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THE FINEST OF FANTASY FICTION

Walter M. Miller, Jr.

William P. McGivern

Robert Sheckley

Ralph Robin

MOTHER BY PROTEST

By Richard Matheson

A Science-Fiction Thriller

35¢

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A PORTFOLIO by Gustav Rehberger

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Cover: Leo Summers

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Illustrator: B. Krigstein

WOLF PACK

By WALTER M. MILLER, JR.



Maybe you've always thought of war as a business for the tough and the unimaginative. It has been said that the best soldier leaves his emotions at home; that pre-battle training is a period calculated to harden both mind and body. But what of the boy who cannot harden? What of the lad who cannot put his sensitivity in a suitcase and store it for the duration? Walter Miller tells us.

HE GASPED and sat up, spilling blankets from sleep-hot shoulders. He shivered a moment in darkness, shaking his head in his hands. Bixby snored faintly on the other cot. Engines were coughing to life on the flight-line as the ground crews pre-flighted the waiting ships. The breath of morning came icy through the

tent-flaps to shock him into full wakefulness.

He glanced at the luminous flare of his watch dial. It was nearly killing time.

He swung his legs out of bed, felt the gritty earth under his bare feet, groped under the cot for fleece-lined boots. He lit a cigaret, then a candle, stared at Bixby for

a moment. Bixby's mouth was working and a sliver of drool lay over his chin.

Mark Kessel hauled his lanky frame to its feet, and stepped over to Bixby's bunk. He lifted one end of the cot two feet from the floor and dropped it hard. Then he went outside to finish dressing in the olive grove while Bixby spluttered and fought the bed clothes.

Dew was in the olive trees, and it glistened faintly in the dim light from other tents in the grove where men grumbled before the dawn and crawled into coveralls and flight jackets, stuffed candy bars and bail-out kits in their knee-pockets, buckled low-slung forty-fives about their waists, tucked a scented letter inside their shirts, and stalked away with a lazy slouch to fly and kill in the dawn.

"I've got a feeling," came Bixby's muffled voice from the tent.

"Yeah?" Mark grunted, not wanting to talk. He dumped frigid water from a jerry-can into a steel helmet and began sloshing his face and head.

"This one'll be a bitch," said Bixby.

"Maybe."

"This your forty-sixth, Mark, or seventh?"

Mark Kessel glowered for a moment into darkness. "Dry up, will you Bix? I don't feel like gab."

"Hung over?"

"Uh-uh."

"Dreams again, huh? About the dame."

"Just dry up."

"Okay, Skipper. Sorry."

A stupid mistake, he decided, telling Bix about the dreams and about La. A drunkenly stupid mistake. Bix made noises like a green flight surgeon with delusions of psychiatry, and, having memorized the symptoms of flight fatigue, was always ready to gig a fellow fly-boy with a diagnosis, prognosis, or post mortem. And he couldn't understand about La.

An orderly room corporal came prowling through the grove, splashing a flashlight's beam among the trees and bellowing. "All bombardier-navigators, report immediately to briefing. All bombigators, early briefing."

A tent flap parted, revealing a slit of light with a head in it. "Hey, Corp!" It called. "What's the target?"

"Not sure, Lieutenant. Heard it's Perugia."

Listening, Mark Kessel froze, his face dripping into a towel.

"Hell, we just hit Prujie last week," growled the head.

"Zat so?" answered the corporal indifferently. "All bombigators, report immediately to briefing! All bombigators . . ." The corporal wandered on.

Mark stood rocking slightly, towel halfway to his face, remem-

bering Perugia. He heard Bix coming outside, and began drying himself.

"He say Perugia?" Bix grunted.

"Yeah."

"Told you this one'll be a bitch."

"Yeah."

"Well, Pappy, he was yelling at me. See you later."

"Yeah. Take it easy."

Bix shuffled away toward the orderly room, unzipped boots making cocky flapping sounds about his ankles. Mark sighed and went back into the tent to stretch out on his cot and think. A preliminary bombardier's briefing meant that he had a half hour or so before pilots and enlisted crews were called. The group had done a lousy job on Perugia last week, and the colonel probably meant to rumble about it to the men who manned the bomb sights. It was decreed that the city should die.

