

## Gypsy Wings

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“Is there a Valhalla for heroes who failed, or do they simply pass from reality to reality, forever running from things they didn’t do?”

“I’ll admit it, I’m addicted to the sky, the joy of seeing the world slip away beneath a set of wings more intoxicating than moonshine. This story grew out of my love of flight, and a fascination with the old legends of pilots who took off, never to return.”

THE SKY GROWLED. Jerry Mackie felt it before he actually heard the odd, popping rumble, felt it deep in his guts the way he could sense a storm long before the first thunder broke. Faint, but growing louder by the heartbeat, the sound spread across the drowsy pasture. Beside him, his brother Wes, younger by three years but nearly as tall, stiffened, then began to thrash as if he was drowning.

“Ghosts coming,” the boy blurted in his strange, flat voice. He shook his head madly from side to side.

“Wes, stop it.” Jerry grabbed him by the arms and tried to shake him out of the fit, but Wes pulled away and jabbed a finger at the cloud-spotted sky. Jerry glanced upward.

“Wow.”

Garish wooden birds slid overhead, at least a dozen of them, and skimmed the cottonwoods that lined the pasture. Jerry watched, amazed as the biplanes rocked on the breeze, flames belching behind their whirring props. In all his fourteen years he had never seen an aeroplane, never in fact talked to anyone who had, so to see an entire flight buzz past was almost magical. The machines lumbered across the pale, midday sky, lifted over the low ridge to the east, then as one, banked into a slow turn back toward him. One, a sleek craft with blue and red hearts painted on its coal black fuselage, did a slow roll before it lowered its tail and clipped the tall grass. The others touched down beside it, some bouncing, some settling to ground as deft as ravens. The black machine shut down with a cough of blue smoke. A stocky man in a long, oil-streaked coat jumped to the ground.

“Hey, kid? What town is this?”

“Town?” Jerry blushed as he realized how stupid he must sound. The nearest town was three miles away and across the river, but must have seemed a hop, skip and jump to the airmen. He pointed toward the distant church spire, just visible over the waving treetops. “That’s Elk Creek.”

“Yeah?” The pilot swept his leather cap off and grinned. He had curly brown hair that looked as if it hadn’t seen a comb in months and a lopsided grin, toothy as a mongrel dog. “Elk Creek got a telephone?”

“Yes, sir.” Jerry nodded, then added quickly, “but it don’t work.”

He had all but forgotten about Wes. Now the boy staggered backwards, throwing his arms in wild circles. “Go away! All of you! Go away!” The boy picked up a rock and hurled it at the nearest aeroplane, then sprinted away. A second pilot, tall and lanky, wearing a heavy canvas coat that hung nearly to his knees, stepped out of a bright red machine with green wings. He tipped his head toward Wes as the boy vanished behind a clump of chokecherry bushes.

“Looks like we frightened your brother.”

“Don’t worry about Wes. He ain’t quite right in the head.”

“This pasture belong to your old man?” the first pilot asked.

“Yeah.” The word caught in Jerry’s throat. Farmer’s Bank of Montana owned the field, and lately had made certain they knew it, but he wasn’t about to tell that to a pack of strangers. “It’s ours.”

“Think he’d mind if we camped here a couple days?” the taller man asked. Jerry shrugged. The first pilot laughed a little louder than he needed.

“Just tell him Les *Gitans* are here. You ever heard of the *Gitans*, kid?”

Jerry swung his head in an emphatic no. The short man grinned all the broader. More pilots were stepping out of their machines now, a motley collection. Several held bottles in their hands and were passing them around. Even from where he stood, Jerry caught the sour scent of bootleg whisky.

“Well, kid,” the pilot took out a silver flask, tipped it back, then wiped the stray drops off his face with his dirty sleeve. “Now you’ve heard of us.”

Jerry’s eyes roved around the strange collection of aeroplanes, their cloth skin stiff as wood. Some had rifles fixed to the upper wings, a few even boasted round-drummed machine guns. His eyes widened as he looked back at the pilots. “Have you been to the war?”

The men laughed, all except the lanky pilot who simply nodded. “Yeah, we’ve been to the war.” He smiled in a friendly way, but his eyes were gray and sad. “Your pa have anything against the war?”

“I don’t think he cares one way or the other,” Jerry lied. For some reason, he desperately wanted the *Gitans* to camp in their cow meadow. “But it might be best if you laid a little low.”

“Kid,” the stocky pilot said with a flourish. “Laying low is what we do best.”

