as the night and a chest somber than some of Joe's morning moods, had taken off to land on the window frame of the opened canopy, above the respectful row of red framed swastikas that the pilot had earned in the past months. The two flyers had looked at each other for a suspended, silent, and exclusive moment, long enough though to suggest that some extraordinary animist sorcery may have been at work. For the time of a hesitating, private but fragile communion, the young pilot had somehow connected with the dark shiny eyes. The bird had tilted its head and had gazed down at him, straight through, into his soul. Joe would have been incapable to explain it but some elemental part of him, rooted in the Native intimate beliefs of his home land, had insinuated that the feathery creature had intended to deliver him some mystic message. The man had implicitly accepted the invitation of the bird and, in the simple magic contained in the black pearls of its stare, he had searched for a meaningful conjuncture to decipher the omen that the occult messenger may have been sent to bring him.

Few seconds later, the barked cheers of another pilot had broken the spontaneous metaphysical concord. Joe had been pulled out of his hypnotic daydreaming and returned to the simplistically materialistic world of men. The animal had escaped in a clap of sleek wings. They had reverberated like whip lashes. Its crowing had been muffled by the sounds of humanity and the coughing of their inventions defiant of the bird's skills. Reluctantly, Joe had dragged his lined boots and heavy suit back to the briefing room. In the crowded space, he had buried his shoulder in a wall soiled by many of his predecessors, most of whom had never returned to lean again on the grim plaster. He had absorbed without listening the essentials of the mission, irrationally troubled by the bird captivating spell.

From the instructions that had reached his attention, he had learnt that his wing had been enrolled to serve as shepherd dog on a round trip over Berlin, deep within the enemy circles of flak wagons. Coincidentally, they had been told that they would be joined up by a support group that should have included his mate Charles, a man who, like him, had been addicted to the sky before all else. For a while, they had both shared the same call and a solid complementary friendship. The pair had formed a bond of war, which had preceded the fight, a relation that could only be severed by the unforgiving loss of one of them.

But their original complicity had been cut short when fate had struck his companion's passion. The disappearance of Charles' *joie de vivre* and blind optimism had left an almost physical scar in his life. Afterwards, Joe had lost some of his quality for enthusiasm. He had retreated in a durable reclusive mood.

He slumped. His face hit in the cold patted grass. He was back in his sarcophagus of shrubbery. His hand rested on the silver wings pinned on his chest. He pondered, against his own pragmatic wisdom, if the terms of his presence may have been ordained by some animistic horoscope in the house of the air sign of the crow.



The return leg from the lair of the *bête noire* of the free world had been less of a picnic than their in-bound passage. The difficulty had been enhanced by the tightening grip of physical fatigue and the strain that had been imposed for weeks on the pilots' mental alertness. On the third and last day of their restless trip, few borders away from the temporary home of their familiar barracks, the pressure from the foes, whose backs they had been more recently pushed against the walls of their own houses, had intensified. They had

fiercely defended their homes and families in an irony in which the tables had gradually turned.

The *forts*, victims of random shots from the ground flak or the predation of a desperate fighter, had dutifully emptied for the second time their belly of screaming incendiary retaliation. With barely a look back at their *plastering*, they had impatiently headed to the safer grey realm of the North Sea with liberating sighs of acceleration, eager to land on friendly soil. For an interlude, the younger aviators, in sight of each other, organised in a *Vic* formation, had begun to relax. A glance at the next Eagles who had floated in the thin air at the end of his wing tips had been sufficient for their superior officer to find the reflection of his own weariness. The shoulders had been bent in the bubble pulpit and the reddened eyes, which had blinked above the masks stained with the salt of their drained bodies, had radiated a fatigued tension.

In spite of Joe assuming the role of the leading *groupie* of the escort wing in charge with the protection from above of the B-24s, his plane had begun to lag, progressively but discernibly, behind his wingmen. After some time, he had lost enough distance to reclaim for himself most of the sky across his propeller. Alone in his plane, simply him and the almost empty sky, he had enjoyed the renewed sensation of a candid solitary escape. He had nearly forgotten the present, daydreaming in the moment of absent respite. Meanwhile, the other birds, Chinese shadows before the screen of the collapsing afternoon sun, had been in the midst of bouncing at each other's clumsy jokes and assigning the tab for the next rounds of liquors of celebration. Most of them were the younger ones, the *old lags* generally preferring to keep to themselves.

They had been dissipating their accumulated nervousness in a steady but growing flow of teasing invitations, which had permeated in the cracking channel of the radio, when another swarm of *bandits* had jumped them. Like arrows piercing through the cover of the blanket of clouds, a *balbo* of *gerries* had emerged from below behind the bombers, between Joe and their fat slower targets. Soon, too close and too fast, they had surged rapaciously on the tails of the quadri-engine crafts. Remarkably, however, the cross-wearing predators had remained oblivious, or arrogantly negligent, of the single aircraft that had been limping on their six.

The shepherd dogs had committed without a second thought. Dispensing with the hesitation to shape an apprehension, Joe had shouted his order and they had all rushed to meet the wolves. He had himself dived and met the foes at a sharp vertical angle. He had rolled and turned until an uncommonly experienced duelist had taken him for a private exhausting and deadly aerial ballet. He had given chase and the cunning adversary had led him to fly with his belly dangerously brushing the deck.

The next sequence had turned into a desperate zigzagging game of cat and mouse right above the tree line. In it, Joe had been both the out-of-breath rodent running for his life and the chasing predator. Making the best of his unyielding perseverance, Joe had eventually rid himself of his obstinate playmate but, by then, he had measured that the voyage back to England had become an impossible chimera.

The pilot had pushed the asphyxiated argent steed that was bleeding oil and fire to its last drop of life-force. Drained and wounded, he had abandoned it not a second too early.

On the last of the vitality remaining from the stimulus of his fear-induced adrenaline, Joe had pointed his escape to the next woods standing on the horizon. With a tenacity that had echoed an upper call beyond any possible conscious decision, he had dragged a broken body and polluted lungs, which had begged for clean air, half a mile away, followed by the heckling ghost of his parachute. In a bocage, thick with thorns, he had crawled and collapsed between a ditch and a dry scratching bush with a triviality that he had ignored amongst his greater torments.

