

Chapter 17

November 1917: Striking the Mark

Von Bülow had unsurprisingly fallen asleep, and was now snoring. Yvonne lay awake staring at the wall. In the moonlight she saw the tin full of buttons resting in its usual place on the bedside table. She sat up and pulled on a nightgown, then lit the kerosene lamp.

The tin did not move. How could it? It was not alive. If anything, it represented death in blood, fear and fire.

She was captivated by its significance.

After swinging her legs off the bed she leaned towards the table, then picked the tin up and held it before her eyes. *Such a plain, everyday item.*

Having lit a lamp, she opened the tin and looked within at the jumble of labelled buttons. She picked one up and held it to the flickering light. Number eight. *The first eight are all Frenchmen. But the rest are English.* How many did 'the rest' signify? Two at least. Yvonne wondered how many more victories von Bülow had added since he had made the comment, and if they were still all Englishmen. She could count how many buttons were in the tin now, but she didn't know how many there had been even a few weeks ago. There was no answer to be had.

Her attention went back to looking through the contents of the tin until she found number nine. She untied the string, then did the

same for number eight. The labels were attached to new buttons. Yvonne derived an unusual satisfaction from her petty act. Quashing her mounting unease, she set nimble fingers to the task of mix and match.

She was not even a minute into her sabotage when a finger traced a line down her spine, 'Are you enjoying yourself, Night Witch?' At some point von Bülow had stopped snoring and Yvonne had not noticed.

She trembled beneath his touch, and this time it was not in revulsion. There was a quaver in her voice, 'What are you going to do to me?'

He chuckled, 'Do? Why do I have to do anything?'

'You aren't angry?'

'Why would I be angry?' There was no obvious inflection in his voice to provide any hint to his true state of mind. Yvonne took it as a bad sign.

To admit out loud that she had meddled with his trophies in order to make him appear foolish would have been a mistake, though neither was under any illusions as to her intent. 'I'm sorry.'

'Can you put them back into the correct order?'

Yvonne's reply was hollow and small, 'No.'

'Then I fail to see how being sorry is any sort of remedy.'

'I'm sorry.' Reiterating remorse at being caught in the act has never been taken seriously by an injured party, but even so, the strategy of offering repentance has never been abandoned by offenders. Even in religion it is a cornerstone.

'Perhaps instead of feeling sorry, in future you could consider exercising prudence.'

Yvonne was crying now, not knowing how much damage she had caused, or how much would be taken out of her hide. Von Bülow

had seen her tears before, many times, and was inured to their intended effect, 'The buttons are only tokens. If you think I have superstitions about them then you are insane. You could piss on them and no-one will know they are less than I claim them to represent.'

She refused to believe that he was without any sentiment in the matter despite every other aspect of her interactions with the man. Not knowing of any response that would not trigger von Bülow's ire, she wrapped herself in silence and hoped to view the morrow through un-blackened eyes.

He clasped her shoulder and she flinched. Though his touch was gentle, he was a master of misdirection. This time, though, his voice was only curious. Tone was generally not something he had ever been able to properly disguise and as she felt a degree of relief, 'Why?'

Yvonne turned to face him, and her face was streaked with tears. He brushed them away with a thumb, 'Is this an attempt to look ugly? Here, you've missed a bit...'

She sobbed at his humour and at her own pathetic state, 'I'm sorry.'

'Three times? Is this a curse you are putting on me?'

Yvonne was living on raw nerves, 'The only good thing to come of his death is that he loved me to the end. He never had time to tire of me, or to wish for another. You'll never understand what it means.'

Von Bülow may have been brutal, but he was not stupid. He had the sense to see that she was referring to her husband, although he lacked the tact to sympathise, 'He left you. What else is death, but abandonment?'

'You don't understand.'

'What is it you want of me?'

She shouted at him then, 'I'm not talking about you!'

'Then you're right, I don't understand.'

'Leave me be. Just go away and never come back.'

Von Bülow had lost interest in the topic, 'Maybe I'll write a letter to the High Command and tell them that it is no longer convenient for me to be stationed here, and please can they transfer me to another sector?'

Grief was no impediment to the detection of sarcasm, nor to meting it out, 'If you go, maybe then I'll miss you.'

What is this shit? Women and their lack of reason! Despite the thought, von Bülow knew that he had been bewitched. It was evident in the small things that he noticed about her: the tilt of the head unique to this being; that confident walk when she was unconsciously in a different space; the slender hands, elegant but made bolder through professional usage.

Yvonne was beautiful, and he knew it as a fact. Here she was, crying whilst dressed in an old gown, and it wouldn't have lessened her to wear a potato sack. The scene was one of familiarity, and von Bülow briefly glimpsed how a marriage might be something that brought a feeling of belonging even on a bad day.