Mark lay blowing slow smoke at the candle-flame and wondered what the hell had happened to him in eight months of war. Once he was sick when he saw the long hungry strip of bomb-bursts trace a belt of billowing death across a small Italian village. Once he howled in the cockpit when a flitting Focke-Wulf slashed in-and-down from five o'clock high, leaving the plexiglass turret of his wing-ship coated crimson from inside. The turret was partially shattered, and the slipstream dried

the crimson to ugly brown and flaked it away before wheels touched home ground.

Now he felt nothing. I am a machine, he thought. Or a part of a machine. A machine with five human parts geared in with the aluminum, glass, and steel. They screw us into our places and we function like pistons, or cogs, or vacuum tubes. We, who were five, become one, and that beats hell out of the Trinity.

Listen, Kessel, he told himself, you're getting to be a sad sack of cemented *merde*. You got four missions to go and they send you home. Why bitch about it now?

But he closed his eyes and watched a mental bomb-pattern trace a mental stripe of hell across a small mental village, and it all looked quietly familiar and unfrightening to him. He dived down through billowing dust to peer at crushed things lying in the rubble, and still he felt nothing.

Mark Kessel stubbed out his cigaret in the dirt floor of the tent and asked himself almost indifferently what had happened to his soul? Or whatever it was.

He stared at the candlelight flickering on the canvas canopy above him and struggled to feel something besides emptiness.

He thought of La. She brought a faint tickling to his scalp and a pleasant pulsing of the temples. For a long time he lay basking in

the warmth of La. She was sleeping. She lay curled in a featherbed, dark hair tangled across an oversized pillow, lips parted, an arm under her head. He scented the faint musky warmth about her, watched her lazy breathing, noted the paleness of a shaven armpit. She stirred in her sleep and smiled faintly. She was dreaming of him. He slipped quietly into her dream, and they wandered along a sunny lake shore, watching the ducks skimming low over water that scintillated in the breeze.

"Will they read the banns tomorrow?" she whispered.

"Tomorrow at every Mass."

Mark shook his head and sat up. There was paper in his valpack at the end of the cot. He dragged it out and lay on his side to write with the stationery box on the edge of the cot. He usually wrote her a letter before a mission, if there were time enough.

He told her about his crew, and about Lecce and San Pancrazio and the way the old Italian women came to catch lizards and snails in the vineyard and cooked them over charcoal fires along rubbled streets in the village. He told her about the olive grove and the vineyards and the donkey carts painted in carnival colors, and about how he had tasted a donkey steak in a San Pancrazio cafe. He told her about the little girl with the festering shrapnel wound, and

the bullet-pocked walls of once-fascist buildings whose megalomaniac inscriptions in praise of *Italia* and *Giovannezza* had been daubed over with red paint and obscenity. And . . .

Listen, Babe, this one's got me down. I haven't talked about such stuff before, but this time's different. I'm scared as hell. This mission gives me the shakes. Maybe it's only because I'm nearly finished with my tour. Maybe it's because I'm about ready to go back. But it's more like being scared for you, baby, not for myself. I felt like this the last time we hit this target.

The words surprised him. He had felt no conscious fear, but as words poured forth, he knew that fear was there.

I love you, La.