The fighter pilot had transformed in minutes from a fierce raptor to little more than a scarred and beaten prey. *'Only few minutes have sufficed to make me fall from being the reigning Eagle of the sky to now be a burrowing mouse in the evanescent evening of an estranged country,'* he had thought cynically, at last. He had lost consciousness under the shattering admission of his sudden and degrading metamorphosis.



Joe watched the vehicle pass and drive away with its load of shrivelling footmen bouncing on its rigid back. Fuelled by his relief, Joe felt conquered by a new motivation. He was now intent on crawling out of his foxhole for somewhere, anywhere, elsewhere, where they would not find him. There were no plans beyond

the basic reflex of getting away.

But, as he made another attempt to lift himself to a sitting position, his wounds reminded themselves to him, all at once, in a cacophony of aches. Through the persistent fogs of confusion and fatigue, his throbbing dolour, and an acute despair to be irremediably trapped in the wrong world, the doubts of his dilemma rushed him like a crowd gathering anxiously, hysterically, around a movie star. First, he needed to control the inner little boy who shouted for his parents if he was to save himself from an environment that did not recognise him and saturated any of his hypothesis with a sweeping wind of panic borne from the notion of an absolute perdition in a hostile country, which would not hesitate to take his life.

The pilot began to methodically peel the pickled onion in which he had put himself into. He regressed to his cold mathematical aviator training. It was his unique steady and reassuring buoy to grab on to. So he did and did not let go. The first answer was pessimistically obvious. He was categorically on his own, deep behind lines where patches on uniform did not match his. His enemies may fight all the same for the value of their lives and their identity but they simply did not draw eagles in the same fashion as the one that he harboured on his shoulder.

Like he used to start kick his Triumph motorcycle back in the England of yesterday, Joe jolted his brain into the motions of reacting to his predicament, namely the one of a belligerent officer astray too far for salvation in the greedy lights of the chilly season. Few teeth-grinding attempts later, Joe had pushed his shoulders against a thicket made of disorderly branches. The cushion of thorns was uncomfortable but, at least, held his weight upright. Blood began to flow back to the muscles of his lower back which had been desensitised by the hibernating soil. He examined his wounds. He would need to strengthen his leg before he could pretend to move higher up.

The first task turned into the initial hurdle of many more to come. Finding a decent branch within reach, straighter than the ones in his immediate reach, took him longer and involved more painful crawling on his elbows than he had anticipated. Whilst his hands laboured in the thickening slime of his dripping lifeblood, Joe tried to disperse the demons who whispered his damnation. Involuntarily, he exiled from the rumours that tortured his mind in the events that had led him to this freezing nest of misery that looked increasingly like the resting bed of an Indian funeral vigil. He retraced the last hours that had brought him violently down to Earth. God knew if the frustration of his failure would galvanise, even for a little more, his fighting spirit.



For long serving pilots such as Joe, exhaustion was an everyday second nature, and lassitude another sin, which threatened the essential spark of initiative. It sat on the opposite tip of his wings from where the Ripper never ceased to grin at him.

On their way to the *op*, the greenest and fuzziest birds of the convoy had still been struggling with the assimilation of the homicidal dance in which they had been persuaded to flirt with their own mortality. They had squeezed past the puffs of greeting *flaming onions*, dark stains of venom flecking their blue playground. Regardless of maturity, none of them had been excluded from the sinister realism of their crusade. They had been unanimous in the contemplation of the absences in their ranks. After months built into years, even Joe had never grown used to witnessing, helpless, the inexorable slow motion spirals of the broken aircrafts as they fell for their ultimate kiss with the hard *deck* surging from miles below their vulnerably suspended route. To some measure, however, they had all been convinced that Death would have to show patience for the next harvest, but not today when it came to their own craft. It was a resigned and preserving lie. It kept them safely confident in the trust that the ultimate sacrifice was the affair of the other young men. Without this negating philosophy of exception, they may have never been able to scramble to their *kites* with lessened doubts and a pretence of courage, in fact, a practiced bravado for the matters of reason.

Joe had long been accustomed to hover attentively above the herds of sluggish bombers. This position had agreed with him, especially in the past year, since he had perfected his personal mortal technic of falling onto his opponents in a power high speed dive. The closest comparison to his style was the manners of a hunting falcon that uses its sheer speed to ram its preys. However, as for the bird, the technic was flawed with the same ambiguous risk to be caught by the exacerbated magnetism of a ground precipitated

to meet with him. With his free-fall pedal-to-the-floor approach, Joe had converted from a prudent survivor into a victor with a suicidal reputation.

The new Mustangs were planes as pleasant to fly as to admire. At first sight, they had reminded him of his earlier British ride although this later American-built plane was a version pumped up on testosterone. They were lighter than the last Republic-made crafts that had eventually granted Joe, in 1943, the long awaited credibility of a proven killer. The captain had particularly enjoyed the recovered agility that the RAF-marked Spitfires had procured, to which, in the P-51, power and a gain of visibility of its bubble canopy had been welcomed additions. The panoptic cockpit had conferred a better sight of the surrounding clouds. For Joe, and surely for few other veteran eagles, the enhanced perception had taken him back to the original enthralling sentiment of genuine freedom that he had experienced in his first flights before the war had broken out. After all this time, he had renewed with the sensation to connect again to that unique predilection to lose himself into the vastness of the skies that had initially impassioned his soul in the improbable but obsessing adventure of aviation. Even though, one success at a time, he could not fully ignore that his initial and enduring inspiration had been reconditioned into a different, toughened, resolution. A new and detached kind of cold man had emerged and had perceptibly substituted his dreams of three-dimensional romantic escapade for the grimmer ambitions of high-altitude executions.