In this moment the effect of her physical form was muted by her mood.

It is the eyes... always it comes back to the eyes. They were hard to like because they were almost always flinty and uncaring, and yet sometimes they had a vulnerable luminosity, though it was only a whore's trick. At other times those same eyes provided a gateway to the soul, where fear and suffering resided. It was precisely to witness some of Yvonne's complex human side that motivated von Bülow to deliberately provoke her. At least, that was what he told himself on the rare occasions when he thought about it.

Right now he didn't desire to witness a manifestation of fear, now that other parts of Yvonne's mind had surfaced. So he simply sat there as she cried. He had no support to offer, because that required knowledge of a specific problem, and there was none that he could discern. Sometimes the only thing to do was to wait for the storm to blow itself out.

He sat beside her until she eventually cried herself to sleep.

Yvonne was puffy the next morning, and her hair was in disarray.

'You look like you could do with some beauty sleep.'

He received a poisonous look, 'I think you meant to say 'some more beauty sleep'.'

Von Bülow smiled, 'No.'

It was time to put the smug bastard into his place, 'You have never told me that you love me.'

Even though the ambush had been sprung without prior warning, it failed to take him unawares, 'I don't.'

'You act as though you do.'

'You and I, are we so different? You act as well.'

'Do you sing my praises to anyone who will listen?'

'No. It should be enough that I say them to you.'

'Then you don't love me.'

'If you want me to say it three times I will. That's the magic number with you, no?'

Yvonne gave him a searching look. She took her time about it, 'Maybe one day you'll understand.'

'Maybe one day I'll be dead.'

Please let it be soon. But she said instead, 'Well, there is a war on, as you know firsthand.'

'Have I done something wrong again?'

Again? When did you take a break? ‘I believe that every person is unique and I am not an exception’

‘Excuse my French, but is that not a contradiction?’

‘Do you love anything?’

‘Steak. Rare, garnished with spring onions.’

The flippancy of his answer had a kernel of truth that infuriated her. She pressed him further, ‘And what of your men? Do they love you even though you do not love them?’

‘It would be a reasonable assumption, though respect is their likelier sentiment.’

Yvonne was brusque, ‘I have to go to work.’ It was a cruel reminder that he didn’t have sole rights to her body.

Von Bülow shrugged as if he didn’t care, ‘So do I. I have some more buttons to collect.’ And that was his way of letting her know she didn’t have a monopoly on reminders.

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Despite the fact that they flew in the same aircraft, Ross Burke was something of an enigma to Captain Lewis-Hamilton. The young flight commander could never shake the feeling that his observer held the rest of the squadron in low esteem. It seemed that simply because he was on the other side of Hill Thirty, Burke had a right to claim superior knowledge to those of lesser years. He would never answer a question seriously, and though this was irritating to the Englishman, he nevertheless persisted, ‘Smoke?’

Burke took the offering, ‘Ta.’ He lit it and inhaled, then blew out a perfect ring before it dissipated before their eyes.

‘I have a question.’

Burke sighed, ‘Here it comes...’

Lewis-Hamilton gave a slight frown of annoyance. He didn't notice that the frown registered on Burke, or that it caused an imperceptible crinkle of amusement in the corner of the older man's eyes, 'Why didn't you transfer to the Australian Flying Corps when it was formed? I know that they were asking for applications from within the RFC.'

'Mate, I know your opinion of Australians, but even they have their standards. Besides, I know that you will one day appreciate the experience of exposure to the wider world even if currently you have your nose halfway between your arse and a tea party.'

The pilot was not new to insults; they came out almost every time the dumb Aussie opened his mouth. He simply could not fathom the reason for it. Stymied once more, he gave the game up and went looking elsewhere for a friendly conversation.

Bert Noone had overheard the exchange, 'I heard what you said, and the question still stands.'

'Did you used to peek at your sister in the bathtub as well?'

'What sort of question is that, Backa? I was in it with her!'

'You would be.'

'I grew up in a drought and we bathed together. Two in the tub raises the water level as you well know.'

'Fucking Archimedes has a lot to answer for.'

'So why didn't you join the AFC? I've asked you once before.'

'Once? That'd be the day.' The real reason was quite simple, 'The skipper might have too much attachment to his school tie, but one thing that he can do is something that matters very much to me; he knows how to get home every day. If I transferred to an Aussie squadron I'd just be assigned to someone who is unproven, and my dear old mum would finally see my name in the paper.' The reference to the published casualty lists was inherently understood.

‘We could apply for a transfer together.’

‘I once saw men jump from a burning RE8 because they didn’t want to sizzle. It makes you wonder.’