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Wes was already home by the time Jerry returned. Relief that his brother was safe quickly faded to worry about what the boy might have told his parents. He washed his hands and face in the chipped enamel bowl on the porch, shook the water off, then went inside. His father looked up as the screen door banged shut, but said nothing. Garr Mackie was not a large man, but he was strong and stiff as sun-baked leather. Jerry hung his hat on the peg near the stove, then quickly took his place at the table. His mother leaned over his shoulder and set a plate of cold biscuits beside a pitcher of water. Jerry caught her eye as she straightened, the unspoken message plain.

Be careful.

“You find the break in the fence?” Mackie speared a thin slice of deer meat onto his plate.

“Yep. A tree fell across it and knocked the top three poles off.” Jerry tried to sound nonchalant. “Wasn’t too hard to find.”

“You fix it?”

“I will.” Jerry stole a glance at Wes, but the boy was silent, his attention fixed on a hairline crack on his plate. His father chewed slowly, then looked pointedly at him.

“You see those aeroplanes go by?”

“Yes, Pa,” Jerry said.

“Wes said they landed in our field. That so?”

“Yes.” Jerry stole a look at his mother, but she steadfastly kept her face turned away. He took a deep breath. “They landed up by the cottonwoods.”

Mackie’s eyes narrowed. “You tell them to leave?”

“They were just passing through,” Jerry said.

“They better be.” Mackie took another bite and spoke as he chewed. “I won’t have gin-runners and warmongers on my place. Understand?”

Jerry nearly said it wasn’t his place anymore, but quickly thought better of it. Instead, he simply nodded. He forced himself to eat, but his mouth was so dry he could barely swallow. A breeze sprang up and rattled the door, the air heavy with the touch of coming rain.

“Storm’s here,” Wes muttered, his gaze still fixed on his plate.

A peal of thunder rolled over the house. Jerry flinched as it shook the windows and faded, certain he caught the sound of whirring engines skipping bird-like on the wind.

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The rain shower was brief, more bluster than downpour. Jerry wished it had been longer as he sweated through his chores. It took him longer to patch the broken fence than he expected and by the time he was finished the afternoon was on the wane. All the while Wes stood in the middle of the yard, throwing rocks at chickens or drawing crooked lines in the dust with a stick. Now and then the boy would speak to someone who wasn’t there, the one-sided conversations unintelligible. Annoyed at having to work while his brother did nothing, Jerry scowled as he herded the milk

cow into the barn and locked her in the stanchion. The alternating streams of hot milk against the tin pail wove a ragtime beat in his mind, and again his thoughts drifted with unbridled envy to the aeroplanes less than a mile away. Once he heard an engine and rushed outside, but was disappointed to see nothing but a rusted Model T truck rumble down the dirt road at the end of the lane.

“My luck,” he thought bitterly as he tromped back inside the reeking barn and plopped down on the low stool. The cow flicked her tail as he grabbed her teats, dotting his face with tiny green freckles. He scrubbed them off on his shirt-sleeve then bent back to milking.

The repetition lulled him as he fell into a rhythm, and he imagined himself in one of the planes, racing above the treetops, firing long volleys of machine gun fire at a fleeing zeppelin or strafing the traitorous Czar’s trenches. Once, years ago, his mother had taken him to the movies. Jerry had sat enthralled with the flickering picture, some tear-stained war epic, lost in the make believe. He had long forgotten the story but remembered every second of the dogfight scene, the dipping, whirling melee an intoxication to his young imagination. When they had returned home he had run across the dusty yard and proudly told his father he intended to enlist and become a pilot when he was old enough.

Instead of a beaming, fatherly reply, he received a back-hand slap across the face. “I’ll be damned if any son of mine becomes a soldier.”

Jerry could still feel the slap. It had been the last time he had seen a movie, and the last time he had spoken with his father about leaving home, but Jerry hadn’t forgotten. He was nearly old enough now to run away. Canada lay less than a hundred miles to the north. It would be an adventure, he told himself. He would sneak across the border then proudly present himself at the Mounties Post where he would tell the man in the bright red uniform why he was there.

“Aren’t you an American?” the MOUNTY would ask.

“Yes, sir, I am,” Jerry would say.

“Don’t you know your President Bryant has declared it against the law for an American to fight in the Great War?”

“I don’t care, sir. I’m here to fight. I want to be a pilot.” And there and then, Jerry dreamt, the MOUNTY would swear him in and usher him with a hero’s welcome to the train depot for the long ride east. He smiled grimly as he milked, his resolve stronger than ever.

Finished, Jerry hauled the bucket to the house. Foamy milk sloshed over the brim as he hefted it onto the battered cupboard. He washed his hands, then, making certain he wasn’t noticed, slipped off toward the cow pasture. His heart sank as he

broke over the low hill and found the meadow empty.

