There was an aerial dog fight going on above, and a number of villagers came out to watch. It made a change from complaining about the weather, as farmers often did. Spring had been warm and wet, which had been good for the early crops like wheat and barley, while summer had been hot and dry, which was bad for the later crops like corn, fruit and grapes. There’s only so much you can say about that.

Dogfights happened regularly now, but usually not so near the village. Often they were too high to make out much detail, but this time they were much lower. There was a German bomber, trailing smoke from one engine, three German fighters and six British fighters. One of the German fighters burst into flames and dived into the earth. Father Marcel crossed himself. He was a tall man approaching middle age, with a growing bald patch and a growing paunch.

The other two German fighters seemed to be trying to evade the guns of the British fighters, when one German fighter, dodging and jinking wildly, collided with one of the British fighters. The planes stuck briefly together before wings broke and they both spun into the earth, sending up plumes of smoke from the forest. The bomber was on fire, streamers of flame trailing behind it. Slowly it turned towards the village, dropping lower and lower. The villagers stood transfixed as it passed almost overhead, cleared the nearby hills, and passed out of view.

“It has to crash,” the priest remarked to his companions. “There’s no way it can fly much further.”

The other planes flew away, leaving them listening to the roar of the doomed bomber receding. Finally the drone was swallowed by an enormous boom, and a mushroom shaped cloud appeared briefly in the distance, followed by a pall of black smoke.

“Do you think anyone survived?” asked Etienne. He was a grizzled man with a large moustache and paunch, one of a group who’d been playing boules outside the café, drinking strong sweet black coffees and sipping wine or absinthe.

“No, the crash would kill them.” the priest replied.

“I think some jumped out and are floating to earth.” countered Rene. “Look!” He was a slender man, shorter than average, dressed in green with shoulder length blond hair. He was good looking in an elfin sort of way. His skin was darker, in a tanned, Skandenavian way. He was the vintner at the chateau, and one of the group playing boules.

“They look like thistles!” exclaimed Pierre. “What are they?” He was an odd looking man, resembling a hairless gorilla crossed with a gargoyle. His short legs were bowed, his long arms were powerful, his chest was a huge barrel and his hairless head would have looked good on a gargoyle. His skin looked like granite. He was something of a hero with the village since almost single handedly saving them from a truckload of German soldiers in the spring. He was a gardener at the chateau, and everyone knew he was a little slow of wits. He was another of the group playing boules.

“I believe you are right, Rene.” said the priest. To Pierre he added, “They are called parachutes... “ and quickly explained how a parachute worked. “They will land near the village. I must call Monsieur Luc. We should capture them.” He walked into the café, which advertised the luxury of a public phone.

“I count five.” Pierre was staring at the sky, shading his eyes. “Can they control where they go?”

“I don’t think so.” Rene replied. “I think they are like thistles, going where the wind blows.”

“Then they’ll land in the forest.” Etienne commented. “We’ll probably never find them.”

“There’s another one up there.” Pierre was still staring at the sky. “I think he’ll land in the corn.”

“You’re right!” Rene exclaimed. “Let’s get going.”

“I have a shotgun at home. Should I fetch it?” Etienne asked.

“There isn’t time.” Rene responded. “Besides, we have Pierre, he’s more than a match for one German soldier.” The other boules players tagged along.

The flyer was too high to land in the corn, instead his parachute snagged in the apple trees of the orchard and left him dangling. He was struggling to free himself from his harness as they hurried toward him. They had almost reached him when he freed himself and dropped two meters to the ground.

The airman was dressed in a blue grey uniform, sheepskin jacket and leather helmet. He sprawled on landing, and was slow getting to his feet.

“Do you speak French?” Rene asked, “or English or German?”, switching from French to English to German.

Meanwhile Pierre ambled over to the man and stretched out a hand the size of a shovel to help him to his feet. The flyer backed away yelling “Get away from me you dirty monkey!” in German.

Pierre grasped the flyer by his shirt front and hoisted him into the air. Bringing the airman’s face close to his own he growled in German “I am not a monkey. I am a mountain Troll!”