‘Isn’t that a mortal sin, deliberately taking your own life?’

‘For Catholics, maybe. But I’m not sure it counts even then, given that they were dead men either way.’

‘It was still a deliberate act.’

‘Sometimes there are no easy options.’

Burke didn’t know what else to say to his old friend. Pointing out that Noone was not exactly a seasoned campaigner seemed crass beyond belief, but the fact that the man didn’t even realise the implication was more proof than Burke needed. He wondered how to let the man down gently, ‘Remember when we went grape picking in the Hunter Valley? The first day we were paired with experienced pickers and made bugger all money out of the job.’ Noone shrugged, not sure of the relevance. Burke nodded, ‘I was on my side of the vine, and the other bloke was on his side. I couldn’t see how he was filling his bucket so fast when mine took forever. The whole crop had to be stripped, but I didn’t see that the bastard was taking advantage by grabbing the bigger bunches on both sides for himself, and leaving the scraps for me. Then he’d move to the next plant and do it all over again before I could catch up.’

‘Yeah, I remember. The same happened to me. You wanted to punch him in the head.’

‘I would have, too. In the end, the simpler solution was to figure out the game and prey on the ones who came along later. They either work it out or call it quits.’

‘We did all right after the first few days, as I recall.’

‘Yeah, but how many didn’t figure out the trick? Pack your bags and go home.’ *Was the reference too obscure?* Burke had no way of knowing, and certainly no way of asking.

Noone pointed his chin at the distant form of Lewis-Hamilton, ‘You don’t like him much, do you?’

‘The toffee-nosed bastard deliberately bowled me off a no-ball once.’

‘Why didn’t you block it out?’

Burke scowled.

* * *

Boom. The gunshot echoed across the field. Von Bülow was practising with his carbine again.

The new men in the *Jasta* had finally found their feet - those that had survived - and now they were beginning to register their first claims. The commander was reminded of the first time he had been asked to assemble a group of strangers into a cohesive fighting unit. That had been just over a year ago. It seemed much longer.

Boom. Bonninghauser was watching from a distance with Reinhold, ‘What has he loaded it with?’

‘Extra powder.’

‘Isn’t he afraid that it will blow his hand off?’

‘Are you afraid of being killed when you face the English?’

‘It’s an unnecessary risk, if you ask me.’

Though von Bülow probably would have said that no-one had asked, Reinhold was built differently, ‘I think he is practising for when he goes to Africa. He wants a small bore, but never said anything about the number of grains per cartridge.’

‘He needs to get through the war first.’

‘He believes he will.’

Boom. Bonninghauser was not all idle questions, ‘It seems that he is spending more time on the range with every passing week.’

Reinhold had noticed the same thing, ‘He is going through a dry spell. If you can’t put shots into the enemy, practice is the next best thing.’

‘He hasn’t got any since I’ve been here.’

Reinhold hadn’t known it was so long. The new pilots must have been thinking that von Bülow had lost his touch if they were celebrating victories and the commander wasn’t. Potentially, it could undermine his credibility. ‘How long have you been here?’

‘Nearly two months.’ *Boom. Boom.* ‘How good is he?’

‘If you want to shoot for money he’ll empty your pockets soon enough.’

Von Bülow looked like he had finished for the day. He had tucked the weapon beneath his arm and was trudging back towards the onlookers. He rebuked them without venom, ‘You’ll never get any better by watching others.’

Though von Bülow hadn’t yet shown his dogfighting prowess to the newer men, he was not without presence. Bonninghauser didn’t mind mining the man’s brain, ‘What is your preferred method?’

Ordinarily the commander didn’t mind blowing his trumpet, but he still felt that if people didn’t listen to him every time he spoke he was hardly obligated to give an encore. Having been asked a direct question, he gave a minimalist response, ‘Sun at your back; shoot from close range.’

It was standard fare. Everyone used that method and Bonninghauser found nothing new in it to harvest. There were two ways to draw von Bülow into a conversation. The first was to ask him how good he was; the second was to ask someone else about

their own abilities. If one didn't work the other was guaranteed to. 'What about you, Ernst? Which of your kills went exactly as you had planned?'

Reinhold was immediately reminded of a Nieuport which had erupted in a fireball. It was a thought he preferred to leave alone. He greatly preferred to see his adversaries survive, though it was widely accepted that firing a machine gun at a man could be to his detriment.

Von Bülow had no such qualms, 'Holding your fire until the last minute gives you an excellent opportunity to plaster your quarry, and I'll admit that it is crudely visceral. However, there is no greater satisfaction than clinically walking your bullets into the cockpit and placing a single bullet into a man's skull. Of course, the Maxim's rate of fire complicates matters – as a rule half of the poor fellow's head is taken off. But the process is one to strive for if you aspire to achieve perfection.'