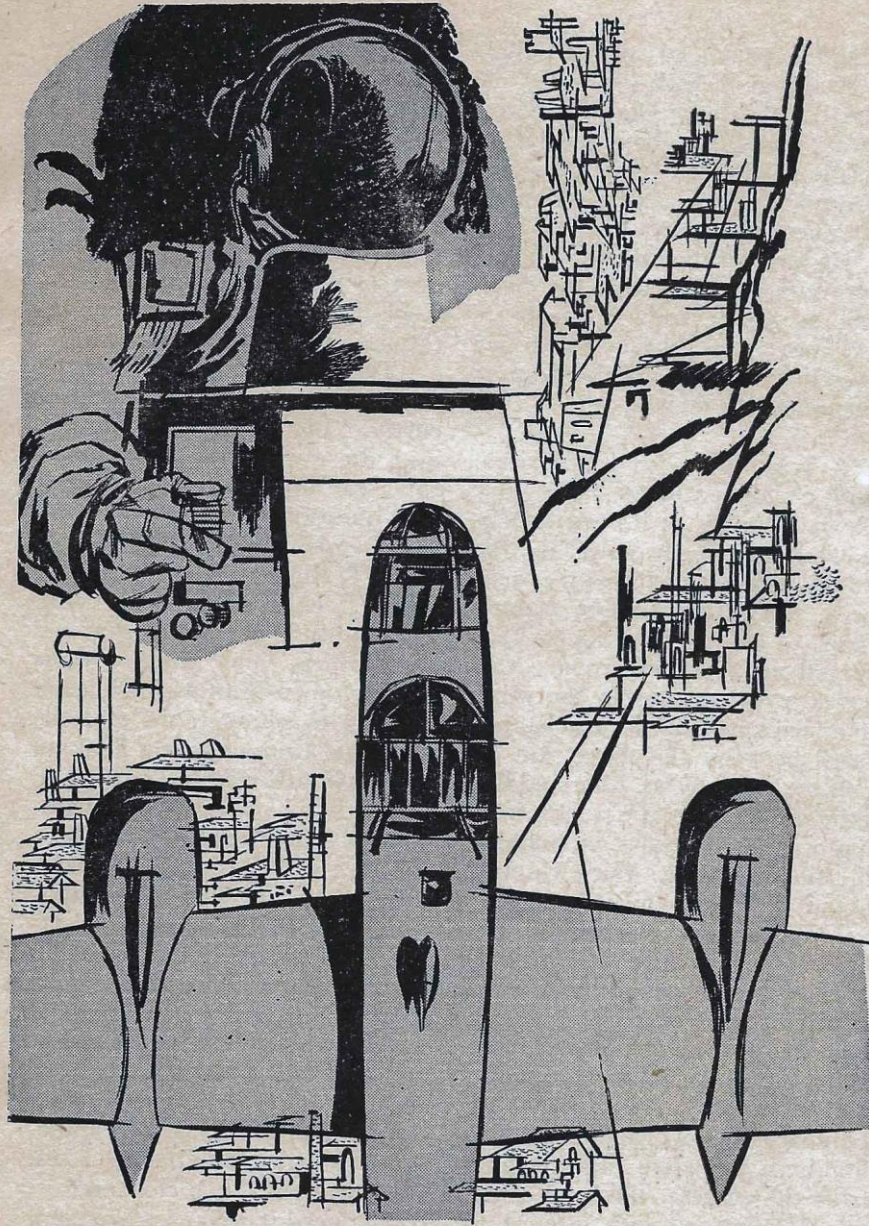
He stared at the letter for a time, then held it toward the candle-flame, watched soot collect on its underside, watched a charred spot appear, crack, and catch fire.

The last ashes were fluttering to the floor when the tent-flaps slapped apart and a bulldog face thrust itself inside.

"Whatthehell, Kessel, you think we oughta hold the goddam war up for you? Get your lazy butt out to the truck!"

"Sorry, Major. I didn't hear the call."

Major Gladin's hammy face put on a fanged smirk. "Well you got my personal invitation now, Lieutenant. Shall I send a staff car for



you, Lieutenant, or can you walk."

Kessel reddened and rolled off the bunk. Major Gladin stalked away, mumbling about the "fifty-mission heebies" and temperamental goddam airplane jockeys who needed wet nurses.

He scraped the ashes of the letter into the dirt with his foot. Maybe you'll know I wrote it anyhow, Babe. Maybe you'll get it somehow, even if I don't know just where to mail it.

A brisk dawn wind had risen, and clouds gathered in a gory dawn. A pair of Limey trucks hauled the flight-crews of the 489th Squadron from the tent area along the winding bumpy road to the old barracks that served as a briefing room. Narrowed eyes watered in the wind, and men sandwiched their chapped faces between the fleece-skin lapels of their jackets. Men huddled behind the cabs of the trucks, trading occasional insults, or smoking in silence while hair whipped about their eyes and foreheads.

Mark Kessel listened to the briefing officer with half an ear. Much was routine, and much was of interest chiefly to the squadron leaders and lead-bombardiers. Wing-men hugged the formation and followed the lead ship. Wing bombardiers toggled off the five hundred pounders upon signal from the goose at the head of the vee. He listened with interest to

weather data, flak and fighter reports, and information on the target.

Perugia was a bulge in an artery that fed the *Wehrmacht* fist. They wanted the arteries burst and bled. They wanted a tourniquet around Italy, a tourniquet to numb the South and enfeeble it. They wanted an amputation.