Yesterday, flying in his last model of war machine above the German pastures, Joe had relapsed again to the timeless and undeniably spellbinding instants when he had propelled his innocent adolescence aboard a pioneering frail biplane, to glide from the cold air of the Sierra Nevada foothills down to the endless bed of colourful orchards in the Valley. He had been thinking of such simpler, clearer, times on the return leg from their round trip of retribution above the Brandenburg region. But Joe had soon been reminded of his present by the mechanical objections plaguing his plane. He should have ditched his now empty extra tanks. The pair of rounded but obsolete fuel reserves had stubbornly developed a gripping attachment like two fat ticks on the belly of his horse. Unable to shake off their counter-aerodynamic burden, Joe had been forced to reduce pace, persuaded by the mathematics of his consumption to save on the vital essence and preserve the margin of his permanence in the intangible air. He had lost speed, which had translated into a growing distance from the group under his command.

Although the captain of 335th, who had been lagging behind like a cripple, had already been contemplating the perspective of venting his anger at his *rigger*, Joe had nonetheless been relieved to be rushing back home in time for dinner until, breaking the hum of purring engine, his helmet had cracked with a yell.

His body had responded with the habitual apprehensive reflex, sending a pinch of adrenaline running up his neck and rippling down his arms. For no other reason than the habit of his guarding role, he had looked down. A dozen of 190s had emerged at full speed, in groups of fours, from the cotton clouds below his very own wings with a bone-chilling resolution aimed straight at the herd under his protection, their engines roaring their eagerness to avenge the rape of their cities. They had been no different from the silhouettes that used to cover him with a sour cold sweat, an acid which had consumed his hopes and bravery above the shores of France. But time had passed and experience had changed him. Today, he was a different pilot from the hesitant one of then. Months had separated his appreciation of the opposition, by all means a short period, endless for a man at war, during which victories had mutated the respectful fear into a bolder determination. Now, on the threshold of his third year of service, what Joe had recognised had been a decaying semblance of opposition which he had learnt to beat with confidence. Yet, Joe's memory had not forgotten the persistent old sentiment. Against his own assumption, it had still clung to his clothes and, although dismissed by habitude, it had stirred a burning pungency in his belly.

For a brief second of captivating morbidity, Joe had observed from his marginal trajectory the brutal encounters of the two opposite groups of predators and preys in the all too familiar gut-wrenching pandemonium of streaking fire and bursting metal. For the returning somnolent, cold, hungry and weary aviators, the scene had turned into a hard committing awakening at the conclusion of a long trip already interrupted by several *dogfights*. Most of them had already traded their apprehension and concentration for the simpler optimistic promise of a hot shower and equally warming meal. Yet, from his vantage point, Joe had noted that the unexpected and savage assault had shaken most of his wingmen out of their torpor. Despite being caught unaware, they had reacted, a fraction too late, however, to shield all of the bombers' crews. In a glimpse, Joe had grasped one of the fort had begun to tip into a fatal deadly downward rotation.

In the single initial minute of engagement, the butcher birds had not only slashed through the *box* of passive fortresses like berserk lethal Mexican wasps but had also punched through the second support flight of fighters that had scattered trailed by condemning signatures of black smoke bleeding from their wounded engines.

With a calmness of mind in perfect contradiction with the mayhem in his heart, which echoed the clash of metals below his line of horizon, Joe had barked a sharp order to his group. In the instant that it had taken him to alert White Two, Three, and Four, he had caught up with them and engaged a swooping high speed pass to cut across the leopard-painted enemy planes that had swerved back for a second opportunity at scavenging on the most crippled of the staggering bombers. He had arrived an instant too late to prevent new casualties. Their next victim had almost immediately vanished beyond the cloud cover, consumed by the voracious energy of the devouring flames, its fall materialised by a long vertical ribbon of smoke defiling the clear elemental air with a scar of death. Joe's awareness had been shaken again at the thought that some of his companions may have been amongst the molested planes that gravity had been reclaiming to feed its earth.

Joe had pointed straight down and his wings had rattled from the sudden acceleration. Even handicapped by his parasitic tanks, the pilot had opted for the same classic stunt that had earned him some overused nonetheless affectionate nicknames. His wingman, White Two, had been preparing for the dive but, by then, Joe's forceful screaming plunge had closed most of the distance between his cruising altitude and his targets. The colours in his window had switched from the tranquil light blue to an in-nerving sea of antagonistic green shades and white mists rushing his way. All of his body had been tensed to indulge his destructive rush to take lives for the sake of saving others, at all cost, even if it had meant sacrificing his own. In truth, lost in the moment, the thought had not crossed his mind. Reason and questions had all been put aside in a reaction that had long become a reflex.

Joe had launched his aluminium weight like a bowling ball onto the spine of the rival leader. His guns had flared up, briefly, just enough to divert the opponent across his field of vision with a measured risk for the ones whom he had come to rescue. The maturity that had stemmed from the endurance of countless missions and the costs of few errors had battered the asperities of his impulsivity to produce a pilot of steel, one who knew well the value of being as conservative as accurate with the trigger. Such was one of the qualities of a veteran man who had aged beyond the years in the persisting features of the boy whose innocence he had abandoned only three years back. At home, he would have remained longer immersed in the candid recreations of college and flirtation. But it had been too late to undo what war had inflicted and imprinted with gravity in his eyes.

Joe had bent the entirety of the muscles in his arms to recover from his murderous plunge. His plane had rebounded below the clouds. He had breached the second floor for an endless couple of oxygen breaths. The stick in his gloved hands had responded reluctantly as if carved from a stiffer inflexible metal. He had bounced up and re-emerged from the blinding veil at the far end of the chaotic battle from where, although with weapons and strengths running low, he had immediately found another aim in the melee. Above his glass roof, the obsessively familiar and strangely ordinary shapes of the enemy crafts had been swinging back in wide manoeuvres that would bring them back again on the tails of the helpless mastodon bombers.

As indelicately as he used to handle his retired Thunderbolt, he had reared the Mustang in a violently narrow angle, shaking the engine dangerously close to its stalling breaking point. His next burst of bullets had brushed past the first of the Luftwaffe planes with the undesirable blowback of alerting its pilot of his pouncing presence. However, before this one had come to a decision, a second squirt from Joe's guns had clawed his flank, tearing a wide scar across the black and white cross. Joe had been in a secondary state in which he had almost been able to taste the blood of his prey with an arrogant certainty. He had been about to press the trigger for the terminal kill shot when the wounded prey had signed its escape with a move that the American had instantly reckoned as one of a seasoned pilot.