'You have done this?'

'Just once: that day I was in a different place. Time actually seemed to slow and I was able to make exactly the shot that I wished for. I imagined the target's next move, and anticipated my own reaction. From there it all unfolded as I had foreseen. Everything deliberate. Mechanical. Exact. Once you have had such an experience, you want to do it again. It completes you. You understand God. To relive that day is what spurs me on; to find the perfect combination that connects you to the soul of the man you snuff out. But to get to that place where time stands still, you must first stand upon the precipice and look down. When you have been to that place, religion makes perfect sense.'

It sounded bizarre. Bonninghauser had never considered such a feeling. But seeing the animation in von Bülow made him wonder if

it was at all possible to achieve. He looked at Reinhold, who had a bleaker outlook, 'For the rest of us, there is usually just the shambles of flames and mangled bodies.'

Von Bülow had more to impart, 'The simple truth is that a man can do everything right every time he flies. Then one lapse and he is dead. This is especially so if the error occurs when the enemy has seen you, or sometimes just if your number is up. Like it was for Boelcke. A man like him is not killed by mortals.'

Reinhold agreed, 'The successful hunter has superior awareness and he makes the right choice without hesitation.'

Von Bülow nodded, 'And luck. One cannot overstate luck. It is as important as character. Maybe more-so.' Von Bülow was the best marksman in the *Jasta*, though he was not always aware of everything else around him when there were upwards of a score of aircraft swirling about, with most of them after his blood. He had been riddled with gunfire enough times that he had acquired a healthy dose of respect for the French and the English, 'Even the best pilots fall, and for me this is proof of luck – both good and ill.'

Bonninghauser made light of it, 'Perhaps it would then be better to practise with dice rather than firearms?'

Von Bülow ignored him. Reinhold was also dismissive, 'If target practice and dice games won wars, the Kaiser wouldn't require us to risk our necks for him. He'd hand out bravery awards for shooting clay pigeons.'

'Don't waste your luck on dice, Bonninghauser. Save it for when you are flying and maybe you will live a little longer.'

Chapter 18

December 1917: Winter Sports

The officer's mess was a low-key environment where the pilots and observers spent much of their down time. Lewis-Hamilton was propped on a bar stool as he was pontificating on Burke's propensity to tell tall tales. Percy Wiggan was his reluctant audience of one, 'The story about the ear is untrue. He confided to me that actually it was bitten off when he was attacked in his sleep by an echidna.' The assertion was met with a mildly drunk but sceptical look. It was not lost on the patrol leader, 'You know - a spiny ant-eater. I doubted it myself when he told me. I have seen a picture of one of those animals, and they don't seem very fierce at all except for the spines. But Burke has informed me that there are all manner of strange creatures where he comes from: spiders and snakes and yowies and such. Echidnas need to defend themselves against many things. It seems plausible, and why should the man seek to deceive me?'

Wiggan's philosophy had always been that the simplest answer was probably the most likely, 'Australians are generally uneducated, and my experience of them these last few months has led me to conclude that they are compulsive liars to boot.' With an emphatic raising of his drinking elbow, he emptied his glass in one last gulp. To punctuate his announcement, he added a beery belch.

'Surely it can't be the case in every instance.'

‘Believe what you will; you’re the one who has to fly with him. For mine, give me a man of good schooling every day of the week, and a church service on Sundays.’ He punctuated the pious statement with another burp.

Wiggan pointed at the orderly behind the bar, indicating his empty glass. Another was brought forth, ‘Look at them, colonial riff-raff.’ He pointed dismissively at the two Australians as they kept each other company in a quiet corner of the room.

Burke and Bert Noone were hunkered down together, deep in discussion about the rugby league competition back at home. There were huge gaps in their knowledge on the current state of the game, which they had not attended live since the nineteen-fourteen season. Consequently, they were more focused on the events that they remembered from the years prior to their war service. Their lack of connection with the present status of the renegade competition underlined how far out of kilter the war had knocked things.

‘Billy Cann – he was the best in the business. Never had a bad season, and tough as nails.’

‘Yeah, he could tackle all right, but the best? No. Put your money on Messenger.’

‘Wrong team. Show some bloody allegiance.’

‘Fair call: Cann, then. But his name suggests he keeps close company with swagmen. Get it? Billy can?’

‘Very original.’

‘No wonder South Sydney were so dominant in those first few years. Throw in McCabe and the Butler brothers and you’ve got the basis for a good team.’

‘I met Harry Butler once.’

‘I was with you.’

‘Oh. Yeah, you were.’

'I preferred when they played Hallett in the centres. They should never have switched him to fullback.'

