

## Opening Extract from Out of the Clouds of Deceit

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Published by **Matador** 

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## Chapter One

Aiden found himself kicking his heels at Kings Cross and wondering whether he had been greedy with the butter ration.

Everything around him looked grimy and it was no warmer on the concourse than it had been outside the station. The air was insidiously damp and raw. When he had left the house earlier this morning the sky had been oppressively grey and overcast and the cold had lost no time in penetrating every seam and fold of his clothes until it had chilled him right through to his bones.

The trains were hopelessly erratic and overcrowding seemed depressingly normal, so Aiden had allowed himself plenty of time in case not just one, but two connections should fail; amongst his many natural anxieties was a fear of being late, besides which it had been repeatedly emphasized to him during his training that he had a responsibility to set an example to his crew and with his news he felt that this was now more true than ever before.

He had been visiting his mother. It had been the first time he had returned home since the funeral. With his news had come an unlooked for, but welcome, forty-eight hours leave. The visit had been virtually unannounced as there had been no opportunity to telephone her until he had reached London to catch a train for the final leg of his journey.

Aiden had pushed the backdoor shut against the foggy, sulphurous night-air; the door always stuck against the frame when the cold weather came. The kitchen had smelt of cooking; the comforting, unfresh but homely, smell of cabbage and boiled potatoes that never

seemed to totally leave the kitchen during the wintertime months, but also the inviting and much less common smell of meat frying.

With the collar of his greatcoat still turned up, he had stepped across the kitchen and kissed his mother lightly on the cheek. His mother had remained standing over the stove serenely stirring the contents of a saucepan. It had been as if he had never been away, and in truth he had not really left the parental home in any definitive sense.

"I was sure you'd be hungry," his mother had said, smiling at him in answer to his kiss.

"But Mum..." Aiden had begun, but with kindly exasperation.

"We'll manage," she had replied without even the slightest hint of concern.

Despite the lateness of the hour and the lack of notice she had received of his impending arrival, before allowing herself to think of anything else she had cooked him a meal; her son had been coming home and she would have considered doing anything less as a dereliction in her duty as a mother.

"And gravy!" Aiden had exclaimed looking into the saucepan, but his tone had really indicated an appreciation of his mother's care rather than any genuine surprise.

"It's only sort of gravy, of course. It's mostly cabbage water and browning!" she had replied, still smiling at him. She was really a very ordinary woman.

Having hung his greatcoat over the newel post in the hallway and dropped his kitbag at the bottom of the stairs, he had returned to the relative warmth of the kitchen and sat at the table where his mother had already laid out his knife and fork.

"How was your journey?" she had asked as she dished up his dinner.

"Oh, you know, cold mostly."

His mother always opened the kitchen window a little whenever she was cooking, whatever the weather happened to be, and she had also parted the curtains an inch or so to allow for ventilation. From where he had sat Aiden had seen that a thin, soft band of condensation had formed around the edges of the panes, like cold beaches on a deep, black lonely sea.

"Did you manage to get a seat?" she had asked as she carefully drained the fat from the frying pan into the pint pudding basin that served as a dripping bowl, taking care to capture the final few precious drops.

"Coming up was a bit crowded, but the train from Charing Cross was pretty empty really."

He had received his news late that afternoon in an interview with his presiding squadron leader. A transport to the station had been due to leave and he had barely had enough time to collect up his kit if he had wanted to catch it. Besides which, it had been nearly teatime and many aircraftmen had finished their duties so there had been long queues for the telephone kiosks on the airfield.

Rush hour had long-since finished by the time Aiden had finally crossed London and reached an almost deserted and very cold Charing Cross. But being a man who was inwardly anxious about many small matters, he had checked for the time of his train before he had found a phone box and telephoned his mother, his breath steaming even in the closed kiosk, to say that he was arriving home and that he had some news to tell her.

"I've put a hot water bottle in your bed."