The foreign man, whom Joe had never met nor had specifically despised, but for the flag of his assignment, had vanished under the mask of a thick cumulus where he had engaged him in a fiery tango to one of their deaths. Summoned by the challenge, Joe had stubbornly followed.

Upon clearing the suspended mist, Joe had been jolted by an electrifying trepidation when he had instinctively realised his precarious closeness to a ground about to swallow his zeal. In a pure reflex of

survival, he had pulled up *in extremis* and, in doing so, had circled his foe in a wide break. At this precise moment of relief, a red lamp had lighted his dashboard and flooded his already adrenaline-saturated mind with a new tension. The fuel gauge had un-mistakenly pronounced the irrefutable pessimistic verdict that his return, if at all possible, would be hanging from the unreliably thin thread of the last expirations of vapours left in his engine. In the first colours that had risen across the collapsing sun and had been eating away the clarity of the day, he had pondered for an instant contained in a heartbeat with the idea of abandoning the chase. But the notion of letting go another win, especially one over a worthy foe, had persuaded him to remain committed and return the entirety of his resolute focus to his opponent shredded body.

Meanwhile, taking advantage of the split second of hesitation from the American, the adversary had recovered and claimed the upper hand from an overhead loop. Joe had acknowledged angrily the instantaneous sentence for his error, underlined to his right by a trail of white smoke escaping from the holes, as large as thumbs, that his opponent had stabbed in the fabric of his magic carpet. A second arbitration of squirted bullets had come and slammed again his fuselage. His plane had rocked and tossed his softer humane body against the hard metal frame. The hunter had become the hunted and Joe had grasped the possibility of losing this battle.

The duelists had flown in curvaceous zigs and zags for several miles, too close to the hard frozen land to speak of altitude, fusing feet from road signs on which Joe might have been able to read the words if they had not been from the verbs of Goethe. They had brushed the tip of trees so harrowingly that Joe had expected a lucky branch to finally dislodge the empty drop tanks from their tenacious faulty bolts. All the while, in his mortally crippled mount, the American pilot had been blinking and coughing the smoke that had been spilling between his legs as thick as marmite.

Inundated by the stress from the peculiar melange of anxiety and excitement, Joe had swooped down in a lawn mowing manoeuvre, belly against the geometrically ploughed brown fields. A couple of desperate manoeuvres later, he had regained the advantage. This time, he had not let it escape him. He had firmly secured his grip yards behind on the equally wounded German.

In the second half of the deadly chase, the strained Yankee had sunk in a state of terrifying tension, which had profited from the void of his consumed strength, burnt along with the precious liquid sublimed in the nose of his ride. The leather of his gloves had turned into a spongy material and his fingers, which had been tensely clasped around the stick for endless minutes, had refused to un-tighten. The drips of sweat down his neck, the fog in his goggles, the blood on the lips bitten by his anxious concentration, and the pleas from the cramps that had clenched his legs, had ranked somewhere amongst the list of his material considerations, in no particular order anymore, neither before nor after his anguishing low fuel and ammunition stocks. They all had become distractions ignored in the face of a stabbed pride that had settled with defiance for a last stand. The frustration to have allowed his vanity to answer the invitation of flying too low for his taste in spite of any survival rational and his autonomy had come and gone, leaving him trapped in the present, in which only the troubles inherent to the struggle with himself, his machine, and his adversary still mattered. His spirit had been all that had stood between the interlaced scenarii that segregate courage from unequivocal madness and sacrifice.

Joe had been caught in the condition of battling several, too many, deterring imperatives at once when, crowded by the realism of gravity, an alienating speed, the reality of a one-way ticket, and the strain of a body about to give up, his sixth sense, sharpened by trials and errors, had alerted him in a flash of intuition of the latest trick of his relentlessly un-abiding opponent. In the half light of the sunset, Joe had nearly missed the small reflecting clue of a thin electrical cable onto which the opposing artist had led him. Joe had flirted with the trap. In a quick swing of his wings, he had barely managed to swerve below the definite severing barrier of the high tension power line. He had passed but inches from clipping his tail and with it his life.

Joe had guessed as much but, more importantly, he had escaped in one piece. His bucking plane had vibrated from all its rivets and sent a trembling throughout his whole body, now exhausted by the excess of nervousness that had forced one last dose of remaining energy into his veins. Objectively, Joe had felt that this last alert had drained all of what had been left of his endurance. In a blink, he had decided that the time had come to end this aerial circus show. He had not waited and gained a safer altitude. Using the last breath of performance from his mount, he had stricken the other pilot who had believed too early and too

confidently in the triumph of his improvised deception. Forgetting to look up, the enemy aviator had neglected for a fatal second that the American's enraged tenacity had also been compelled by an uncommon talent and a rancorous character.

Joe had hit his European cousin with such thunder and lightning that the Focke had broken and tumbled into hundred parts across the length of a flat frosted field before sparks of metal had ignited the main of the rolling carcass into a ball of fire. Without a look back for the signalling pillar of smoke, which had risen from the melted metal and consumed flesh, the victor had turned his back on death and aligned his compass due full West, towards an impossible destination called home, a reward to which he had been travelling only minutes earlier. Joe had pulled his aircraft higher using all his residual force to dodge the approaching height of a forest and sighed to expel the rage still flowing in his chest. He had tried to relax in his drenched suit. Pushing aside the gloomy but resigned prediction of a reservoir too drained to carry him back to his destination, he had been left with the more fatalistic and indulgent peace of simply flying.

He too, as his withering metal ride, had been scarred by the onerous chase. The sensation in his leg and hip, bothersome at first, had worsened. Deprived of the receding impulses of anaesthetising endomorphine substance, it had expanded into a numbing restraint. Joe's will had so far invited his body to patiently accept its turn in the growing queue of issues which had pressed him. But now, liberated from his foe, he had finally been persuaded by the radiating dolour to acknowledge the trauma sanctioned by the streaks of deep red lining on the side of his cabin.

That is when he had noticed that he had been by himself for a while, actually since he had crossed the barrier of the clouds. His breath and wits recovered, Joe had called on his radio but only screeching *gremlins* of statics had replied with cracking mockery. Alone, he had ordered the recalcitrance in his stiff arms to take him back to safer skies above the grey winter ceiling.