'Who, then?'

'Jim Davis.'

'No, he was better in the forward pack.'

'Maybe, but there were enough forwards to go around that it hardly mattered.'

'Word is that young Horder is coming along quite well.'

'Well enough to not volunteer to join us over here where the crowds don't cheer you on without an accompaniment of automatic weapons.' And that observation killed their enthusiasm for reminiscing about their favourite club team.

The conversation had turned sour, but stayed on topic. Burke noted, 'Interesting that Balmain is winning the competition every year now that the war is on.'

'Are they the only team whose players aren't signing up for the AIF?'

'What other reason can it be? Before I got on the boat they were just a mid-ranked bunch, no better or worse than the Dirty Reds.'

'Now there's an unflattering name, but no worse than Newtown's. Who calls themselves the Bluebags? It sounds like they enjoy being kicked in the balls!'

'They're a shit team, too.'

'They ought to change their nickname to something better. Modernise. How about the Biplanes?'

'Jesus, I can tell you're not a Newtown supporter with a stupid suggestion like that.'

'Or a Balmain supporter, either.'

‘Balmain. Maybe their players are the only ones with brains in their heads, staying at home where it’s the fans that scream, not the participants.’

‘Brains? Footballers?’ They laughed at the stereotype.

Noone leaned backwards, tilting his chair far enough that he risked injury to his spine in the event that he should overbalance, ‘I wonder if the ladies still swoon over them, or are they now handing out white feathers at the ticket gate to blokes refusing to enlist?’

‘How hypocritical people can be, judging those who refuse to fight, while they happily sit at home themselves.’

Burke and Noone peered morosely into their beer, each pondering the world in a brief silence. Noone resumed where they had left off, though neither had noticed the pause in the conversation, ‘They’re fickle bitches, all right. But what do you want them to do, Backa? Join the infantry?’ *Women in the army? The very idea was ludicrous.* Neither of them would ever have any notion that the Russians had already raised all-female battalions, but their collective ignorance of events so far a-field was hardly unique amongst the armies that fought on the Western Front.

‘I need another beer. Where’s Drummond?’

‘He won’t be anywhere to be seen if it’s his turn to buy.’

‘The miserable sod.’

‘I’ll go and find some of the new boys, then. They may as well be useful for something.’ For some reason, Noone didn’t consider himself to be a new boy anymore - not since the latest intake had arrived. Burke considered the elevation to be premature.

Combat veterans had their fair share of stories to impart, and if they chose to tell them they invariably had a willing audience. For Ross Burke to open up, first he needed to be plied with alcohol. It made him unusually eloquent at times, ‘The first time I flew over the

lines I ran into the enemy. How about that? No time to familiarise myself with life at the front - just straight in at the deep end. We were at seven thousand feet and there were Albatroses all over us...'

One of the listeners felt the need to interrupt, 'You mean Albatri.'

Drunken eyes swivelled unsteadily, 'Huh?'

'The plural for Albatros is Albatri.'

Burke was dismissive of the new kid's opinion, 'Bullshit.'

Another fellow added his tuppence's worth, 'Actually, it's Albatros. The same as applies to fish or deer.'

The Australian didn't care, 'Or blithering idiot. You're barely old enough to wipe your arse, boy. Keep your school book wisdom for Mummy. Do you want the story or not?'

'Sorry, Ross.' Ordinarily, Burke would have shut up shop and told them to leave him alone – either that, or punch someone in the face - but he was luring these foolish rabbits into his snare and was prepared to put up with their ignorant attention to useless trivia.

'So there we were at six thousand...'

'You said seven.'

'And I also said to shut your mouth, but you didn't seem to hear that part.' He glared at the others and almost called it quits. They correctly read his intention and became instantly submissive. *Stupid Poms.*

'The Hun bastards were shooting the blazes out of us and we lost a thousand feet while some hoity-toity Pommy kids graced the world with everything they know about grammar and diction...' Burke looked meaningfully at them, but they wouldn't meet his eye. All except Noone, who winked. 'The most dangerous place to be when you are flying is not at high altitude, but just above the ground. When you hit the ground you are dead, so being actually on the ground isn't

the most dangerous place. The last place that most airmen fly before they are killed is just above the ground. Think about that.'

He nodded at them again, 'So being at five thousand...'. Here Burke paused for another interjection but none was forthcoming, '...wasn't too alarming except for the bastard Huns and their Spandaus.' He sagely pointed at one of the boys who had dared to interrupt him. Burke was at this stage very drunk, 'That's a machine gun, in case you didn't know.' It was an attempt to provoke more theoretical knowledge from the upstarts, but they were wary of him now.