“Damn it to hell.” Jerry swore under his breath. His mood brightened after a second look. At least one of the planes remained, partially hidden in the trees that lined the field. More than a little nervous, Jerry screwed up his courage and marched across the grassy stretch toward it.

The pilots had built a hobo camp among the cottonwoods, crude tarpaulin lean-to’s strung between branches. The aroma of wood smoke, beans, and gasoline hung thick on the languid air. Jerry looked around, wondering where the airmen had gone, then finally spotted a pair of legs sticking out from beneath the front of the aeroplane. Still nervous, he sauntered closer.

“Howdy,” Jerry said, desperately hoping his voice didn’t crack.

The lanky pilot he had spoken with earlier scooted out from under the thick wooden prop, and grinning, wiped a smudge of grease off his forehead. “Howdy, yourself.”

“I thought,” Jerry said hesitantly, “you fellas had pulled up stakes.”

“Not yet. Some of the boys just took a jaunt up North.”

Jerry didn’t ask why. It was common knowledge, even in Elk Creek, that the roving gangs of pilots operated unhindered across the border, hauling Canadian whiskey southward. Even his father kept a bottle of it hidden behind the canning jars.

“How come you didn’t go?” He nodded at the front of the aeroplane. “The engine busted?”

“No. At least not too badly.” The tall man laughed, then extended his arm. “Give me a hand up, would you?”

The man was heavier than he looked, and Jerry nearly lost his balance as he helped him to his feet. The tall man arched his back to work out the kinks. “My name’s Albert Aimes, but most folks call me Preacher.”

“Are you a preacher?” Jerry asked, surprised at the thought. Preacher laughed again, the sound of it infectious.

“Let’s just say I’ve been known to pray a time or two.”

The pilot took a wooden handled screwdriver from his back-pocket and methodically began to tighten the unshielded wires that bridged the magneto to the sparkplugs atop each of the finned, gray steel cylinders. Jerry watched with interest. The motor was nothing like the little flat-headed engine in his father’s Model A. His

gaze roved over the strange machine, amazed at the spiderweb of cables and struts that bound it together. His eyes settled on a painting of a dark-haired woman with exaggerated breasts, a tambourine in her slender hands. Above her long, flowing hair, painted in elegant black letters were the words "*Les Gitans*." Beneath the painting ran a long line of blimps, a trail of smoke out the top of each.

"What's *Gitan* mean," Jerry asked.

"Huh?" Preacher turned, surprised it seemed that Jerry could read. He nodded at the painting, then bent back to the engine. "It's French for gypsy."

"You were in France?"

Preacher nodded.

"Why'd you come back?"

"Guess I got tired of fighting."

"But, we're winning, right?" Jerry asked, a little more eagerly than he intended. "I mean England and Canada. You know, the good guys. We're going to beat the Huns, right?"

Preacher's face darkened. "I don't think anyone's going to win that war. Fifteen years is a long time to spend killing each other."

A distant buzz swept through the trees and became a roar as one after another the rest of the *Gitans* flew over the meadow. Jerry rushed out to watch, entranced as the aeroplanes rolled and twisted at treetop level, playing a dangerous game of follow-the-leader. The black machine with the blue and red hearts led the procession as they swooped low then settled to earth. Their engines sputtered and died, leaving the meadow ominously silent. The airmen crawled out and laboriously began to push their ships toward the trees.

"Hey, kid?" The stocky pilot of the black machine waved Jerry toward him. "Give me a hand, huh?"

Glad to help, Jerry hurried across the meadow and took up position on the opposite side of the fuselage, his hand wrapped around a leather-edged pocket recessed into the wooden frame. He was surprised how light the craft was as they rolled it toward the sheltering woods.

"So, you and the Preacher been swapping war stories?" The man stretched his neck until he could look over the plane's narrow back, a boyish grin plastered on his oil-smudged face.

“He said he was in France,” Jerry admitted.

“France. Belgium. Poland. Hell, the Preacher was in ‘em all.” They swung the machine around until the nose pointed back toward the field. The stocky pilot lowered the tail to the ground, then pointed at Preacher. “You are looking at the second-best balloon buster in the history of aviation. Only Frank Luke brought down more observation blimps than the Preach. And that’s only ‘cause we busted out of the Legion and come home.”

Jerry stared at the gangly Preacher with newfound admiration. Puffing a little from exertion, the short pilot drew his flask from an inside pocket, took a long drink then sighed with obvious pleasure. “Damn, that’s good. So, what do they call you, kid?”

“Jerry. Jerry Mackie.”