In the narrow cockpit space, choked by the exhaust and the heat, he had pulled his expiring Mustang higher and faster. Purely guided by the last of his survival instinct, he had stretched more height from the grasp of gravity. But as the pilot had ordered his machine to ascend, the Mustang had replied his direction with the dreaded condemning coughs of renunciation. The Merlin engine had suddenly lost most of its magical purr, substituted by a series of sick hiccups of whistling wind and diesel drum. The mechanical failure had soon taken a more visible form and had translated in a darkening trail of thick and oily smoke. Its thickening consistence had seemed to echo Joe's swelling injury.

The mirroring surrender of the two broken partners, the rider and his loyal mount, had hurled the pilot out of the cockpit from an elevation which would have likely been labelled as unsafe in any military manual. Joe had parted reluctantly from the spirited aircraft. His early training long passed, sightless from the smoke, he had earned his membership to the *caterpillar club* to land brutally and awkwardly in the folds of silk onto a hard frozen ground surrounded by bordering groves.

Joe had found himself more isolated than ever, deep in the heart of in his enemies' realm, whose animosity had reacted to his presence even in the cold bite of its weather. In the last light before nightfall, the now wingless aviator had glimpsed at the signature of a tower of black smoke that had appeared a couple of miles away from his fall. *'She would have deserved a better end.'* He had considered with regret before correcting. *'Then again, what better death than in combat?'*

At the limit of his constitution and wariness, bleeding from his struggle and infirm from his awkward landing on the frosted ground, solemnly missing for his companions on their way back, the young American eagle had walked aimlessly, wholly lost, adrift, in a place beyond recognition and safety.

II

The aviator's mind stalled for the greatest part of the day. Like a capricious infant, it unreasonably pushed aside the reality that inferred that the next years of his youth, of his life, were quickly, inevitably, vanishing down a void left by each of his dying hopes. His distress invited the reminiscence of that unsure California child who used to hide his timidity and his doubts in solitary excursions in the woods across the first hills of fruit trees. But the dreamer boy was long gone, substituted by the clinical warrior who had taken his place, hammered by mortal trials of fire and hard steel, the man whom he was.

He began to question his conviction to the usefulness to commit to the greater but painful imperatives of survival. Joe was a raptor deprived of its wings. It left him with the queer sensation of being cut off from the freedom of his element, to be a crippled body abandoned to the trap of a dimensionally reduced static ground. Finally, cornered by a time that escaped with what remained of his vital energy, Joe imposed himself an ultimatum. *'I either give up here or I perish trying for what of a last, although slim, chance I may still have.'* The verdict was obvious for he had never been known to go down without resistance. That was true for this one final fight and he chose the second alternative.

'A cripple on the run,' he chuckled as he boastfully urged himself to minimise his handicap as a chance to even the odds. Consistent with the routine of his calling, he worked down a checklist of his most critical basic motor functions. He forced himself to stir each limb. He did not have to strip open his pants to know that his knee was stiff and swollen against the fabric of his flight suit. It had been sprained when it had painfully cushioned his landing on the ice-covered side of a furrow. He searched his memory for any residual tip of survival that his training may have had successfully implanted in his brains. Unfortunately, there was no chapter listed under *Charlie Foxtrot* and no recommendation seemed a better idea than *punching out* of his place of rest and hiding, inconsiderate of his bearing. There was no future in immobility.

Joe moved up the next wound, up the same ill-fated leg. He was examining the disheartening abundance of blood that had stained his pants and was now congealed in thick patches of red jam, when a quick movement caught his eye. The unexpected alert sent a sharp electrical influx up his spine. It took Joe the heavy beat of a heart that pounded to get out his chest paralysed by his withheld breath, and some neck twisting to grasp that the startling shadow in the thorny shrubbery was nothing more than a fold of his 'chute. Few yards behind him, at the corner of his vision, it flapped from under a thick bush, waken by a gale of wind. The wounded pilot smiled at his own silly nervousness, *'I am becoming as fidgety as a little girl.'* But, he also quickly realised with a sense of relief that it had been short of a miracle that the wavering white flag had evaded the notice of the patrolling militia. He recalled their heads down, half buried in woollen scarves wrapped around the collar of their long coats. *'They must have been too busy pestering at their uncomfortable assignment to pay any sincere attention to the lifeless winter landscape,'* Joe assumed. *'But, they, or another vehicle, may come again... It will, sooner or later.'*

Joe crawled towards the silk curtain like a seal on a Pacific beach. His attempt took him right along the edge of a cliff of consciousness where the insistent summons of his wounds and the discouraging permeating embrace of his weakness pushed him to the limit of falling into the next blackness. It took him an excruciating hour to reach, gather and salvage the silk sheet. The simple effort of ripping off the white fabric became another test of endurance, which flickered against the blinding screen of his feebleness. He had never been a boy scout. His exacerbated sense of individualism had always dismissed the pseudo-military suit. He had never wished to wear any until, paradoxically, he had eventually surrendered his conviction to indulge in the larger and heroic promises of the combat aerial evasions of the new war. Nonetheless, the boy in each man, moulded from a virgin practical common sense, managed to improvise the necessary bandages to wrap his dark wounds out of sight and his most urgent concern. Joe used another length of the saved fabric to tie into submission the straightest of the flexible branches from the closest nut tree and combined the two materials into a weaved cast around the swollen cartilage of his infirm kneecap. He stuffed the last strips as an extra lining inside his leather jacket.

When the aviator finally stood up, the day was falling. He turned West where the sun imitated a slower version of a blazing bomber caught in a downward gliding trajectory on a collision course with the extinguishing wall of the horizon. It was not late that far North. Joe had grown accustomed to the robbed

afternoon hours of these longitudes. He bit his tongue again to hold back a cry when he pushed his first baby step since his collapse into the grove. He tasted the metallic haemoglobin in his mouth embittered by the unwashed pasty taste of diesel and smoke. Few exhausting motions later, Joe stopped to smother the stars bursting in his skull. When his vision recovered its clarity, he looked up where the sun had just set, *'What good will it do to aim there if the next friendly face is hundred miles of land and sea away?'* He remembered that, when short on gas, he had pointed his propeller Northward, towards the improbable but nearest haven of Norway. It had been his last initiative but he admitted that it had only bought him few inconsequential miles before the mechanics of his engine had given up on him in one ultimate spewing cough.