The flyer responded by drawing his pistol and shooting Pierre at point blank range. Pierre grasped the gun with his free hand, forcing it to point towards the earth where the second shot buried itself. Pierre continued twisting until the pistol pointed at the airman’s face. “Pull the trigger or let go.” He growled. “I’m bullet proof, you’re not.”

The flyer was going cross eyed looking down the gun barrel. Finally he managed “I can’t, you’re holding my hand.”

Pierre shifted his grip so he held the pistol between thumb and forefinger. “Now let go.”

“Pierre, once he gives you the gun, put him down gently.” Rene spoke German for the benefit of the flier. The flier released the pistol, Pierre put him down. The pistol was attached to the German’s belt by a lanyard, Pierre grasped the lanyard in both hands and snapped it like rotten string.

“The safety! Put the safety on!” Rene fussed.

“How? I’m not sure.”

“Then give it to me.” Rene took the pistol, looked at it for a moment, then pointed it at the flier.

“The safety is off, and it is loaded, as you know.” He spoke in German. “I will use it if I have to. You are our prisoner, and will obey my instructions. If you don’t I will ask Pierre to hold you upside down and shake you.”

“Your big friend?” He eyed Pierre carefully. “I thought he was going to kill me.”

“You hurt his feelings, he is sensitive. Never call him a monkey. Gorilla maybe, but not monkey. Now, are you injured?”

“Not really. I hit my knee leaving my aeroplane, and I jarred it again getting down from the tree. What about your big friend? I thought I shot him.”

“Ask Pierre yourself. He understands German.”

The airman considered this for a moment. Then he spoke to Pierre. “Hey big man, I am sorry I called you a monkey. You scared me. I hope I did not hurt you when I shot at you, but I thought you were going to kill me.”

Pierre sketched a smile, showing his canines. “If I want to kill you, you will not have time to draw your gun. Lucky for you I am bullet proof. And if I wanted to hurt you I could have torn your arm off before you pulled your gun. These are my friends. You try to hurt my friends and you will be sorry. So you do what Rene tells you.”

The others were clamouring for a translation. Rene said, “Let’s go back to the village. Someone should come back with a ladder and get the parachute.” As they walked he explained what had been said.

The airman walked in silence, then began talking to Pierre. A few minutes later Pierre turned to the others. “He wants to know why we dislike Germans so much! I told him because they invaded, and they killed little Collette’s parents two months ago.”

“Tell him Germans think they are the master race and the rest of us are second class people.” Etienne supplied.

“And people who don’t have pale skin they consider animals.” Rene added.

“Is that why he called me a monkey?” Pierre asked the others.

“Most likely,” Rene replied, “but you won’t get him to admit to that now.”

“Well, I don’t like him either.”

When they reached the village they were greeted by a group of villagers carrying shotguns, father Marcel, who was unarmed, Monsieur Luc, or Lord Lukeios, the chateau owner, a slim Egyptian looking man with a shaven head, a neatly trimmed black beard that ran in a fringe along his jaw line and ended in a pointy goatee. His nose was long and curved like a scimitar. He was wearing a pale yellow linen suit with lavender silk shirt, and aviator sunglasses that hid his yellow eyes. Beside him was Palomedes, a man whom Lukeios always introduced as his son, although the villagers commented privately that there was no resemblance. Palomedes was a solidly built man with curly black hair, round face with bulbous nose. He was dressed in green and brown, his hunting clothes, and carrying a powerful hunting bow and quiver of arrows.

Lukeios addressed himself to the German. “Who are you, and what is your rank?”

“Hans Steiner, pilot.” He stood to attention, but Lord Lukeios had that affect on people.

“Where is your plane? Tell me how you came here, and where are your companions.”

Hans stiffened as if rebuked. “I was piloting a bomber, one of a squadron en route to bomb England. The English seemed to know where we were and intercepted us. My plane was damaged and on fire, we had no choice but to abandon it. I should have dropped the bombs in an open area, but the release mechanism failed. My crew jumped before your village, I steered the plane past the village towards the forest beyond. Once I was sure the plane would clear the hill I jumped and landed in an orchard. The plane crashed somewhere beyond the hill and exploded. I believe there is no village there, so the damage will be small.” Rene translated for the others.

“How many crew? Were any injured?”

“There is a navigator who also handles dropping bombs, and three gunners. I do not know of any injuries - they all jumped.”