Although she had not been indifferent to the news which had precipitated his visit, her primary concern as it had always been had remained his comfort. But tired from his journey and from the emotion of the afternoon, he had actually wanted nothing more than his bed and he had eaten largely to please her, although the small portion of liver had been an unexpected treat.

He had been content to be back in the familiar kitchen, it was like safely drawing breath, although there had been a draft from the open window. The kitchen had not changed since his last visit and had seemed pleasantly set; as if now that she was on her own his mother would see no reason to alter it in any way.

Between mouthfuls, and managing to sound quietly jubilant, Aiden had then said, "I've been posted. I have to report to my operational conversion unit the day after tomorrow."

"Oh, I see," she had replied, indulgently. "But you know what I'm like; I don't really know what all that means!"

A part of him would have liked her to have asked if there was

any more news. But then, he had reasoned to himself, as if he had been jealously hoarding something of the sweetest value he had deliberately said nothing to her on the telephone which would have indicated that there *had* been anything more.

"Bombers, it means I'll be flying heavy bombers." Already, he had felt a pride in being able to say that. Aiden had smiled up at his mother; long ago he had thought that he had outgrown her and that he must surely know more about the world than she, but he still craved her pleasure in his achievement.

"Oh, I see," she had said again, but this time thinking abstractedly of children she had sounded vaguely worried.

During the war she had been mildly ashamed of the views of Bishop Bell, Bishop of Chichester, whose speech in the House of Lords against the allies' bombing campaign had been so widely reported. She had thought there had been such a surfeit of wickedness in the world which had had to be stopped. These bishops, she had thought, and those fashionable Hampstead poets she had heard report of, were quite out of touch with everyday people whose daily lives seemed a world away from such noetic niceness. But she had also been secretly relieved that Aiden had been too young to play any part in such a necessary yet monstrous thing.

"And that's not all," Aiden had continued brightly. "My papers came through! I've been commissioned!"

This news had been of much greater interest to his mother as she could equate this with him doing well or with generally getting on in life and although not ebullient in her congratulations, Aiden had recognised that she had been deeply pleased for him.

The following morning his mother had woken him with a cup of tea. "I've put the kettle on the gas. Can you make do for a wash and shave?" There had been no question of a bath; coke for the boiler was in short supply again. She had continued, "Let me have anything that needs a wash."

Aiden had not taken advantage of his mother in any real sense; it was more as if both he and she had slipped effortlessly and comfortably back into the roles they had both played before Aiden had joined the RAF. It was as if not enough had changed for these roles not to simply continue.

"You don't have to, you know," Aiden had half-heartedly and ineffectually protested. Besides his mother's determination, like the majority of his peers he craved the continuing existence of a wellregulated domestic life and he had therefore felt content to let his mother look after him even while knowing that it involved a degree of sacrifice on her part.

Although it was not a Monday, she had washed his clothes as she had always used to, boiling up his shirts, scrubbing the collars on the draining board, running the clothes through the mangle to squeeze the water out and then hanging them over the coke boiler to get what was left of the heat.

"There," she had said, hanging up the last of them, "I daresay they'll be dry enough to iron this afternoon."

Aiden had nothing in particular that he had wanted to do with his time at home and, apart from walking muffled-up through the dismal cold to the parade of shops at the top of the street to get himself a newspaper, he had been content to stay around the house. He had found a peculiar satisfaction in watching his mother carrying out her workaday tasks. It was, he had decided, not so much nostalgia - as much as, say, the balneal smell of the open airing cupboard reminded him of the smell of being safely in his childhood bed - but more like a sense of voyeurism, as if he were witnessing something secretly delectable but that he did not have the necessary sanction to seek out and engage in.

After a late lunch of tinned sardines, Aiden had built a fire in the dinning-room grate, wondering when his mother had last used it, partly so that the room might be warm enough for them to sit in later - other than the kitchen, the dining-room was the only room in the house which his mother might heat - but also because she had wanted to finish drying his clothes on the clotheshorse in front of the fire.

