

Chapter 48: Rhubarbs

THE DYNAMICS OF THE WAR HAD SHIFTED.

They were on the offence now.

Danny sat steady on Johnny's wingtip. They were on a 'Rhubarb' – a two plane raid over France, in and out, with as much damage as possible to any military target they encountered on the way. It was right up Johnny's alley. Danny found himself stretched thin trying to hang onto the Irishman's hunting style.

"Black crosses on the ground below."

"Shall we come down from the sun?"

There was no reply but Johnny adjusted, started climbing.

"Watch for flak, buddy."

There was a slow roll.

"Ready?"

"Ready."

They pressed down toward the winter landscape. It was a stomach-rolling sensation and a part of it was fear.

The lines of crosses became Heinkels on the ground. The air and ground vibrated with the speed of their dive. Danny slowly breathed out, then deeply in, steadying the crosshairs. Johnny was going in guns blazing, .303 bullets cutting up the sod before spraying into the grounded airplanes. One exploded. Danny got a petrol bowser in his sights. "I'm going for the bowser, Johnny. Ready to lift!"

He aligned, pressed the gun button. Johnny swung wide, realigned for another strafing run.

"Careful, Johnny!"

"Waiting on you." Danny could almost hear the smirk in Johnny's voice.

He could hear the bullets hole the bowser, petrol gushed. He pulled up rapidly, rolled for another approach. Johnny was aligned and also going for the bowser. His tracer threw sparks from the concrete in which the bowser was parked, he hit the leak, then the tank and there was a massive whoosh. For a moment Kathleen Two was obscured in the explosion then Johnny's yelp of victory came.

"Clear out, Johnny, clear out! They've manned the guns, flak coming in!"

The rolled, evaded, black puffs in the sky around them.

Danny could feel the cold sweat breaking in his neck.

"That was amazing!"

"Yeah, until there was flak. I'm starting to run low, buddy, they're gonna scramble fighters. Let's head for the clouds and hightail it home."

They rose for the cloud cover at seventeen thousand feet. It lay in a thick blanket. They had trouble keeping sight of each other.

"They're not going to find us in this."

"Or we're gonna think we're flying with each other and the next thing your wingman's gonna be a 109."

"What good fun."

"I've got a wedding to make end of this year, I really don't fancy getting shot down and eating sauerkraut in a prison camp."

"I've got the same wedding to be at, make no mistake. You'll need a wingman to get you down the aisle."

"I will. You better start minding the flak."

"I'll mind the flak."

Danny had to grin in his cockpit. They were well teamed up. Calculation and devil may care were deadly together, even if he found that his jaws and neck hurt frightfully at the end of a rhubarb from tension.

It was always a hair-raising experience. Fighters didn't scare him, but the unpredictable enemy that was flak, was something else. The way Johnny seemed to disregard it was also a terrifying thing.

"Aren't you ever afraid?" he had to ask Johnny over a beer when they had landed.

Johnny's blue eyes laughed, he gave Danny his wry crooked grin.

"I know that I shall meet my fate

somewhere amongst the clouds above.

Those that I fight I do not hate,

those that I guard I do not love.

My country is Kiltartan Cross,

my countrymen Kiltartan's poor.

No likely end could bring them loss

or leave them happier than before.

Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,

nor public men, nor cheering crowds.

A lonely impulse of delight

drove to this, tumult in the clouds.

I balanced all, brought all to mind.

The years to come seemed waste of breath,

a waste of breath the years behind

in balance with this life, this death.

“Written by a countryman of mine, William Butler Yeats. He understood.”