“Pleased to meet you, Jerry Jerry Mackie.” The little man’s grin broadened. “I’m Stumpy O’Toole. Say, you know the roads around these parts, right?”

Jerry nodded.

“How would you like to earn yourself an aeroplane ride?”

“You mean it?” Jerry’s heart practically stopped at the thought of it.

“Sure, I mean it. Tomorrow, we’re supposed to get a truck-load of gasoline in here. You meet the driver at daybreak down at that railroad bridge and lead him here, and I’ll see you get a ride upstairs. Hell, you help us load up and I might even let you fly the damn thing. What do you say?”

Before Jerry could answer, another rumble cut the evening air. Everyone fell silent and stared upward. High overhead a single aeroplane drifted across the sky. It flew in a perfectly straight line, no playful loops or dives, its path business-like and serious. Out the corner of his eye Jerry saw Preacher turn and walk away.

“Who’s that?” Jerry asked softly.

“That?” Stumpy smiled, but there was no humor in his voice. “Remember I told you the Preach’ was the number two balloon buster in the world? Well, that was number one.”

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A light wind stirred the willows along the river bend, and Jerry pulled his threadbare coat tighter around his shoulders. Nervously, he waited near the footing of the railroad bridge, the river’s swoosh and gurgle somehow ominous, as if the

swirling water was filled with dark spirits eager to trap the unwary. He glanced up at the sky, sunrise only a pale swath along the rolling hills to the east. It had taken him nearly an hour to make his way to the bridge in the dark, stumbling and tripping along the shadowed road. The night had been short and he had barely slept, his mind filled with worry. It left him hollow, sick to his stomach, all too aware what would happen should his father discover where he had gone.

A sputtering engine broke the stillness. A flat-bed truck rattled along the narrow dirt road then ground to a stop. Jerry shrank closer to the cement footing, but the promise of an aeroplane ride was too tempting. He took a deep breath then stepped out. An unshaven, jowly man, face lit by the cigarette dangling from his lower lip, stared at Jerry from the driver's window.

"You the kid 'sposed to take me to them flyboys?" The man's voice gurgled like the river, his breath reeking of cheap tobacco and whisky. Jerry nodded. "Get in then."

He hurried around to the passenger side and crawled inside the little cab. The seat cushion was long gone, replaced by an upturned apple crate. Jerry clung to the door frame as they pounded down the rutted path, tin cans banging against each other in the back. The driver remained silent, grunting now and then at the worst of the jarring bumps.

"Turn here." Jerry pointed at a gap in the sagging barbwire fence. The driver dropped into a lower gear as they climbed along the slowly rising terrain. The narrow tires spun as they neared the top of the wooded hill, then, just when it seemed the engine would stall and send them hurtling backwards to their death, the truck topped the ridge. The familiar sight of their cow pasture gave Jerry only momentary relief, the thought of his father weighing him down as the truck rolled to a stop at the edge of the trees.

The morose driver popped the hand-clutch to kill the engine, and Jerry nearly slammed into the dashboard. Figures ambled out of the trees and slowly surrounded the battered Ford. Stumpy O'Toole circled the front of the truck and peered inside. Satisfied they were who they were supposed to be, he gave a backhand wave to the men around him. Jerry pushed the door open and jumped gratefully to the ground. The hair on his neck stiffened at the unmistakable sound of gun hammers being lowered.

"Hey, kid!" O'Toole slapped Jerry on the shoulder. "Give me a hand with the gas cans, would you?"

For the next half hour, Jerry was too busy to worry about his father or anything else except staying upright as he hauled the heavy, over-filled cans from the truck to the aeroplanes. Sweat poured down his back as he hefted another of the square containers up to O'Toole, the stocky pilot balanced precariously one foot on



the lower wing of his plane, the other on the wire-spoked wheel.

“Thanks, kid.” O’Toole upended the can into a dented tin funnel crammed into the fuel tank nestled in the center of the upper wing.

Jerry passed another fuel can into the pilot’s waiting hand. Behind him, he heard the clink of bottles as wooden cases were loaded on the truck. The sky had brightened enough to make out individual faces. Jerry tried to spot Preacher, but didn’t find him.

“Where’s Preacher?” he asked as he took the empty can back.

“Huh?” O’Toole leapt nimbly to the ground then wiped his hands on his filthy pant legs. “The Preach? He had some night flying to do.” He left it at that and walked off toward the truck. The other pilots were already rolling their machines out and pointing them into the wind. Some swung their props in slow, ponderous arcs while others oiled and primed the cylinders. One after another, the machines roared to life, the air whipped into an oil-soaked storm of exhaust and dust. Jerry had the sinking feeling that the promised ride was not going to happen as he watched the truck bounce away and vanish over the hill. He felt a tap on his shoulder, and startled, spun around. O’Toole stood grinning behind him.