"The marshalling yards are the principal target," the colonel called curtly, "but stretch the pattern over the town. Give Jerry something to do, shovelling rubble. Any questions?"

You take five hundred pounds of TNT, thought Kessel, and you dump it on a plain stone house with gypsum floors and charcoal footwarmers and coral virgins looking down from wall niches, a house with photographs of Babe Ruth and Primo Carnera flanking an eighteenth century crucifix, a house that had seen ten generations of human birth and growth and love and death, a house with antipasto furnishings and oil-and-vinegar atmosphere and girl-at-the-piano warmth about the living room. A house rich with the odor of blood-red wine and moon-pale cheese, with the savor of garlic and anisette, with the aroma of healthy perspiring women, and on Holy Days, the smell of candle-flames, mingled with baking cakes. You bombed it, you clobbered it, you reduced it, you shattered and

wrecked and crumbled it into a rubble-heap where a bit of cloth caught between the stones fluttered in a dusty breeze. You took the house and kicked it apart into the street so that Jerry would have to spend his time and his bulldozers clearing it out of the way. You never see the house, or the dozens of others like it. You only know it's there somewhere in the ugly belt of dust and belching hell ten thousand feet beneath you, but not seeing it, you feel only a puzzled concern.

There were no questions.

Men in fleece-skins and parachute harnesses slouched out of the briefing room and milled toward the squadron trucks. There was no laughter. Quietly, around the corner of the building, a gunner knelt for a chaplain's blessing, and quickly strode away. Trucks grumbled away, nosed onto a taxi-strip, headed for the aircraft dispersal area.

Mark Kessel stared at the eagles crouched in the olive grove and thought about La. The eagles' wing racks were loaded with bombs and their bellies were full of thunder. La was combing her hair and smiling softly at her thoughts. She was thinking of a dream. She crossed her legs, and the satin robe fell from her thighs as she sat before the vanity. Brown and slender, and a muscle twitched as she absently swung a

foot and laughed softly to herself.

He caught her shoulders gently, and she came up to him with a low purr of pleasure. Her bosom snuggled close and her shoulders hunched forward against him.

"*O Marco! Che bello questo momento!*" she murmured.

Mark chuckled at his own inventions. He had not seen an English-speaking woman in so long that even the image of La spoke Italian.

The dun-colored eagles looked hungry on their concrete emplacements. There is something anxious and eager in the three-legged stance of a B-25, with its blunt and squarish features and the gull-like set of its wings. They're more alive than most aircraft, he thought, and full of a childlike enthusiasm. They performed their tasks with innocence.

There were certain advantages to being a machine, he thought. Certain comforts in mindlessness and guiltlessness. The light of dawn was red on their wings and flaring on their plexiglass blisters.

"Hell, Kessel!" barked a voice. "Wake up! Shake it, will ya?"

He came out of a daze, glanced around, saw the rest of his crew already out of the parked truck and walking toward the ship. Bixby grinned back at him over his shoulder.

"Come on Pappy! We need a driver."

He growled something sour at the men remaining in the truck, vaulted over the tail-gate, and sauntered after his crew. The truck lumbered on, delivering parcels of men at each parking station. He checked over the crew chief's report, signed the slip, listened to the crew chief's usual straight faced remark:

"Perugia, huh? Milk-run again, eh, Pappy?"

"Sure. Care to come along for the ride?"

"Guess not. Think I'll go to town for a little excitement."

"Take off."

They parted still wearing straight faces.

The turret gunner and the radio op were already crawling into the rear hatch. Mark turned for a moment to glance over the ship with its "Prince Albert" sign on the nose. It had acquired its name when a North African ground crew had used a tobacco can to patch a bullet hole in the fuselage. The ship was scarred and decrepit, but he knew every inch of it, and he suspected that it would fall to pieces in other hands than the knowing ones of its present ground and flight crews. He loved the old rattling wreck. Almost the way he loved La.

"Damn it to hell, Pappy!" called Surges, his copilot. "Do we fly today, or don't we?"

"Keep your war-drawers on, Junior Birdman. Pappy's comin'."

He hiked toward the forward hatch, and moments later inverters whined in the cockpit. Engines coughed to life.