'Of course, the other thing to worry about being at four thousand feet is how far it is to the ground.' His speech was ponderous, and especially difficult to decipher for those of the Englishmen unused to the thick accent, 'That's the worst part. There's nothing scary about being just above the ground. Lots of people fall off ladders and out of trees and live to tell about it. But not from three thousand feet.'

Burke could see that they were starting to smell a rat. The constant loss of altitude was about as subtle as a brick through a window. He grinned at the prospect of what lay ahead. Whether they read his look correctly or not was immaterial. If they thought he was just a slobbering drunk, so much the better. He forged ahead, struggling for continuity in his inebriated state, 'From seven thousand feet to two thousand, chased the whole time by Albatroses. And you know the worst part?' He leaned forward conspiratorially, and they leaned in imperceptibly in response to his cue, 'We were on fire.'

The claim prompted some justified scepticism, 'I beg your pardon? How did you get down safely from so far up? You haven't a mark upon you!'

'Are you calling me a liar, fella-me-lad?'

The look on Burke's face forbade any notion of doubt. He cowed his audience with his intensity, 'If I said we burned the whole way down, that's what happened. His Lordship landed us in No-man's-land and we ran nude back to our lines, our very clothes having been incinerated while we wore them. The infantry said that they'd never seen the like: me with my cock wrapped around my waist to keep it from tripping me over, and His Lordship modestly covering his spare pinkie with a scrap of string.'

'But it can't be done. Despite the physical impossibility of surviving after falling in flames for seven thousand feet, you are hale and hearty! Not a mark upon your body.' Mentioning his mutilated ear seemed meaningless in the context.

'I said it was my first mission, no?'

'I don't understand.'

'Brand new. Green. Too green to burn.'

There was a pause of several heartbeats as the implications were sorted by the various men. They let out groans as they realised that they had been duped.

Burke took one last shot, 'Did you know that the word 'gullible' has been omitted from the latest edition of the Dictionary?'

'Really? Why?'

'There's always one.'

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Black branches speared into the lowering sky like the antlers of a deranged stag. There was dampness in the air, and snow-melt had trickled down the coat collar of the young man as he foraged in the forest. He padded softly over the partially buried trail, game-bag

slung across his shoulder as he kept a sharp eye out for anything interested in his furtive doings.

He trekked homewards, hunched against the cold, mittened hands fending off the supple branches and twigs that seemed bent on flicking his eyes out. One of them had raised a welt on his cheek. He rubbed it with painfully tingling fingers, but the only sensation was the rubbery numbness of chilled skin.

In the distance, he spied the familiar form of the house he had grown up in. He imagined that it would have looked different only in detail even if it had been constructed of gingerbread. *If Mother hears she has been compared to a witch, well, the look on her face would be worth skipping a meal to see.* He revised his thought. *No, the meal comes first.*

When he finally arrived home, he scraped his boots clean on the bottom step, and then released the latch, letting himself inside as quickly as he could to prevent the warmth within escaping.

‘Volker, is that you?’

‘Yes, Father. I’m back.’

‘Come in from the cold.’

Volker Bartels removed his boots and brought them inside, placing them close enough to the fireplace to allow them to dry, but not so close that they would be ruined, ‘Just one hare. The other snares were empty.’

‘If the game-warden catches you you’ll be sorry.’

‘If we don’t eat we’ll all be sorry.’

‘Yes, yes, I wasn’t chastising you.’

The younger man removed their next meal from the jute sack in which it had been carried home, ‘Shall I skin it?’

‘No need, your mother has idle hands, it will give her something to do.’

There was a female snort at the comment, 'Idle hands? Something to do?'

Harald Bartels had a twinkle in his eye, 'Besides chatter.'

Volker smiled at the by-play. His family would have been very happy if it wasn't for the shortages. 'I saw sign of deer in the snow. I can go out again before the tracks are covered if you wish it.'

'No, no, the hare will do. Otherwise your mother will start complaining that she's too fat.'

'Start complaining?'

Another twinkle, 'Well, if not her, then me.'

'And when do you ever complain about being too fat, Harald?'

The twinkle was now accompanied by a mischievous grin, 'I'm never too fat, dearest.'

The comment was duly processed, then answered with a squawk of indignation.

Harald chuckled, 'There, that's what I wanted: the squawk.'

'I don't squawk!'

'Call it what you will, but the hare won't skin itself.'

The domestic routines took over, and harmony was duly restored to the small household. Volker's mother had vanished to the kitchen to prepare their evening meal.

'Father?'

'Yes, Volker?'

'I'm seventeen years old.'

Pale blue eyes peered over the rim of the spectacles that perched atop Harald Volker's nose, 'How fortunate that you learned your numbers at school.' The tone was mild, but both of them knew where the conversation was headed.