For their evening meal his mother had improvised hamburgers from grated potato, oatmeal and a tiny amount of meat which they ate with winter greens and root vegetables. Aiden had briefly toyed with the idea of looking up some of his old friends, but then he had deliberately spent too long with the evening newspaper spread-out in front of him studying events which were only of limited interest to him for this to have been viable. So having consulted, and then assiduously rechecked, the railway timetable for his journey the next day, they had sat in the easy chairs in front of the fire in the dinning room and had switched on the bakelite radio in good time so that it should warm up. Then at half past eight they had listened to Tommy Handley and It's That Man Again and which had always made his mother laugh.

As they had sat together, listening to the radio, the room had finally seemed cosy; the thick curtains had been pulled tight shut over the french windows against the draft and the fire had now warmed the room reasonably. Aiden reflected that without his father the family seemed defensively small and lacked the comfort of a tribe. For her part, his mother had felt content to minister to Aiden sensing that the purposeful covenant would cease once Aiden found himself a wife

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Across the station from where Aiden now stood, a short train of grubby carriages in charge of a black tank-locomotive, the anachronistic yellow lettering on the side of its water tanks barely visible through a layer of grime, crawled slowly alongside a platform, the connecting rod of the engine's driving-wheels rising, falling and slowing like the elongated foot of some fabulous beast. As it came to a halt the locomotive suddenly let off steam with a deafening whoosh which sounded all the greater in the relative quiet of the early afternoon gloom, the sound reverberating loudly around the cathedral-like train-shed.

Pigeons, startled and disturbed at the sudden noise, jolted into the air, like a mass of erratically blown envelopes, the fluttering of their wings briefly illuminated in the dim shafts of light straining in through the filmy glass of the station roof. The great swirling cloud of white steam and grey-black smoke billowed higher and higher reaching up to the panes of grimy glass high above the platforms and adding to the layer of dirt and soot which dulled everything on the station: the retaining walls; the steel-work high above the heads of the travellers; the backs of the wooden benches and roofs of the newspaper kiosks; the window sills and panes of waiting rooms and the parcels office; and, which even permeated clothing making cuffs and shirt collars absolutely filthy.

As abruptly as it had started the engine stopped venting and the last of the steam and smoke dispersed like a winters-breath about the station and the pigeons, cooing softly to each other, re-entrenched to their streaky, feculent perches. An occasional carriage door slammed shut, and a handful of passengers made their ways towards the ticket barrier. Aiden watched them, wondering about their lives: a middle-aged woman in sensible shoes keeping one eye on the concourse clock, with one hand holding the hand of a boy, the other hand a girl's, all three of them dressed in warm coats and with the boy's long grey school socks visible below the hem of his coat; a middle-aged man with a small, nondescript suitcase, his scarf carefully layered between his overcoat and his neck; a young woman walking quickly, seemingly impervious to the cold as if quite distracted by her own pleasant thoughts. Presently, they had all surrendered their tickets at the barrier and had dispersed in different directions across the concourse and Aiden remembered that he was very cold indeed and looked about him for the refreshment room.

With a cursory backwards glance at the pasty-faced girl whose job it was to dole out refreshments and who was now disinterestedly counting copper coins into the till drawer, he managed, by focusing his attention on his cup to the exclusion of virtually everything and everybody else about him, to keep his cup level and his arm steady and constant relative to the rest of his body as he walked away from the serving-counter. He manoeuvred carefully between the tables, half expecting the sudden jolt of his heavy kitbag as it slid off his shoulder and which would cause him to spill his tea. Reaching an empty table he lowered himself awkwardly, consciously keeping the upper part of his body upright until his cup was level with the tabletop.

He then carefully slid the cup onto the table. Easing his kitbag off his shoulder and carefully taking its weight in his now free hand, he placed the bag down onto the floor beside him and then, with a feeling of something like relief, sat down. Although an improvement to being out on the concourse, it was not particularly warm in the refreshment room and there was condensation on every window.

There was still a long time to wait before his train was due. He stirred the hot, sweet orange-brown tea, then cradling the cup between his hands, partly for warmth and partly because that was his habit, he found himself thinking about his father.