"Interphone check. Bixby?"

"Loud and clear, Pappy," answered the voice in his headsets.

"Radio?"

"Burnes, loud and clear."

"Turret?"

"Sparley, ditto, Pappy."

"Tail?"

"Winters, okay, sir."

"The class is now in session. Be seated, gentlemen."

Preliminary patter brought a sense of oneness somehow, like a man prodding himself to make sure he was still in one piece. Mark lost his black mood as he taxied the Prince from the revetment and into line on the strip. There was thunder of engines in the morning, and the trees whipped in the prop-wash at every turning. The eagles lumbered single-file to the end of the runway. The eagles took off in pairs, wheels folding gracefully, almost daintily, as they roared aloft and circled for assembly in the sky. Twenty-seven ships gleamed golden in the early sun. A flying wolf pack that rallied by twos and formed in flights of three, three flights in echelon, three squadrons in a staggered vee.

The wolf pack turned east toward the open sea, and the Adriatic fluttered with blinding gold

in the direction of a blazing sun.

Mark Kessel felt Surges watching him occasionally, gave him a questioning glance. Surges was a dark little man with a sour smirk and a quick nervousness that made Mark wonder sometimes why they'd packed him in a twenty-five instead of a Mustang or a Thunderbolt.

"Feeling better, Pappy?" Surges asked over the interphone.

"Better than what?" grunted the pilot.

"Don't hand me that horse-manure, Skipper. I can read you like a tech order."

"Then read and shut up. There's a war on, you know."

"And if I may echo the immortal words of Sherman, war is a crock of crap."

The formation thundered northwestward along the broad blue tongue of the Adriatic. Kessel's crew fell silent, each of them aware of the other's presence and functions, each filling his place in the total Mechanthrope. War, thought Mark, was paradoxical proof that men by nature are co-operative social beings, functioning best as teams. Unfortunately, teams were not necessarily co-operative with other teams.

Hearken to the wisdom of a washed out flak dodger, he mused sourly. Once, when he was a sophomore math and philosophy student, he could tolerate his own solemn intellectualizings. Now,

when they happened accidentally, he felt the need to boil himself in sarcasm and forget it. Nothing seemed sillier than searching for subtle meanings when the only meaning left in life was how to stay alive. He needed no rationalizations about his reasons for being where he was and what he was. Idealism was for the crumbs who never got there. He liked to fly, and he liked to play the game, and if the rules were dirty, then it would be more embarrassing to refuse to fight than it was to play the rotten game. People were proud of him for playing it, and he was glad they were proud, for no reason other than that it felt good.

He grinned acidly at Surges. "Hey, Surgie. I just realized that we are the 'Mothers'-Sons-Who-Fought-and-Bled' that they talk about on the Fourth."

"Jeez, whattay know!" Surges mused for a moment. "Say, you thinking about doing another tour?"

Mark spat an obscenity.

"I know," said Surges. "You're feeling guilty about not bleeding."

"True, possibly true."

"A small scar would probably help."

"Help what?"

"Life, liberty, and the pursuit of women. You could always show her your scar as a way of breaking the ice."

"Not necessary. No ice . . ."

Around La, he finished under his breath, and fell silent again. Gloomily silent. Maybe I'm really getting psycho, he considered, realizing how much he believed in La. How could he explain about La to somebody like Bixby or Surges? *There was this dame, see, and her name was Ruth, and she came from Seattle, and she was blonde, pale-eyed, and creamy, see? And she's waiting for me, but it's no damn good any more, because I can't see her. I see only La, and La is a ghost, a figment, a myth made by a haunted spirit.*

She had grown like a strange moth in the chrysalis of his mind, born of a slow metamorphosis that began with a memory image of Ruth. The metamorphosis had changed a pleasant, comfortable, homey sort of a girl into a sleek, intense, moody creature of tender passion, whom he called "La" or "La Femme" because he knew she was no longer Ruth. But who was this wraith who came to him across the frozen tundra of his psyche?

Don't kid yourself, fly-boy, it's happened to other guys. Idealization, they call it. You revise Ruth because you're not quite satisfied with the way she is. You substitute the thing you want for the thing that's true, and if you didn't have a pocketful of pictures for reference, you'd think your La

was Ruth, you stupid ape. Guys have thought it before, and it's a helluva shock, they say, to bump buck teeth with the girl you remembered as a delectable siren instead of a toothy frump. La is an idealized Ruth, and a part of you damn well knows it.