“So four jumped before the village, you jumped after. The wind blew you back here. Pierre, you saw five on the other side, so there must be one other survivor from one of the fighters. Hans, do you speak English? No? I can see you are telling the truth. Now who here speaks German?” Lukeios was switching between German and French as he spoke. “Father Marcel?”

“No, though I understand some English.”

The others shook their heads. “Then either Rene or Pierre must stay with Hans.”

“I have to collect Collette from school soon.”

“I guess that means me, Boss.” Rene made a deprecating smile. “But why? Where are you going? Shouldn’t he go with you to the chateau?”

“He will, but Palomedes and I are going to find the others. I don’t want German airmen wandering around the forest, and I don’t want Hans with us while we search for them.”

Rene nodded. Lukeios turned to Hans. “You will stay here for the time being. Rene here will be like your commanding officer - you will obey everything he asks you to do. Other than that, you are a guest here, you will behave like a guest, polite and quiet. You will not think to run away, you will not think to harm anyone.” He switched back to French. “Hans is staying here until I can take him to the chateau. He is a prisoner, but treat him like a guest. Rene is in charge of him. Adieu.”

“Why does that man carry a bow?” Hans asked Rene.

“He is a master hunter, he says that guns scare the game away. We’re staying here for a while, would you like a beer?”

Rene ordered beers for everyone, at Monsieur Luc’s expense. Then they restarted their game of boules.

Pierre left as soon as he finished his beer, walking nearly a kilometer to the local school. He had done this every school day since Collette had been orphaned, walking her to and from school. This time there was a strong smell of smoke.

This was not good, he thought to himself. It smells like the forest is on fire. I should let Luc know. But maybe he already knows, he is hunting the other airmen.

He drew a lung full of air, cupped his hands to his mouth, and bellowed. It sounded like a foghorn mixed with whale song, deep and very loud. It could be heard kilometers away, and both Luc and Rene would understand.

He reached the school and stood by the gate, waiting with the patience of a statue. Eventually the bell rang, and then the children appeared, some running, some walking. A few waved to him, so he waved back, greeting them by name if he knew that.

A knot of girls appeared, all talking animatedly. One broke away, ran to him and threw herself at him. He picked her up and swung her around, being careful not to hurt her. Humans were so fragile. He was grinning from ear to ear.

“Pierre, we heard you yodelling just before. Is there danger?”

“There is a forest fire, can you smell the smoke? I was telling Luc. There may be danger, he will know. We’ve had such an interesting day today. How was your day?”

They began walking towards the village, telling each other about their day. A flock of ravens flew past, circling and cawing. “Did you know auntie Mifunwi said she can talk with ravens?” the girl asked.

“Uncle Luc can too. He says ravens are special birds.”

They heard someone whistling behind them and turned. Lukeios was walking behind them. Collette ran to him and threw her arms around him. “Uncle Luc! Where did you come from? Why are you whistling?”

Lukeios swung her around, kissed her forehead, and then put her back on the ground. “I am pleased to see you too. I flew here, and now I am whistling up a storm.”

“Why are you doing that?”

“Ah, the forest is on fire. Everything is tinder dry, and the fire is burning its way towards our villages and my chateau. It’s too big to put out with buckets of water. I want the wind to blow it back on itself so it doesn’t come any closer, and then I want rain to put it out. The farmers need rain for their crops too.”

Already the wind had changed direction and was gathering strength. “If I whistle can I summon a wind?”

Lukeios laughed. “No little one, you need permission from the air spirits, and they do not like being at the beck and call of humans. Imagine what would happen if there were a storm every time someone whistled.”

“There’d be a lot of storms.” Collette observed gravely. “Can you show me how to do magic?”

“Magic is all around us all the time only most people don’t notice. Ask Pierre.”

Pierre smiled kindly. “Look at the forest. You take an acorn, put it in the ground, give it some water, and you get an oak tree. That’s magic.” he rumbled.

“It is?”

“Magic covers anything that happens where you don’t know how it works.” Lukeios explained. “Science is when you do know how it works. Do you know how an acorn turns into a tree?”