His father had been a mild and compassionate man and who had had a sweet tooth. Eking out the chocolate ration had been a constant concern to him and Aiden fondly remembered him sitting at the kitchen table carefully dividing up his precious ration, making it last by measuring out a meagre amount for each day. It had been a serious business and if the small bar fractured unevenly spilling tiny irregular shards onto the table, he would frown, quite unconsciously, and dab at them gently with the end of his moistened finger, anxious not to waste even the smallest amount.

But Aiden thought his father would have been proud of him. Being in uniform would have been too simplistic a reason for his father's pride. But being a man who understood duty as being a transcendent manifestation of care, he would have recognised and approved Aiden's earnest desire to live up to his responsibilities. Although being a man of many small anxieties, Aiden secretly worried whether he would ever be able to measure up to what he thought was expected of him. And then he had not really known what had been expected of him at the funeral. Amongst the dark trappings he shyly, and with uncertainty, intuitively received from all those around him the generally favoured mixture of ceremony and sorrow, and was left seriously wondering whether remembering the chocolate ration was too trivial or un-weighty a thing to be considered a legitimate part of his grief.

Only now, having almost finished his tea did Aiden look properly about the refreshment room. Firstly he glanced back at the counter, idly wondering whether in fact the girl was not as plain as he had first thought her to be. Then, looking around the main body of the room for the first time, he noticed that there was a man of about his own age sitting at the table next to his who, like Aiden, wore bluegrey uniform. Reserved and not at all naturally gregarious, Aiden would not have sought out company to merely pass the time, but the other man struck up a conversation with him.

"You seemed miles away," he said, offering Aiden a cigarette.

"I didn't even see you there!" Aiden replied casually, accepting it.

"Where're you off to?" The other man struck a match and held it up to the end of Aiden's cigarette. Neither of them showed any curiosity that they should be on the move, transitoriness being a fact of their lives.

"OCU." Aiden exhaled the first breath of smoke, the sulphurand-potassium smell of the match still pleasantly pungent in his nostrils. He intuitively knew that no explanation of the abbreviation that tripped so easily and proudly off his tongue would be necessary; the implications of shared service experiences and a common technical language were seductively comfortable, but mostly he had greatly surprised himself at just how relaxed he was with this casual conversation.

"Me too," the other airman said as he held the match up in the air, waving it exuberantly until the flame was extinguished. Then, reaching across the gap between the two tables, he offered Aiden his hand. "My name's Dennis."

Aiden offered his own hand, "Aiden,"

Dennis then stood up and, bringing his cup with him and pushing his kitbag with his foot, he crossed over to Aiden's table and sat down opposite him.

"Heavies?" Dennis enquired hopefully.

"That's right!" Aiden had instantly warmed to Dennis; he seemed just like himself and talking to him was refreshingly and remarkably effortless.

"Then I guess we must be going to the same place," Dennis said, as if a perfectly satisfactory conclusion had been reached. Then, with a note of obvious excitement in his voice, as if he were completely

thrilled at the prospect of what lay before them, he continued, "I wonder what we'll be flying?"

Aiden paused before replying. He carefully knocked the ash off his cigarette into the ashtray, taking his time to formulate what he was going to say and, more importantly, thinking what Dennis might say to him in return.

"Actually, I received my papers at the same time as the posting." He did not know if it should matter if it turned out that he had been commissioned but Dennis had not been.

"And me! I was going to sew the badge on in the train."

Aiden's mother had already insisted on performing this small duty for him.

Aiden felt a sense of relief pass over him and he said evenly, "I expect when we're operational we'll end up flying Lincolns, but I don't suppose we'll go straight on to them."

It would have been disappointing if it had turned out that Dennis and he were not of equal rank; it would have seemed like a spoiling of innocence as they were so obviously starting out together.

"Lancasters then, if we're lucky!" Dennis exclaimed loudly, but then shot Aiden an uncertain, almost guilty look as if he were worried that he might have said too much.