But he couldn't sell himself. It hurt. There was a La somewhere, and he had to believe in her. He groped for ways to support the belief: telepathy — or a chance meeting that lingered in unconscious memory without details of time and place. She came to him in dreams with such clarity that he was frequently certain that somewhere he had seen her. Perhaps one of those brief meetings at some moronic party where two people meet and chat and sense some strong attraction between them, but never manage to get beyond the usual polite inanities because of surging friends with cocktail glasses and the restrained sub-note of hysteria that pervades a roomful of yammering humanity which is having a lousy time but pretending to enjoy itself. So maybe he met La that way, and she haunted him.

She was a physical touch in the night, a whispered voice in lonely moments. He knew her moods, her weaknesses, her strengths. They fitted his own, and the two halves dovetailed into one flesh, one spirit. There was a lock, and a key to fit it — a sword, and a

sheath to match. There were two clocks, running back to back, keeping the same time by heart-beat pendulums. But she was lonesome and frightened, and he knew not why.

The fighters came sidling in out of the hot blue sky, friendly killers that met the wolf pack off the coast near Bari to escort it northward for the strike. A Lockheed Lightning slipped in close to Kessel's flight, throttled back, waggled its wings. Kessel exchanged a thumbs-up with the fighter jockey, then watched the haughty killer flip away and climb to fly far out at nine-o'clock-high, guarding the pack against steel-beaked falcons of the Luftwaffe.

The sun poured into the cockpit and warmed it. The sun washed the coastline far off to the left below. The sun baked the dun-colored ships and made the formation a thing of beauty against the Mediterranean blue. Sky and sea were full of turquoise peace that made the waiting violence seem unreal, a battle-game played under the auspices of a jovial Wotan who saw that killing was not for keeps.

Kessel gave the controls to Surges while he lit a cigaret and settled back to relax for awhile. He stared down at the lace-fringed sea where triremes had sailed and Caesar's ships had sped toward other wars. It was the

same. Add wings and replace the slaves with 1750 horsepower radial engines, and the catapults with demolition bombs. It was always the same. It was destructive, but because it was patterned and planned, because it was systematized and rhythmic, because it was dynamic and flowing toward a goal, it was somehow creative through its functioning. Through crucifixion came redemption; through war, new pattern and synthesis.

"*Pilot to crew,*" he called over the interphone. "*We're coming onto posted property. Better test your guns.*"

La would not like what he was feeling now, he thought. She hated the whole bloody mess, and would be unable to understand his own mixed feelings and ambivalences. Look through my eyes, my La. See what I am seeing and feel my feelings while I am a part of this Mechantrope. For here we fail to fit, and though here be difference between us, so must there be understanding. Look with my eyes! See the sleek wolf pack running across cold sky, feel the icy air that leaks in around my feet, and the warm sun on the slippery leather of my jacket. Look north to the clear horizon where death will soon meet death and a city shall be consumed. Know that we in the pack must move and live as brothers, even though we must kill our brothers down below, whom

we will never see — never know.

Do you feel me, La? For I know that you are sitting on a stone bench beneath a trellis with a book in your lap, gazing dreamily out toward the lake where we walk in the breeze by night. A small child plays at your feet, and he is your cousin.

But it was no good. He could never seem to drag her to him while he flew. It was as if she resisted knowing what he was and what he did.

The ship's guns burped above the thunder of the engines as Burnes, Bixby, Sparley, and Winters each rattled off a few rounds from the fifty calibre guns in their respective positions. Mark nosed the ship down slightly and squeezed the firing stud for the fixed nose-guns. A belch shuddered up through the cockpit, and a momentary haze flickered up across the plexiglass, and four streaks of tracers squirted out ahead to vanish toward the ocean. Other ships were doing the same. A flexing of the muscles before the brawl.

If only the target were not Perugia! Perhaps it was the length of the mission and the time over enemy territory that made him uneasy, but Sofia and Ploeste were even farther and they gave him no such discomfort. He had a quick knotting of his belly with the bombing of Perugia, and there was no logic in it. Maybe it was

something about the countryside that stirred some old memory of home, but it was as if the reprov- ing eyes of monks and urchins and old women were upon him, as if hatred were a palpable thing, radiating up from the land below. As if the Christ that was suffused in the flesh of Italian masses called softly in rebuke to the wolf pack.