With the same poise as a man flipping a coin and leaving his fate to Lady Luck, he elected to head South West. He walked away from his hideout rationalising his choice. It helped him distract his mind from the cries in his limb. He comforted himself with the speculation that, at least, the land pretended to be more indulgently flat. His bearing was probably as unwise as any other guess. It was as unlikely as any other one to take him within any reasonable time of endurance across a friendly border, but hopefully it would be more clement on his strained wounds. He also evaluated that, in this direction, he may be able to avoid, for a while at least, the main of the hornet nests that he and his friends had kicked a day earlier. It felt subjectively reassuring to impose some distance between him and the uniformed hounds who had surely been busy sniffing his trail from the opened grave of his smouldering bird, even if all around, everywhere was German territory. Regardless, surrounded in all orientations by the insurmountable truth of his geography, the harshness of a carnivorous weather, his parasitic injuries, and the absence of safe harbour within any distance ahead, he angled away from the line that marked the route travelled by the truck.



Joe walked for hours, disproportionately multiplied by his suffering, a lost soul haunting the lifeless fields of a purgatory in which it had fallen. He leaned and stumbled against the bites of a wind, without a doubt German for the perseverance with which it hacked his oscillating body with an un-dissimulated hate. In the worst of his initial steps across the cracking wetness, before night time progressively froze solid the uneven extents of hibernating potato plots in more stable ice-hard grounds, he occupied himself with the task of cornering and then locking away in the attic of his consciousness his most pessimistic thoughts, although many of them were more realistic than the absurd beliefs that kept him going forward. The wounded man disciplined himself to set all his strength and the integrality of his will in the simple taken-for-granted act of placing one foot forward, drag the second to level, and repeat the same phantom walk, over and over again. He staggered hypnotically most of the first night, and the following one, from the asylum of one bocage to the next cover at the limit of his perspective, at the root of the milky way.

Stubbornly, he had not resolved himself to abandon the burdening but salutary bulk of silk salvaged from his lacerated parachute. Some parts of it, patiently rolled in his satchel, made an improvised cushion for his occasional fall when a brusque shove of the oriental breeze tipped him over. Other strips kept him warmer, rather less cold, or he used them to regularly renew his soiled bandages. All the while, however, he fondled the colt that sat atop his survival pack. Even as it bounced against his bruised ribs in a rhythmic but nagging pounding, it provided him with a continuous tempo to submit his march to and a reassuring, although illusory, sense of security. He would pull up the cold gun apprehensively each time the scurrying of an invisible nocturnal animal or the crack of a falling branch spooked him out of his somnambulism. Hours later, under a fresh blanket of yellow fern, he would rub it unaware, like a comforting last companion, until sleep conquered him.



On the third night of starvation and exhaustion, Joe entered a different kind of trance, one crowded with spinning nightmares and the peculiar impression that his mind and body often parted. A couple of hours before morning would diffuse its glow through the thick fog, the febrile American stepped out of a grove to blink at the mirage of a man-made light. A yellow incandescence of a lamp beacons him below the

shadow of roof which broke the otherwise lineal surface of the next horizon. Its seductive radiation whispered to him the miraculous assurance of walls bursting with merciful warmth. Joe stared for an incredulous while at the phosphorescent call in the distance. Like a cast-away who catches the sight of a faraway ship, he held it from vanishing from his unreliable dehydrated and delirious perception, his eyes reaching out to embrace and not let go of the sparkle of hope at the end of a wide opened pasture. He could have cried but his fatigue was too overwhelming to dispense with the tears of his emotional relief.

The pilot grabbed on to that vision with the desperation of shipwrecked survivor on the last of his expiring breaths. He pulled towards it from his mental grip. He recognised that it may well be the last chance that he would be given and he was too weak, too delirious and enraptured by the obsessing light to speculate on what could come next, if he reached the alluring glow. He was unable to deliberately consider any consequence on the moment. His subconscious may well be percipient of what it may lead to but desperation mobilised before all else its cryptic power to drive his last gasp of will forward.

Joe approached the house, stumbling, a lone undead silhouette, crossing the opened ground on a limp. His movements were leaden, so slow than anyone watching would have thought the ghostly form to be immobile, to be part of the night scenery, if it had not been for its uncontrollable shivering under the assaults of the Northern drafts. The salutary vision materialised as he drew closer. He stopped, his eyes clutching on the lantern insinuation of heat, quivering with hesitation in the frosty twirls of air. He could almost hear the teasing shouts of the sirens inviting him in, their voices undeniably sweeter than the cold tangibility of the elements which had drained all of his force hour after hour.

Joe's hand sought the dampness of his hip wound. Instead, he found an icy crust. His movement did not reconcile with any sensation. He could no longer feel the fingers poking at the skin depleted of its vital essence. Only then, he recalled that life had left his side some time ago. He could not pinpoint when. It may have been hours ago, possibly yesterday. He realised then that the susurration did not emanate from welcoming creatures of calidity but instead from the mocking screams of the ice demons who rode the encircling breezes.

He grinned his parched lips. How many nights could he fool himself with the short victory of a handful of travelled miles before his body would finally say no more, as his Mustang had? *This is your last night*, Joe heard his heart state like a court judge.

I can't trust anyone, even my own self, he hissed, defeated, between his clenched teeth. The invincible hero of the skies had been blown to surrender by the Arctic kiss of death of Freyja. The truth was bright as the contrasting lamp before him. It cried out that this place was his last chance. *When there is no choice, there is only one choice. Forward.*



Joe limped into the barn's quilt of golden light and musky animal heat. The contrasting shelter was welcoming like a cozy immaterial duvet pulled to his ears. His body instantly relaxed although he did not let go his tight grip on the bulky gun. It still represented the last psychological crouch that segregated his pride from his vulnerability. It subjectively supported the courage of a man, invited by his needs against his instincts, to enter in the exposure of the illuminated room. Hunger, thirst, and pain surely made for convincing preachers. They individually did but, as in Joe's case, combined, they could band to effortlessly break a man's spirit to the point of corrupting the cognisance of his doomed fate.