“We’ve got to fly, kid,” he shouted over the accumulated roar. “You gonna be around this evening?”

“Are you?” Jerry shouted back, not hiding his suspicion. O’Toole laughed and thumped him on the shoulder.

“Damned right, we’ll be back. I owe you a joyride.”

Jerry watched the machines as they gathered speed and staggered into the air. Despite O’Toole’s assurance, he couldn’t shunt aside his doubt. Feeling like a fool, he ran home, and hurriedly drove the milk cow into the barn, anxious to seem as if he had simply been at his chores early instead of hauling gas to whiskey runners. He locked the spotted Jersey in the stanchion, then turned to see a figure silhouetted in the crooked doorway. Wes stared at him, his face blank as always. Jerry brushed past him to get the milk pail, but Wes grabbed his sleeve.

“You got ghosts with you,” the boy said, then without explanation, turned and walked away.

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The sun was up in full by the time he slogged back to the house for breakfast. His mother’s brows furrowed as she sniffed the air, and suddenly Jerry realized he reeked of gasoline. To his relief she said nothing, but set a plate of fried potatoes

and more of the stringy deer meat in front of him. Trying a little too hard to seem nonchalant, he took a bite then asked where his father was.

“Went into Browning,” his mother replied. Her tone left little doubt he had gone once more to the bank to plead for time. Never an easy man, Jerry’s father had fallen more and more in upon himself as the noose of debt tightened around the homestead. These days, his mother flinched when he walked into the room. Jerry understood all too well and left an ever-widening berth around his father when he could. Across the kitchen, the screen door banged and Wes wandered in but didn’t sit down. Instead, he simply stood, his eyes fixed on a spot over Jerry’s left shoulder.

“What’s wrong with you?” Jerry snapped.

The boy said nothing.

“You’re crazy in the head.” Jerry wolfed down his breakfast and left. He grabbed his shovel and marched out to clean the unending network of irrigation ditches. The morning grew oppressively hot, filled with mosquitoes, the stench of soured blood drifting with them. He paused and looked skyward. Far above, a lone aeroplane traveled a straight path east to west, but it was too high to make out details. Disheartened, he bent back to his work.

Finally, after lunch, Jerry heard the unmistakable drone of a prop cruising unseen just beyond the low rise. After making certain he hadn’t been seen, Jerry slipped away. His heart lurched as he broke into the rocky clearing. A red and green aeroplane sat askew in the middle of the pasture, the left wheel collapsed. A man knelt beside the wing, doubled over, his face nearly touching his thighs.

“Preacher?” Jerry charged toward the craft. “Are you okay?”

The man muttered something, but his words were slurred and incoherent. He barely glanced up as Jerry helped him to his feet. A thin trickle of blood seeped out of a cut on his lower lip. Carefully, Jerry ran his hand along the stunned man’s forehead, then recoiled. For one second, just at the moment of contact, Jerry felt as if he stood in two places at once. Gone was the quiet meadow, replaced by a gray and ruined land. Shattered trees poked up from shallow, muddy pits while another aeroplane lay on its nose, tail high, little more than a broken frame covered with shredded cloth. Jerry snatched his hand back and the sensation vanished. Hesitantly, he touched Preacher’s forehead again, but to his relief felt nothing.

“What happened?” Jerry led Preacher toward the trees and the welcoming shade, then eased him down beside a gnarled cottonwood.

“Why won’t he leave me alone?” Preacher seemed to be speaking to himself. Exhausted, he slumped against the tree.

“Who? Who won’t leave you alone?”

As if in answer, another aeroplane, the motor faint with distance, hove into view far overhead. Jerry stared as it slowly crossed the sky, then entered a wooly cloud. He waited, but the machine didn’t reappear.

“Damn you!” With surprising force, Preacher leapt to his feet and shouted at the sky. “Don’t you know it’s over?” He took a single, faltering step, then collapsed back to the earth. Jerry dragged him into the shade, and not knowing what else to do, sat waiting for O’Toole and the others to fly home. He didn’t have long to wait.

A soft drone piggybacked the wind and became a roar as the Gypsies popped over the low ridge. They landed haphazardly, several barely missing Preacher’s upended machine as they careened to ground. Engines died and men leapt from their tiny, open cockpits, shouting and laughing at each other. Most of them, Jerry could see, were already drunk. He walked out to meet O’Toole.

“I think Preacher’s hurt.”