O my people, what have I done to thee?

In what have I grieved thee?

Answer me,

*For I gave thee a royal sceptre,
And thou hast given to me a scourge.*

"Hey, Pappy, this is Bix," croaked his headsets.

"Yeah?"

"Look at the coastline — up about eleven o'clock low. See those specks?"

Mark leaned close to the win- dow and stared down for a few seconds. Three gnats were flitting out across the water, close to the drink. "Fighters," he answered absently.

"Maybe our own, boss."

"Maybe. . . . Pilot to crew, you get that?"

They answered in turn that they got it.

"Burnes, you keep your eyes on them. The rest of you keep look- ing around."

He switched his jackbox to command radio and called the escort craft. "Hello Jackknife,

this is Eggbeater. Sharks at curfew time below. Over."

"Roger, Eggbeater. Out," came the reply.

But the fighters remained close to the formation, except for two that broke away and began climbing instead of diving. Mark watched them for a moment, then called the crew again.

"Everybody but Burnes — keep an eye out above. Those may be decoys down below. Don't get caught with your pants down if a bunch of pigeons come out of the sun."

"Say, Pappy," Burnes called five minutes later. "I think those are P-47s. They're heading on south."

"Roger, but watch it. Jerry knows we're coming."

The wolf pack came to Fermo and turned inland, feinting toward Terni. Over the coast, hell broke. The first black blossom of flak opened suddenly inside the formation, blotting Mark's view of the 487th Squadron for an instant, then dropping behind. The wolf pack spread quickly apart, the ships weaving and swaying evasively while they kept the general shape of the formation. The inky flak-bursts followed the pack, and Mark felt an occasional *thud* shiver the ship from a close burst. The death-blossoms trailed behind as they drove inland, and a few miles from the coast the blossoms were gone.

Ahead lay the snow-blanketed slopes of the Apennines with villages like eagles' nests on their sides. Mark stared down at the land. "Enemy," he told himself. If you had to bail out, these hillbillies would gut you and flay you and hang you by the heels in the market place. But you couldn't hate them for that. You could only figure that maybe you deserved it.

Cut the horse manure, fly-boy. This is business, and it's during office hours. That's the turning point up there, and there's hell beyond the mountains.

"BANDITS AT SEVEN O'CLOCK HIGH!" howled a sudden voice in the intercomm.

And an instant later, Sparley loosed a three second burst from the upper turret. Burnes got a burst from the waist, and then Mark saw the Focke-Wulf zipping down and turning sharply into a dive at about eight hundred yards, while two P-38s stabbed toward it. Another Focke-Wulf crossed like a flash in a pursuit curve aimed at the squadron just ahead and above. Bixby slashed at it with the flexible nose-gun, as it cut back and under, out of sight.

The interphone was yammering as Mark's crew stabbed out at the flitting falcons. He saw a plume of smoke trailing earthward about two miles away, but the range was too great to recognize it as friend or foe. One ship in the lead flight had a slightly chewed up

tail, but no ships dropped out of the pack.

Flak began bursting around the ship when they were still five minutes from target, and six Messerschmitts whipped out of the sun, screaming in slashing arcs across the rear of the formation. One went down, but a twenty-five began trailing smoke, fell from formation, one wing blazing. White silk puffs flowered beneath it. It fell into the blazing wing and spun earthward. The black death-flowers rocked the ship with their blooming, and Mark Kessel's nostrils quivered at the scent of cordite as the Prince ploughed through the smoke-balls of a steady barrage. The wolf pack waved and dodged. The wolf pack tumbled across the sky in seeming consternation, but the pattern lingered as in a frightened flock of geese. Ahead lay the city, and beyond it the marshalling yards, the arterial bulge in the long flow to the south. It was wide and hard to miss. And beyond the marshalling yards — the broad blue waters of Lake Trasimeno.

The lake, it reminded him of La. His scalp crawled, and his hands were fists on the controls. Surges sat smiling sourly at the flak bursts, chin propped on one elbow, smoking a lazy cigaret. Mark glared at him and cursed under his breath. Voices were tense on the interphone.