"Perhaps we'll end up in Coastal Command." Aiden smiled easily. Aiden and Dennis both knew well enough that quite apart from being used to address the bomber gap until more modern designs could be brought on stream the Lancaster was being pressed into a number of peace-time roles, notably maritime patrol.

"Well, I don't know about that." Dennis said with uncertainty and frowned. But Aiden found that he rather liked the idea of flying along, mile after mile, high up in the sunshine over the craquelure sea, the bright light gleaming on the newly-applied grey and white paintwork of the aircraft.

Then presently, markedly at odds with his earlier apparent enthusiasm, Dennis unexpectedly lowered his voice and asked conspiratorially, "Were you thinking about the posting just now? Quite honestly, between you and me, I find it all *dreadfully* nerveracking."

Dennis unconsciously played with the teaspoon in his saucer, repeatedly twisting the handle so that the convex back of the spoon was uppermost, and then twisting it back again to its more natural resting position. He frowned, as if by speaking in this way he had somehow placed himself at Aiden's mercy.

"I know," Aiden quietly agreed. But feeling indescribably comforted, elated even, that Dennis appeared to feel as he did, he tentatively continued: "I always seem to worry about such silly things. I always have done, you know, at school, during training, everywhere. Whereas other chaps don't seem to be like that at all, they're able to just get on with things..."

Aiden heard his own voice trailing off weakly, as if he were aware of how unshielded and feeble he must sound. But Dennis. almost imperceptibly, nodded his agreement as if he were ashamed to admit to it, and then sounding like a man who was fearful of ever finding loving grace said, "It's more than just something being new, isn't it, of being a new boy?"

"It makes you feel so awfully vulnerable." Aiden almost whispered, the back of his neck and ears burning, his eyes focused intensely on his empty cup.

Had he been minded to, he could have recounted a litany of such awkwardness and embarrassments from his earliest memories right through to the present day. But Aiden knew that if he were to recount such apprehensions to anyone else they would sound extremely trivial, and more importantly, to admit to having such concerns seemed somehow questionable or dubious as if he were inadequate and insufficiently manly. He had not even been able to speak of such things to his father, despite him having been the gentlest of men, and Aiden attributed this inability to connect with him as having been contributory to his sense of being isolated or set apart from other men that he invariably felt.

Awkwardly, and wondering if he were alone in having such feelings, Aiden looked up and smiled encouragement at Dennis. "But as it happens, I was thinking of my father just then."

"Well, if he's at all like mine I expect he worries about you flying."

"It's only me and my mother, now," Aiden offered.

"Oh, I see. The war I suppose?"

Aiden thought it quite natural that everybody should assume his father had been killed in the war.

"No, it wasn't the war. I mean," Aiden stumbled on to say, thinking an explanation was called for, "he was actually in a reserved occupation..."

But Dennis startled Aiden by suddenly exclaiming, cutting right across Aiden's reply, "I lost Tommy. He was my brother. And I'm all they've got left now, so they tend to worry so!"

"In the war?" Aiden asked softly.

But he surprised Aiden by loudly clearing his throat and replying very matter-of-factly, "Yes, but it was a silly accident, really."

They lapsed into a kind of mildly astonished silence as if each of them had been taken aback by the extent to which they had revealed to the other something deeply private about themselves. Presently, and with a shy look at each other, they each glanced towards the counter, then extinguishing their cigarettes and shouldering their kitbags in a curiously unconsciously synchronized action, they went in search of their train which they calculated ought to be in at the platform by now.

Aiden and Dennis were the only passengers from their train who alighted at the country station that afternoon. There was a smell like damp cabbage stalks in the cold Lincolnshire air and for a moment they stood on the platform to get their bearings. Huddled in their greatcoats and stamping their feet, they wondered whether they would ever feel warm again; for the whole of their journey the heating in the railway carriages had persistently failed to work. As the train drew away into the distance, the carriage wheels click-clacking over the rail joints and the contact of the wheels on the rails making a sighing noise like perpetually sad mermaids, they walked towards the station building.