“Yeah?” O’Toole frowned. He hurried toward him, bent down and made a quick examination. Preacher’s eyes fluttered open but he didn’t seem to notice the stocky man above him.

“Is he going to be okay?” Jerry asked, more worried than he wanted to admit.

“Sure, kid. He’ll be jake in a couple hours.” O’Toole tried to appear unconcerned, but his eyes betrayed him. “He gets like this sometimes, that’s all.”

“He kept yelling at someone to leave him alone.”

O’Toole scratched his nose, obviously weighing his words. “Look, kid. The Preach wouldn’t want me to tell you this, so let’s keep it on the QT, right?”

Jerry nodded, and O’Toole launched into a brief explanation. “You probably figured already the lot of us got good reason to avoid the law, right? Hell, most of us are deserters from one army or another. Got tired of being shot at, or sick of taking orders. But not the Preach. That man would still be ‘over there’ if he could.”

“Then,” Jerry asked, confused, “why’s he here?”

“Cause I shanghaied him and put him on a freighter out of Calais before he woke up.” O’Toole shrugged. “He wasn’t too happy about it, but like I told him, it beats spending the next five years in prison.”

“Prison?” Jerry looked down at the man curled on his side against the old

cottonwood.

“That’s where you go after a court-martial, kid. Our boy Preacher had a little run-in with the brass. They blamed him for getting another pilot killed.” O’Toole waggled his bushy eyebrows. “See, the Preach and Frank Luke had an unfriendly little competition going to see who could flame the most observation balloons. Ran neck and neck for months. Every time one of them would make a kill, the other would go out of his way to even up the score. At first, the CO looked the other way. Hell, we were supposed to be shooting down their sausages, right? But after a while even he could see someone was going to get killed. So, he ordered them to knock it off.”

“And Preacher disobeyed?”

“Hell yes, he disobeyed. Luke was one blimp ahead, and that didn’t sit right with him. So he takes off just before sunset one day and goes balloon hunting. Luke got word and took off in his plane, too.”

“What happened?”

O’Toole shrugged. “Preacher came back. Frank Luke didn’t. The Old Man hit the ceiling when he found out. Said he was going to see him court-martialed. And he would have, too, if I hadn’t got him drunk that night and stole a truck. Got both our asses out of France and glad of it.”

Jerry twisted around and stared at the green and red aeroplane. Several of the other *Gitans* were busy fixing the broken wheel and checking the wing for damage. Suddenly, they stopped and looked up. Jerry followed their gaze and saw, once again, the lone aeroplane cruise past, a speck against the pale sky.

“What happened to Frank Luke?” Jerry asked quietly. O’Toole spread his hands in front of him.

“Like I said, he never came back.” Abruptly, O’Toole’s good humor returned. He took out the little silver flask Jerry had seen earlier, took a long pull, then clapped Jerry on the shoulder. “Hey, I just remembered something. I owe you a plane ride.”

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Wind in his face. The scent of hot steel, castor oil, and spilled fuel. Wires singing as O’Toole revved the engine. Jerry’s fingers tightened around the edge of the wicker seat nestled inside the forward cockpit as the black aeroplane began to roll. Every bump, every patch of uneven ground traveled up the fuselage and through his legs. He held his breath as they picked up speed, the bumps and jars so hard now he was certain the rickety collection of stick and fabric would shake apart. His

stomach lurched as the tail rose.

“Hang on, kid!” O’Toole shouted from behind. “Here we go!”

The sound was deafening. Jerry’s legs stiffened, the vibration terrifying until, like a horse stepping out of a trot into a slow, easy lope, they broke ground. He craned his neck over the side of the machine, his face in the slipstream, and watched the ground fall away. Trees passed, every detail so clear he felt as if he looked down through a clear pond at a world unseen until only now. An invisible hand shoved him against the left side of the cockpit as O’Toole banked sharply to the right.

“You doing okay up there?”

“You bet!” Jerry shouted in reply, though he had no idea if he could be heard over the roar. They climbed above the mottled patchwork of creeks and fields and toy houses no bigger than his thumb. Nothing he had imagined about flying could compare to the actuality. For the first time in his life, he felt as if he belonged somewhere.

“Hang on, kid. You’re going to love this part!” The aeroplane leveled, then dipped down. The wind became a cyclone as they plunged almost vertically, then pulled up into a slow circle. Jerry felt himself grow first heavy then perfectly weightless as he hung upside down. Again, the pressure surged as they started down the other side of the loop. O’Toole threw the craft into a Lazy Eight. Jerry whooped as the plane hung on a stall, flipped over and regained the air.

“Hey, kid!” O’Toole leaned over the narrow space between the cockpits and shouted in Jerry’s ear. “See that stick between your legs? Grab it like you’re taking a piss.”