'I will be called up soon. If I leave it any longer to volunteer I won't have the option to choose service in your old regiment.'

The elder decided to take the lead, 'There is such a thing as service to the state.'

'I have been brought up to believe so.'

Harald nodded, 'Unfortunately, affairs of state are not always pure. Never. I mean, never pure.'

Volker knew that his father would keep him out of the war for as long as possible, even if it meant hiding him in the cellar, 'Often there is no choice.'

'There are ways to tell whether the politicians are making the correct choices.' He paused, 'My mistake. What I meant to say was that there are ways to tell that they have made incorrect choices.'

'How?'

'The obvious one is when they put a rifle in your hands.'

'Can you please be serious?'

'I am very serious about this, Volker.'

'There must be more to it than that. War is the result of failed political strategy.'

'Yes, it is. But it is very difficult to govern when there are lies and compromises every way a man turns.'

'And now you'll tell me that you can tell their lies, because their lips move.' Volker was just pre-empting his father's pet turn of phrase.

'You are an astute boy. I am very proud of you.' Now Harald's face did turn serious, 'You'll either volunteer or be drafted.'

'I know.'

'You want this?'

'Do I have a choice?'

'Life is full of choices, Volker.'

'I thought that you would forbid me from fighting until I had no other option.'

‘I? Forbid? No, no, you will make your own decision in this matter, and not blame me if it all turns to shit.’

Volker looked aghast. He had never heard his father use the word. That one utterance, more than anything else, told the young man how far opposed the older man was to the idea of enlisting in the Kaiser’s army.

Harald had used the word for effect, and he saw that the strategy had worked for now. But life had to go on, ‘In the meantime, you can go back outside and bring in some more wood for the fireplace.’

‘Yes, Father.’

Volker made his escape, relieved to be away from the awkward situation, even if the price to pay was a renewed exposure to the elements. He pulled on his wet boots and went back outside. As he closed the latch, he heard an unfamiliar drone in the distance.

Though Volker Bartels had never seen an aeroplane, nor a zeppelin, he had heard tales of them and knew the sound for what it was. He crossed the yard to see if he could get a view unobstructed by trees, but it was not to be.

The sound gradually decreased in volume, then before it petered out, ended with a distant explosion. Firewood forgotten, Volker ran back into the house.

‘Father, I think a flying machine has crashed nearby!’

‘Did you close the door behind you in your hurry to tell me of it?’

He had not. The lapse was attended to, then the conversation was picked up again, ‘What would it be doing this far away from the fighting?’

Harald Bartels was a firm believer in keeping things simple, ‘Possibly it has lost its way and run out of fuel.’

‘Can I go and see it?’

‘Maybe we’ll go out tomorrow.’

Volker knew better than to press the issue. To ask twice was folly.

‘Where is the firewood that I sent you to fetch?’

The young man performed the task, but each trip outside caused him to look into the distance at unexpected possibilities.

* * *

‘A man walks into a bar. The barman says, ‘Watch where you’re going!’”

The pub was packed with servicemen, and that usually meant that there would be a fight at some stage. Inter-service rivalry was inevitable, and most encounters resulted in a considerable amount of damage and no few cracked heads.

‘Hey, what do you call a dog that doesn’t heel?’

‘Gangrene!’

‘Syphilis!’

‘C’mon, that one’s not even new.’

‘Remember the time we borrowed linen from the hotel clothes line?’

The story in question was not very old at all, and was recalled amongst hoots of laughter, ‘The old bastard came out and accused us of thieving...’

‘...Drummond told him to shut his trap if he knew what was good for him - it was three against one...’

‘The cranky bastard went back inside and came back with this bloody great mongrel and said ‘Now it’s three against two!’”

‘And Hump, he says, ‘We should have brought Barry, that’d even things up nicely.’”

‘Fucking Barry!’ The image of the docile nanny filled them with mirth.

Ross Burke was deep in his cups, and it was not the first time. His eyes were as red as an outback sunset and as unforgiving on an Englishman. They were the ones who had involved Australia in the bloody war, and the adventurous aspect had ended just as soon as the shooting started. To have joined up expecting anything different was inexplicable to a man who had grown up with firearms. He was no different to a rabbit for the cooking pot, and was a fool not to have realised it immediately. The recruiters had done a good job; that much was certain. Men who were otherwise sensible had flocked to do their bidding.

All that was left to him was to take it out on those around him. He had no hesitation in that respect. As usual, his heavy Australian accent was a draw card and he had another captive audience hanging off his every word. The topic today was his mangled ear, and only Bert Noone knew the game he was playing, 'It was my sweetheart who did it. The local black fellas have a custom not unlike blood brothers – you know, where you cut yourself and press the wound to mingle with your mate - only you get your sweetheart to bite your ear off instead. It's a sign of your love.'