Under the blanket of damp, cold air, the station and its

surroundings seemed as if they had been stupefied. As if they had been abandoned, two or three solitary goods wagons stood silently in the sprawling goods-vard, their red-bauxite-coloured bodies virtually indistinguishable from the colours of the dirty track sleepers. vard hoist and goods-shed. A flatbed lorry, drab and mute, had been parked outside the empty coal merchant's office, roughly-folded coal sacks piled unevenly in the coal-dust on its back, and a shovel leant against the coal staithes as if it had been forgotten. Against the deep oppressive stillness of the afternoon it seemed as if they were the only living souls on the station, until the sudden clunk of a signal being re-set and the diminishing oscillations of the cables which connected it to the signal box beyond the throat of the goods-yard, suggested the possibilities of lives they could not see.

"I can't see anyone here to meet us," Dennis said carelessly.

Each of them had simply been told that transport would be waiting for him at the station and if travelling on his own, each would have desperately worried about appearing foolish as he would not know what the transport was and where he should look for it.

From time to time during the train journey they had even wondered out loud about the transport. Their wondering would have appeared to a casual listener as being something of no more than idle curiosity but in reality they had both known that each of them had felt the same sense of gnawing unease.

"Perhaps they're outside." Aiden replied in the same easy manner. With the intuitive comfort that he could now always share his secret apprehensions with Dennis without fear of opprobrium, Aiden felt sufficiently venturesome to think he could even make a joke of it if he had wished; relieved, he thought he must have at least now appeared to be acting as other men would in the same situation.

"I shouldn't get your hopes up," Dennis said nonchalantly, swinging his kitbag up and onto his shoulder. "They've probably forgotten all about us!" The two men laughed loudly together as if making a show of their indifference.

As they came closer to the station buildings, the smell of an unseen coal-fire mingled with the smell of the damp cabbage stalks and they could see an ordinary aircraftman, propping himself up

against the peeling cream paint of the ticket barrier and watching their progress.

"This way, sirs," he said disinterestedly, as they gave-up their travel warrants.

Secretly relieved, and hoping that he had seen the two of them laughing together, they followed him out to the station forecourt where a standard airforce lorry was parked immediately outside the entrance to the booking hall.

Aiden and Dennis squeezed up in the cab of the lorry with the driver where they were only marginally warmer than they had been on the station. As it ground its way out of the station forecourt, they initially sat in awkward silence, but then, in an attempt to appear as if he and Aiden were totally relaxed and old hands at the game, Dennis continued the conversation they had been having in the train.

"So that's why you joined up, seeing the Tempest shoot the doodlebug down?"

"It didn't shoot at it," Aiden replied but then hurriedly added, "It was all wrong really, the Tempest shouldn't even have been there; it was behind the balloon barrage. But having seen it happen, all I really wanted to do was fly!" And suddenly worried about the overt enthusiasm of his final sentence, he stole a quick sideways glance at the driver.

"Flipped it over with its wingtip, I suppose? You used to read about that sort of thing in the newspapers." Dennis tried to keep the wonder out of his voice, but he involuntarily let out a long, low whistle before adding: "that must have been really something to see!"

They were still boyishly excitable and believed themselves extraordinarily lucky for actually receiving pay for having adventures and were weighed down with the niggling belief that their commissions had therefore somehow been unwarranted. So they secretly feared the judgement of men who laboured indifferently and they therefore felt a little intimidated by the presence of the aircraftman. But their driver concentrated on the road before him with an apparent indifference to his passengers that he could have been born with.

"No, I think that must have been the intention, but the Tempest actually collided with it!"

Such weapons had seemed to belong to the pit of another world and Aiden had watched it approach with fascinated horror, the hairs on the back of his neck on end. June 1944 had been a month of heavy cloud, driving rain and leaden skies which had made the buzz bombs all but intolerable. But as he had watched it approach, a wellmaintained, oiled sound like an urgent, growling purr had joined with the saw-edged sound of the flying bomb. With an overwhelming impression of power and speed, the Tempest had appeared as if out of nowhere and banked incisively towards the bomb.