Hesitantly, Jerry took hold of the hardwood shaft but nearly let go as he felt it push against his palm. He gritted his teeth and held it more firmly, amazed at how the plane pitched and bucked with the simplest twist of the wrist.

“Great, kid! Now, reach up with your feet and put them on that yoke on the floor. Step right when you turn right. Step left when you turn left. That’s all there is to it.”

A sudden tightness curled in Jerry’s throat. “I can’t fly this machine!”

“Yeah? Well guess what?” O’Toole leaned further and spread his hands, one on either side of Jerry’s head until they were in plain view. “You better be flying cause I’m sure as hell not.”

For one sickening moment it seemed the plane might fall from the sky. When it didn’t, Jerry began to relax and experiment with the controls. By the time O’Toole

took the plane back he understood on an instinctive level what it meant to fly.

“Okay, kid, let’s go home.”

O’Toole banked as he throttled back and let the craft slip groundward. Jerry kept his head in the slipstream and watched as the landscape, so flat only moments before, once again took on details as they skimmed the treetops. A run-down farmstead flashed beneath and it took Jerry a startled moment to realize it was his own home. The engine sputtered as O’Toole blipped the cylinders, cutting the spark in and out to decrease power. The ground blurred then vanished from view as the little machine pitched nose high and settled to ground with a single easy thump. O’Toole killed the engine.

Ears ringing, Jerry fumbled with the rope that held him to the wicker seat, then climbed out. His legs shook and he had to steady himself against the varnished fabric to keep from tilting, but he couldn’t stop grinning. A tall, familiar figure ambled out of the trees toward them.

“How’d he do?” Preacher asked. He was pale, the welt along his forehead still visible, but he seemed otherwise fine. O’Toole slapped Jerry on the back.

“The kid’s a natural-born pilot.”

“That so?” Preacher’s solemn face warmed. He held out his right hand. “Welcome to the club.” Jerry shook it, but couldn’t think of anything to say, his mind still lost in the drifting clouds.

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He was a giant now, and wore seven-league boots as he marched home. Even the unending string of chores waiting for him seemed bearable. But, the closer he came, the smaller he felt, diminished by the notion of his father waiting for him. To his dismay, their rusted truck sat near the house, his already father returned from his business with the bank. Jerry considered turning around, but fought down the childish fear. He was a man now, and men faced their troubles square on.

Wes sat on the front steps, his attention fixed on a dead beetle. Jerry stepped around him and went inside.

It was cool in the house, the cloying scent of raw milk and coal smoke permeating everything. Jerry washed the grease stains from his face and dried off, all the while listening for his father’s heavy, shambling footsteps, but the house remained quiet. Feeling a little braver, he turned around.

“Where were you?” His father’s voice was low and tight, soft as a snake’s rattle, but his eyes burned with rage. Startled, Jerry stepped back.

“I was in the cow pasture.”

“With those whiskey runners, weren’t you.” It wasn’t a question. “You deliberately disobeyed me.”

“Pa!” Jerry started to explain about hearing the aeroplane in trouble, but before he could say anything, a strong backhand slap raked his cheek. He staggered, but refused to go down. Instead, he glared at his father. The anger in the thin man’s eyes spread across his face. Again, he raised his hand, but Jerry blocked the blow with his forearm. The shock was strong enough to make his wrist go numb.

“You’re worthless.” The older man’s lips drew in. “After everything I’ve done for you.”

“What? What have you ever done for me?” Jerry was shaking with his own long-suppressed fury, years of resentment welling up.

“Everything I do is for you and your brother. This farm, this house—”

“You don’t even know we’re around unless we forget to latch the damn gate!”

The next strike was no slap. Jerry was hurled backward against the iron stove. He crumpled to the floor and tried to roll away, but his father’s square-toed boot caught him hard against the ribs. Unable to move, he crouched on the bare floor and waited for the pain to arrive. His father drew back his foot for another kick, but a soft, hesitant voice from the other room made him spin around.

“Garr, stop it.”

Jerry crawled away as his mother stepped into the kitchen. Her face was bone white save for the redness beneath her left eye that soon would be purple. She had been crying, and her voice quavered, but she held herself straight. Again, his father’s leg drew back, but his mother stepped closer. “Garr! you’ll kill the boy.”

Without another word, Garr Mackie stomped out of the kitchen. Slowly, his ribs aching, Jerry raised himself to his feet, using the table for support. He started to say something, but his mother cut him off.

“What were you thinking?”