The best audience was an unsuspecting one. The nature of the fighting seemed to offer up a never-ending supply of new victims, 'My God! Do you have to bite her ear as well?'

Burke laughed loudly, 'Don't be a drongo - that'd make her ugly. You Pommy bastards ask the stupidest questions.'

'But it makes you ugly as well!'

'Jesus Christ, she doesn't want me for my ear!'

Humphrey Drummond was famous for two things: his deep pockets and his odd habit of drinking beer in a way that was just

plain wrong. His friends leaped enthusiastically upon every excuse to rag him for either one.

‘Here you go, Hump. Have a beer, my treat.’

Drummond gratefully accepted the proffered pint and lifted it to his lips, noisily slurping the foamy head whilst leaving the amber liquid to be consumed at leisure, ‘Ah, froth!’

The act drew the usual round of mock horror, ‘Jesus, where did you grow up?’

Smacking his lips, Drummond beamed back at them, ‘Have you tried it?’

‘I haven’t stuck my finger in my bum either, but I know not to.’

The atmosphere was bubbly, and the men continued making as much noise as possible while ignoring the rumble of the artillery in the distance. Before long, glasses had again been emptied, ‘Whose shout is it?’

Drummond’s response was entirely predictable, ‘Not mine – I’m out.’

‘Piss off! It’s your turn, don’t be cheap.’

The miserly observer resisted, as he always did, ‘You mean frugal.’

‘Same old story. Why do we even drink with you?’

‘To see Humpty drink his fucking froth: no other reason!’

‘Remember that time we ran afoul of those French infantry?’

‘In the pub? Yeah, that went south pretty quickly.’

‘Drummond wrapped a bottle over the back of their sergeant’s head as I recall.’

‘Now that was a cheap shot.’

‘Hump would call it frugal!’

Burke was immersed in the sound of the place, but he also had a sixth sense. He located the source of his unease - a couple of sappers

were surveying him from across the room, 'What are those bastards looking at us for?'

'Probably they can't believe that I'd be talking to a sheila as ugly as you are.'

One of the men who had been eyeballing them got up and wove an unsteady path to their table, 'You're the one called Burke, aren't you?' His foot may have been wearing a wobbly boot, but his diction was far more precise.

'You needed to go to a posh school to work that out?'

The enquirer bristled, 'What do you have against an education?'

'Only that it gives your lot a sense that the rest of us are too stupid to count past ten unless we remove our shoes.'

Wiggan heard a fragment of the exchange as he shoved through the throng on his way to the bar. He saw no reason not to add his two bits, 'Do Australians wear shoes?' The comment fell on deaf ears. *Pearls cast before swine*. Wiggan doubted that he'd bother making the effort again.

The chap who had identified Burke had taken a sudden dislike to the rude Australian, 'Can you count past twenty without taking your trousers off?' The change that had come over him was nothing out of the ordinary in the long and proud history of excessive alcohol intake, 'I was conscripted, but I hear that you volunteered. Remind me again who the stupid one is?'

The comment was fired off with one aim in mind, and it worked. Burke threw a punch. The room erupted into instant chaos as fists and missiles flew with gay abandon. Someone threw a glass that struck Drummond squarely on the forehead, which sat him on his rump looking as dazed as a cow attempting algebra. Shouting, swearing and the crash of furniture and fittings drowned out the outraged protests of the publican. Broken chairs and smashed glass

littered the establishment within minutes. Later generations may have been tempted to describe it as a war zone, but these brawlers were under no such illusions - they had seen the real thing, and the experience bore little valid comparison to their act of wanton vandalism.

It didn't take long for the sound of shrill whistles to announce the arrival of more serious trouble. The alarm went up, 'MPs!'

Burke grinned like a maniac at his friend, 'Better get the hell out of here, No-one!' They ran for the exit, and they were not the only ones. The doorway had very quickly become a bottleneck, so they bailed out of a window instead, laughing excitedly as they ran down cobbled streets. Looking back, they saw that the military policemen were lustily swinging away with their truncheons.

The two friends stopped to catch their breath, 'You stupid bastard, Backa, that idiot was itching for a fight.'

'Well he got one, didn't he? Right in the mouth too, so who's the stupid one now?' Burke inspected his hand and blood ran freely from knuckles that had been cut by English teeth, 'Fucking hell, the Huns have been shooting at me forever and not a scratch, but as soon as I try to have a quiet one at the local some kid from the church choir busts my hand.'

Bert Noone laughed it off, 'I'm pretty sure it wasn't quite what he had in mind.'