Aiden had expected to hear the deafening thump of cannon shells, but the aircraft had approached closer and closer, but still the pilot had not fired. Then the two shapes had merged together into a complex cluster of points and indeterminable motion and had then suddenly sprung violently apart again; each had acquired an unexpected trajectory. For two or three seconds the metallic drone of the flying bomb became louder as it described an upwards arc into the air and then it became quieter, its hot glowing exhaust pointing skywards as the bomb tipped down towards the ground. In collision with the short stubby wing of the bomb, first the Tempest's skin had been torn, exposing and then breaking the longitudinals of the wing's frame. With the supporting laminar flow of the air interrupted, and its rugged loveliness broken forever, the Tempest had also spun down towards the ground.

Miraculously, the pilot, who had seemed to be not much older than Aiden, had managed to walk away from his crashed aeroplane and had seemed physically untouched by the incident. By the time Aiden had run to the scene, the pilot had been standing serenely in front of his broken machine, inevitably holding a cup of tea provided by a well-wishing local house-holder, seemingly oblivious to the destruction around him and exuding a remarkable inner stillness, as if he had been occupying a private celestial space. Aiden had felt as if a great tension had been released, as if he had witnessed a tremendous personal battle being won, and that all the pilot's energy had been spent in a most marvellous and noble endeavour.

"Collided!" Dennis exclaimed. "Whatever happened?"

The event had been something beyond the merely exciting, a sudden, essentially private, revelation; something red-animal. It had been about wilfully disregarding the tilt of the scale-beam and drawing upon some deeper knowledge hard-wired into the soul, and made umbilical by the experience of generations. The experience had left Aiden with a feeling of replete peacefulness and he now felt reticent about trying to describe what he had seen, and especially what he had felt, on that day, so with one careful eye on their driver he simply replied:

"Oh you know, bit of a mess really. The bomb made a tremendous crater and the Tempest went down, but the pilot got out alright."

Having left the station forecourt, they were now passing through an unattractive village which was strung out along the road as if it had no heart or soul. It consisted mostly of small brick-built houses whose gardens seemed full of bicycles, bits of grey disintegrating wood, rusting garden implements and rubbishy sheds. The whole village seemed closed-up, silenced by the cold and invading damp.

"Is that why you joined up?" Aiden then asked, "Something about the war?"

"I suppose so. I wanted to pay them back!" There was something boyishly excitable about Dennis, with his matter-of-fact excitableness. "You see, we were very nearly bombed out."

Fearing that the conversation had already strayed too much into the personal, Aiden cast about for a safe change of subject.

The village left behind, they travelled slowly through a dreary, monotonous landscape of dull fields which they glimpsed momentarily through gates set into the thick hawthorn hedges that defined the field boundaries as far as they could see, a seemingly endless expanse of stalks of brussels sprouts and root vegetables. The unrelenting flatness of the landscape was broken only by an occasional bleak, fingery tree that dripped persistently from the heavy, wet air.

Then presently they arrived at a junction and they forgot all about trying to make tempered conversation for the aircraftman's benefit.

Glimpsed through a barbed-wire-topped chain link fence, the agricultural land suddenly gave way ahead of them to a grey-green sweep of grass, as capacious as a beach, and a bright, wide expanse of concrete that ran away into the distance. It was as if a malignant sadness had been chased away by trumpets and sunshine. After the dank claustrophobic lanes the wideness and evenness of the scene seemed clean, purposeful and on the cusp of familiarity.

Turning to the right, the lorry followed the lane, which shadowed the perimeter of the airfield, for about a mile before gaining the airfield buildings. Here Aiden's apprehensions were further appeared for the aircraftman brought the lorry to a halt in front of a brick-built administrative building and announced indifferently, "The Duty Officer said you were to report to him first. This way please, sirs." and deftly handed them into the vestibule of the building thereby saving them from the necessity of having to ask where they should go.