Collette shook her head. Lukeios continued “I whistled up a wind, and a storm will follow. That isn’t magic, but science, because the air spirits are making the wind, and when enough of them get together they’ll gather clouds and then it will rain. I asked them to do this with my whistling, and the reason is to put the fires out, not to help humans. They are happy to do that.”

“Oh.” This was a lot for the girl to absorb. “Can I see the air spirits?”

“Not today, they are busy. Do you remember the time you saw your parents’ spirits, just after they died? There were other spirits around, one of them was an air spirit. That time I tapped your forehead and shifted your perception. You must learn to do that for yourself.”

“You can see spirits all the time, uncle Luc?”

“Yes, all the time.”

“What about Pierre?”

“I can see spirits.” Pierre responded.

“Pierre is magical - he is made from living stone. He has special powers. You, Collette, are human, so you need to learn to do what we can do. All of us will teach you what we can, but you must have patience.”

“What about Rene, Palomedes, aunt Mifunwi and uncle Red?”

“I believe all of them can.” Lukeios replied. A breeze ruffled Collette’s hair, and Lukeios swiftly tapped her forehead. “Look there!”

Collette saw a gauzy, filmy shape that seemed to stretch out a tendril to ruffle her hair.

“No!” she said petulantly. The shape seemed to puff up, then tendrils mussed her hair and lifted her skirt, and it was gone.

“That was an air spirit.” Lukeios explained.

“Where’s it gone? Why did it do that?”

“It’s gone back into the sky. They do things like that because the think it’s fun.”

Pierre told Collette of the aerial dogfight. Lukeios told her how he and Palomedes had gone hunting the airmen who had parachuted to safety. “... so the ravens were able to guide Palomedes and I to each one of the airmen. There were four Germans, one was stuck in the trees, the other three were on the ground trying to find their way out of the forest. They were actually pleased to see us.”

“But you said there were five.” Collette protested. She could count.

“So I did. The fifth is an English airman, he was stuck in a tree, and he had a broken leg. We had to take great care to get him down to the ground, and then Palomedes and I had to set and splint his leg, and make a stretcher for him so we could carry him out.”

By the time they reached the village the wind was blowing strongly and dark clouds were massing. In the café were five German airmen under Rene’s guard easily distinguished by their blue grey uniforms, and one English airman in dark blue on a stretcher on a table. The stretcher seemed to be made of parachute silk and slender tree limbs or trunks. The doctor was examining him. The boules players had packed their balls away and were sitting inside, away from the wind. “Hello doctor, how is your patient?” Lukeios called out.

“He is in remarkably good spirits for someone who has been shot down, broken his leg, and then had it set and splinted in the field. You two have done a very good job, there is not much more I can do for him today. How is the forest fire going?”

“I’ve had some experience setting broken limbs in the past. The wind has sprung up and blown the fire back on itself. There is a storm on the way that should put the fire out. I suggest everyone go home now while they can.”

“You will take the aviators to the chateau?” father Marcel asked.

“Yes. Doctor, with your permission, may we take the English flyer to the chateau?”

“There is no hospital near, as you know, and I prefer not to have him at my surgery. You have room at the chateau. He cannot walk, and it will be several weeks before he can even exercise his leg. But if you are prepared to carry him there should be no problem. If you like, I will call in on my rounds tomorrow.”

“We have four strong German lads who carried him here. The chateau is not far, and the road is relatively level.”

The airmen had finished their drinks and the party set off – Palomedes, Lukeios, Rene, Pierre, Collette plus the six aviators and father Marcel. The bomber pilot, being an officer, walked while the other Germans took turns in pairs to carry the stretcher. Hans, the pilot, asked, “What will happen when we get to the chateau? Are we prisoners?”

“Technically no, you will all be my guests. None of you Germans are injured, so you can make arrangements to contact your squadron and return. We have a telephone that works when we have electricity, but the exchange is manual and not always staffed. You are welcome to stay a few days, but I do expect you to return to your squadron.”

“Thank you, that is most kind. What of the English fighter pilot?”

“He will stay with us until his injuries heal. I would treat any attempt to take him prisoner of war as a breach of the obligations of guests. I also expect all of you to behave as guests should, and not to try to take advantage of the situation. You are the officer, you will be responsible for the behaviour of your crew.”