Jerry had never heard such bitterness in her voice, and suddenly he realized she blamed him, not his father, for the fight. Unsure what else to do, he stumbled to the screen door and kicked it open. Wes didn’t look up as he passed, but ten feet from the house he stopped and went back to the porch. Gently, Jerry bent down and

hugged the strange boy.

“Goodbye, Wes.”

Wes glanced up from the shriveled insect in his palm, but remained silent. Jerry smiled at him, then turned and walked away.

“They’re all dead, you know.”

A cold tingle raced up Jerry’s neck at his brother’s high, reedy voice. He looked back at the boy, not sure if he had meant the whiskey runners or the beetle in his hand. Fighting tears, Jerry raced away from the only home he had ever known, his brother’s words echoing in his mind.

\* \* \* \*

The plan was simple enough, he decided as he hurried along the rutted path to the cow pasture. If the *Gitans* wouldn’t take him—and he was certain they would—he would find some other way to reach Canada and enlist. He wanted the sky, and one way or another, he would have it. Puffing a little from his fast pace, his ribs not as sore as they would be by morning, Jerry topped the low hill and looked down upon the little field.

“What the hell?”

The pasture lay empty. No rickety aeroplanes waited, no makeshift tents or whiskey crates. He ran down the slope, unable to believe the little band of smugglers could have left so quickly. A low branch tore at his shirt as he ducked into the shaded trees, but he found no trace of the camp. No footprints. No tire-marks. A half-buried fire ring lay beside a fallen log, long unused. Weeds poked up between the stones while charred sticks crumbled in the ashes, a forlorn reminder that once a fire had burned here. Jerry began to shake, the impossibility of the situation more than he could comprehend. Slowly, he turned around.

“Sorry, kid. They couldn’t wait for you.”

Preacher stood on the edge of the trees, hands in his pockets. A reluctant smile crossed his homely face.

“Where is everybody?” Jerry stammered.

“Gone. Off flying, I guess.” Preacher shrugged. “It’s what *Les Gitans* do.”

“My brother says you’re all dead.” Jerry fought to form the words. “Are you?”



Preacher frowned. "I don't feel dead."

"Then, what are you?"

"Lost. I think we're just terribly, terribly lost." Preacher stared westward, his eyes hazy as the mare's tail clouds gathered along the horizon. "Sometimes, when I'm flying, I can see it, that other place where things you should have done really happened. A place where that damned war ended ages ago."

"So," Jerry asked quietly, "how come you don't go there?"

"How come?" Preacher smiled wistfully. "Because he won't let me."

Jerry didn't need to look up to know who he meant. Far away, nearly buried on the wind, an engine droned, a lone plane high above the earth soaring arrow straight into the unseen. Slowly, he turned and faced the melancholy pilot. "Why did you come here?"

"Why?" Preacher laughed softly. "Kid, if I knew that, maybe I wouldn't be in the hell-hole I'm in." His face grew serious once more. "I can tell you this much. Once you start running, it's hard to stop." He clapped Jerry on the shoulder, and without another word walked away. The boy watched him go, then let his gaze travel skyward, hoping to catch a final glimpse of the lone aeroplane. When he looked back, Preacher was gone.

\* \* \* \*

He didn't want to go back, but went anyhow. The shabby barnyard, the rusted tin roofs and sagging fences seemed somehow smaller now, diminished. Once, they had threatened to swallow him, to wrap around his legs like the weeds that encircled the barnyard until he become rooted to the thin soil. Now, it was just another farm. Someday, he knew, he would take the sky again. When he was ready. Until then, he could wait.

Jerry stopped on the porch and wiped his hands on his pants, buying time, then stepped inside the kitchen. His father sat at the table, staring at a half-empty coffee cup. He glanced up, his expression unreadable.

"Pa?" Jerry dug his heels in and forced himself to meet his father's eye. "I'm sorry I disobeyed you. What I did was wrong."

Garr Mackie nodded, as a king might grant a peasant some trifling request. Before he could speak, Jerry pressed on. "But, that doesn't make it right what you did to me. And it doesn't make it right what you did to Mother, either." Jerry took a deep breath. "And I won't let it happen again."

Anger flashed in Garr Mackie's eyes. His fists bunched on top of the table as he glared at his son, the little hollows behind his jaws drawn tight. Finally, after a long moment he nodded, an acknowledgment that his son, if not quite a man yet, was certainly no longer a boy. Slowly, Jerry turned around and went back outside. Wes stood barefoot in the dooryard, wiggling his toes in the fine, silty dust.

"See any ghosts now?" Jerry asked. The boy cocked his head and stared at him, then shook his head side to side. Jerry smiled and gave the strange child a hug. "Come on, Wes. Let's get the milking done."