Subdued, Joe did not resist their three shoving hands as they pushed him beyond all legitimate concerns for a trap in which he was assuredly dragging his moribund flesh. The pilot in him, groomed by years of combat in the larger panoramic screen of the sky at speeds beyond reason and nature, collected in a split second the most relevant details of the place. No more than a handful of cows stood in a tight row ahead of him, too few to imply a prosperous farm. Yet, these were times of war. They did not move, undisturbed and indifferent to his foreign presence. He turned to the horse at the right end of the stalls, opposite to a smaller door to his left. The equine seemed excluded from the rest of the livestock, maybe because of his more impatient temperament or, more fairly, it may have been given the pretence of privacy due to his superior allure. Influenced by some sort of male intuitive affinity and a genuine longing for any relation of protective camaraderie, Joe answered his empathy for the stallion.

He moved to the isolated towering nobility of the steed, his stiffened limp sweeping a path in the

soiled straw. He reached the horse and passed an amicable hand on his mane. Drawn by the warmer and fuller life of the animal, Joe rested his head against its shoulder where telepathically he pressed an unspoken pact of secrecy. The authentic Mustang turned a black eye to signify his accord to the wavering man. The grounded aviator acknowledged the nickered agreement and collapsed like a broken house of cards in the thickest stack of fodder. The stallion whined annoyed by the indiscreet disturbance of the alien's brutal manners and the invasion of the narrow space of its private stall. Its nostrils dilated and a shiver ran like a wave along its slick back. The American pilot also guessed in the eyes of the pony that it may have been unintentionally spurred by the mix of sweat and blood which now assailed its senses.

Joe projected upward a mean look, one that a father, upon returning home from a long day, may shoot at a bothersome child.

"I dare you to be the next foal to let me down," he growled.

Hurt and diminished, his own sweat coordinated with the wilder one of his new companion of fortune, sensations seemed to return to his thawing legs. They also rushed distress back to his brains. Awakened, they demanded hysterically a long overdue attention to his lesions. Joe thought for a flashing instant to shape himself a nest into the bed of aromatic dry grass but, instead, he just laid there, his back against the wall darkened by use. Any move would have been an unnecessary demand. He was well enough. He just wanted to indulge the moment of repose. Few minutes later, he had abandoned himself to the flows of warmth drifting in the barn. They caressed his face and hugged him tenderly back to the world of the living. He took a long breath of the foul but pleasantly real smell of existence, a lively and authentic composition of urine, droppings, bestial bodies, dry grass, and raw dirt moistened by the saturated straw.

The radiance of the auspice, the safety of a minimally built barn, which had glowed from afar like a pretentious lighthouse, the energy of the horse that stared down at him with what could be interpreted as an honest concern, this whole concert of trivial vital sensations rocked him like a drowsing morphine. Only then, in the floating crossing between consciousness and fainting, Joe appreciated that he had never reached so deep within himself. In a brief glimpse of clarity, he measured his fortune to still be alive.

In a pause of peace without scale, stuck like a clock frozen by the crucifying ices that besieged their lost prey right outside the door ajar, he felt cradled in the same but ambiguous weightlessness as a man satisfied by an over-indulgent meal, undecided between languor and sickness. He did not intend to sleep nor did he actually care to keep his vigilance onto the world around him. He just sunk in a dreamless retreat where all his traumatised senses were muffled, softened, silenced, forgotten...



The fat pink lips of his stable-mate were toying with his matted hair. Cast away in his personal ocean of pain and confusion, Joe no longer possessed the strength to neither acknowledge nor to fight the spontaneous display of tenderness. He kept his eyes shut and pretended in an absurd fantasy that he was back in England, laying on a velvet couch, the heat of a large fireplace warming his face, his head deliciously tucked against the hip of a young girl with a sweet name. He was bragging about his heroic deeds. Meanwhile, she, not a horse, sighed in admiration as she played with his coiffure with an indulgent but probably feigned interest.

He was almost disappointed, rather than suspicious, when the horse abandoned his soothing nursing, neighed and slammed nervously a hoof in the soil. The man's wits, at least the remaining of its evanescent fragments, backtracked to the heavy thump that had preceded the responding kick of the stallion. The banging sound translated lazily into the mental picture of a wooden door. It connected with his last memories. *'Could it be the same one that I saw to my left on his way in?'* Joe opened his eyelids. His stomach now churned with distress. He would have probably emptied the fright that it contained if his guts had not been shrivelled from their emptiness for a couple of days.

The animal above him leaned and examined him expectantly. He seemed to wait for the next move of the smaller man prostrated in his space, *'What are you gonna do now, smart ass?'* The aviator turned his head. He rubbed his blinking drowsy eyes and peaked through the slits of the stall's uneven planks that separated the prideful horse from the bleak bovines. All that he could make out was the back of a wide shouldered man.

In a reflex, Joe's knuckles went white around the butt of his '45. He waited. His thumping heartbeats

marked the inevitable countdown to their confrontation. The large farmer did not turn in his direction.

Impatient and unpracticed at passivity, Joe pushed himself higher against the wall with his good leg. From his new vantage point, he gained a wider view of the barn. He could even see its main door, the same one that he had distractingly left slightly opened. Beyond its aperture, the first rays of a rising sun pointed straight at him as if to reveal him like a search light. They seem to threaten him with another fatalistic day of torment. As Death, who most probably stood waiting for him beyond the opening, freedom was spreading greeting arms of nascent radiance for him. *'Come,'* it whispered. *'You need to go now,'* it insisted. The door was near and yet so far, too far. The negligible few steps between him and any escape would have been by any mean arrogantly easy for any healthy man. But today, in his declining condition, they represented a daring journey. Regardless, beyond the attraction of the exit, Joe argued that he would have been left with no better gain than another reset period of survival, this time much shorter and still instinctively prolonged, without destination.