“Of course, I understand. You own a chateau; this means you are a nobleman? How long has your family owned the chateau?”

Lukeios smiled. “We survived the Revolution because we are out of the way here, and my forefathers looked after their peasants. I can trace my lineage back to the Middle Ages. If you are interested I can give you a tour, show you paintings and suits of armour and so on.”

“I would like that. My ancestors were nobles in Saxony and Prussia, but the previous war saw the end of our fortunes. If you don’t mind, you don’t look all that French.”

“No, there are Greek and Egyptian women in my lineage.”

Collette noticed that Rene winked at Pierre. She asked Rene why and he responded “Ah, he is teasing the German. They are very big on racial purity, meaning blond hair, white skin and blue eyes like him. They regard Egyptians and Greeks as very low class humans because they have dark hair and their skin is not white. That is not very nice of them. People are people, skin colour and hair colour has no significance.”

“He’s not very nice then, is he?”

“No, but he thinks he is. He is being polite to Luc, he just thinks he is a better person that Luc because he has blue eyes and pale skin. You should always judge a person by what they do, the way they behave, and what they say, not what they look like.” Collette hadn’t really thought about this before. Now it occurred to her that the German didn’t like Pierre because his skin looked like stone, and didn’t like Rene because his skin was light brown. It was a new concept for her.

There was rain behind them, following them home like a lost puppy. When they slowed the approaching rain slowed, when they sped up, it sped up. It looked like a heavy grey curtain behind them, hiding everything behind it.

The airmen were discussing it, the navigator and the pilot adamant that the weather forecast had been fine with light clouds. Pierre commented to Collette “They don’t know it’s magical. It won’t rain on us because Luc asked them not to.”

Lukeios weighed into the discussion in German. “Gentlemen, we are fortunate that the weather forecast was wrong. Your plane crash started a forest fire, and our village was just one of many that could have been destroyed. We should hurry, the rain is following us, and it won’t wait for us.”

They reached the chateau with the wall of water fifty meters behind. Within thirty seconds of closing the door the rain was hammering on the door and windows like a mob trying to gain entry. Collette was staring through a window, marvelling at how quickly the puddles were spreading. Hans and several others joined her.

“This is a torrential downpour!” Hans exclaimed. “How can this be?”

“Everything was tinder dry. The fire would have destroyed hundreds, perhaps thousands of square kilometers.” Lukeios explained. “It had to be extinguished. Who knows how many lives might have been lost otherwise.”

“But the weather forecast! This rain was so sudden! And it is so unnaturally heavy!”

“Unnatural? The clouds are dropping rain in sufficient quantity to extinguish the forest fire. I would say it is necessarily heavy. Perhaps that is what shocks you herr Steiner, the idea that there might be some intelligence behind natural phenomena, arranging things to benefit all creatures that live on earth. And if it can interfere on such a scale, perhaps it might just interfere with your thousand year reich. You Germans control most of Europe, but your mighty reich could not manage to invade England. Something stopped you. And before that, your armies chased the Tommies onto the beach at Dunkirk where, as the Americans say, it would be shooting fish in a barrel. But a fog came over the German army, while the English used fishing boats under a clear sky, with the sea as smooth as glass, necessarily so might I add, and plucked all their troops to safety. Something immensely powerful interfered then, and it is interfering with the plans of your fuehrer still. Mark my words, herr Steiner. Within five years your thousand year reich will be nothing but dust and ashes, with nothing to show but the millions of dead it has caused. That is all I wish to say.” There was just a hint of anger in his speech.

Rene translated this speech for the others. Father Marcel commented almost in wonder, “He is serious about that. The Hand of God, arranging things still.”

Pierre commented, “There were fishing boats, pleasure boats, river boats, every sort of small boat. There were hundreds and hundreds of them.”

Rene added “Many of the ships would have sunk if the sea hadn’t been smooth. River boats cannot handle the open sea. And if it hadn’t been foggy the Germans could have killed most of the soldiers.”

Pierre added “Luc told me the boats rescued over three hundred thousand soldiers from the beach.”

“How do you know so much?” father Marcel asked.

“We were watching. Luc and Rene and I were there.” Pierre replied. “We even toppled a few German Tanks on their sides.” And who do you think summoned the fog? He kept that thought to himself.