Joe stayed immobile, observant in his invalid ambush. Across the wooden rails, the heavier man worked in silence. It was a strangely displaced thought but, in that instant, Joe remembered that he had witnessed this kind of application before. He had seen it in his family, the same kind of resolved efficiency emphasised by a back worn by many years of labor and bent by a lifetime spent bowed before the same chores. The flashing recollection escaped him as quickly as it had come. His mind was brought back to a cold fever, pressed out of his body by the excessive exercise of clinging to his weapon which he held as if it was a magic wand that could somehow solve his problem and save him. If only he could be enough to rub it with a wishful thinking to be miraculously granted his disappearance from this place, this country, and this agony.

Meanwhile, the farmer irremediably worked his way towards the reluctant refugee. Like the slow but inevitable dawn that washed with intensifying light the man's profile, stretching his shadow into an arrow aimed at Joe's hiding place, step by step, swing after swing of his pitchfork, the peasant imitated the daylight and cleared the shed of the residues of the night.

His back against the dirty wall, Joe's mind was sprouting ideas and possibilities like a grotesque vine of overgrown weeds. Some were ridiculously innocent, others, in contrast, remarkably violent. He calculated, forecasted the outcome from each possible action, speculated his chances, overreached his future into its eventual consequences... He was in the middle of such an introverted mental workout when a string of morale restraint snapped in him and released an unsuspected being, a more savage and instinctive cornered version of the man that he thought to. It was a creature of instinctive survival. Desperate to live and overcome, it broke its chains and jumped out of the jails of his subconscious.

Unaware, the peasant was swinging the fork with the force of the habit. He could have not theorised that the spectre whom Joe had become, perverted by desperation and suffering, was lurking behind him, ready to pounce on his uneventful life. His cleaning drove him, one stall at a time, closer to the intruder's corner of the building. Before moving to the last segment of his sunrise chore, the horse stable, the oblivious man, who lived a thousand miles from the nearest border of the war, turned to stretch his back in the face of the purifying new sun.

Joe saw his opportunity. Being a fighter pilot implied an ability to take decision in the fraction of a second. He stood and in large ambitious steps, which consumed the last drops of his strength, launched for the man. At the limit of his reach, his legs lost all of their vigour. They simply folded from underneath him. The wounded aviator collapsed but not before he asserted a firm grasp on the farmer's stern shoulders. Joe took advantage of his wavering body to hamper the German's movements with his weight. In a single motion, Joe leaned forward and wrapped a constricting arm around the older man's neck, as much to contain his victim's defence as to maintain some of his upright posture. The aviator secured his hold and jabbed the mouth of his brand new pistol where the chin meets the neck.

The farmer was taken aback by the unexpected aggression in the peace of a solitary morning far from anywhere where such things could happen. His muscles suddenly drained from their intensity by the rush of venomous apprehension, he dropped his tool and obeyed the counter-weight of the trespasser. Carried by the momentum of the taller burglar, too weak to stand up or even to resist, he followed his assailant's disequilibrium backward. Both men, one surrendering to the burden of another man, the other one to his own instability, retreated inside the box from where Joe had just emerged, between the nervous horse and the low segregating boards. They came to a halt when Joe's back hit hard the ageless crumbling plaster but

the gun did not falter from his jaw bone nor the grumbling breath of the stranger parted from his temple. Seconds dripped into an endless minute, breeding uneasiness and ideas, most of violent consequences, into both their minds. No words were exchanged. None were needed nor relevant to describe the obvious stalemate to a dead-end. The local man could feel his aggressor's expiration against his ear. Joe had not thought his next move. He had improvised to turn his ambush into a way out. However, he was now caught reflecting if he had it in him to flee. He could not stay erected, and, anyway, to which end.

The pilot was recalled to reality when he sensed a preparedness building in the stiffness of the peasant's muscles. He reassured his grip, nearly strangling the unshaven pale throat, when the small door suddenly opened with a spontaneity that called the two merged heads to turn in unison.

The young woman suspended her light and spirited steps when she intuitively perceived the unusual tension in the quiet but all too silent and empty space before her. She scanned the room for the presence of the father whom she had come to meet and found his wavering eyes at the end of the barn. They were dominated by a haunting silhouette. Her heart skipped a beat. She imagined for an instant the towering shadow to be an unearthly figure of legend. The dark spirit was coming to collect her father and she had interrupted its grim act of unfair abduction.

Too sleepy to invent a danger that she could not define and too perturbed to walk away, she stepped forward. She wanted to cross the distance to her father before the unconsumed shadow from the night would decide to take him away. She moved prudently but steadily brushing with her shoulder, for reassurance, the hides of the animals. Her uncontrollable curiosity guided her steps and her hesitation should have bought her the time to fully wake and chase the hallucination. But it did not fade. As she came closer, it grew more real. She delayed to decipher the dangerous mystery ahead until she understood that the ghost who was staring at her from behind her father's shoulder could not be a demonic spirit. Such spirits, as they had been described in her superstitious upbringing, and later conceived in her childhood nightmares, had never illustrated such youthful blue eyes, no matter how deep they were sunk in their exhausted orbits.

Her father's lips were trembling. He was trying, in spite of his terror, to give her an order. When she had this look of intense interest, she was unlikely to listen. Across him, the young woman could not take her sight from the predator. Captivated, she approached a little more, within touching distance, mimicking the cautiousness of a child who has set her mind to save a cowering and hissing cat from the last precarious branch of a tree. She raised her hand to the lethal steel in Joe's hand. When her thin fingers wrapped around the instrument of death, all strength abandoned instantly the cornered bird. It was as if her touch possessed a gift of enchantment.

Joe's arms fell to his side and his knees buckled under him, but his sight never deviated from the angel who had come to him, for him, to save him. The closer she had approached the more her aura had swollen and blinded him until all determination had capitulated to her salutary presence. Her radiance had touched him, engulfed him, and dissipated his worries and pains, leaving him with a comfortable emptiness in which he could finally let go. He felt saved and washed from his scars.

He could not have guessed that the mystical apparition belonged as much to his past as to his future. She was a vision who had always been in him, unnoticed, guarded, concealed, and hibernating in the depth of his soul until the day of her revelation.

Joe's head hit the ground without dolour nor anguish. All became restfully black.