"Bandit, four o'clock low —

no, it's a Spitfire. One of ours."

"Hey! Flak heavy at one o'clock low, Pappy."

"Get a burst on this Focke-Wulf, Burnes."

"Goddam it, bomb bays open! The stupid bastard, he'll make this a long one!"

"*Rake him! Rake hell out of him!*"

"Bomb bays open, Pappy."

"Straight and level."

"Lead man's bucking for a Purple Heart."

"Shut up and watch your business!"

"Blow it, Pappy."

"Damn! Surges! Take it!"

"What's wrong, Pappy?"

"Just take it and shut up!"

Surges gave him a look and grabbed the controls. The wolf pack had plunged from fifteen to nine-thousand feet, and whipped toward the target with the instruments hugging the red-line. The crack of a bull-whip snapped through the ship as a shard of shrapnel stung the fuselage.

"That one bite anybody?" Surges called.

"Nope, nope. Goddam, get it over with!"

Mark Kessel sat panting, fists clenched and pressed together. She was with him now, for the first time she was with him, and her meanings, if not her voice came to him like a savage song:

"*Che brutto!* . . . How hateful you are. I hate you hate you hate

you hate you! You goddam murderer, you killed my mother! You wrecked my church, and you shattered my city, and now you come again! They'll get you, they'll rake you and rip you and slash you to ribbons. You gutless apes! *Che brutto!*"

She stood under the trellis with her fists clenched, her hair in the wind, ignoring the black hell in the sky that rained spent shrapnel over the city. Her breasts were sharp and proud and heaving. Her face was flushed with fury. Nearby, a frightened child was wailing.

He saw her, and she was with him like a scourge, and she knew that it was he. He swallowed a sick place in his throat and grabbed for his throat mic switch.

"Bixby! Close the bomb bays!"

"What's that, Pappy."

"Close 'em, goddam you!"

"Pappy, you're out of your head."

Mark cursed and grabbed for the salvo lever. Surges knocked his arm aside and slapped him hard across the mouth.

"Pappy! Get the hell out of here. You're blowing your top!"

Mark doubled his fist and drove it hard against the copilot's cheekbone. The ship fell out of formation as Surges dropped both hands from the controls and shook his head dizzily. Mark swung again, but Surges caught it on his shoulder.

Suddenly the muzzle of a forty-five jammed his ribs, and Surges hissed, "Damn you, Pappy, I'll blow your guts halfway to Naples. Sit still, or I'll kill you. We've got six men aboard."

He swung again. Surges let the ship go, jammed a foot against Mark's side, pistol-whipped him until the pilot fell bleeding against the side of his seat.

La, La! his mind whimpered.

The only answer was a tempest of hatred that engulfed him.

La, I couldn't know!

But he *could* have known. He had flown this mission before. He knew about the lake, and it was the same lake. He knew about her language and her mannerisms. He knew down deep — who she was, and where she was, and what she was.

Then he heard Bixby howl "*Finally!*" as the lead ship began toggling its bombs. One . . . two . . . three . . . and the Prince lost weight in gulps of five hundred pounds. He felt them leave the ship, and he wanted to dive after them. Looking back, he saw that the radio op had crawled atop the bomb bays for a sneak look through the hatch at the plummeting projectiles. The man was grinning. "*Bombs away!*" and the formation banked sharply.

I'll beat Burnes till his face is pulp, he thought. But *La* called out, *It's you, it's you, Marco, you foul coward.*

I'm not after your city, La! It's Jerry we're trying to kill! I can't help it, none of us can help it! For God's sake, La. For God's sake!

Yes, Marco, for God's sake.

He kept staring back at the city, waiting for the hell to break. Twenty four seconds after bombs-away, it broke. Thunder walked across the city and over the marshalling yards. Hell plumed up from a festering wound of five and belching dust.

La — La with your wind tossed hair and slender moon-blessed face, with your grace and your love and your laughter. La — La, in your plain stone house with gypsum floors and charcoal foot-warmers and coral virgins that look down from wall niches, a house of human birth and growth and death. La — La — it was us. I'm sorry. If I'd known. . . . He choked off, feeling the grinding pain.

If you had known, came a feeble whisper, would all be spared for the sake of one?

* It stabbed him in a clenched belly, and it was mockery. He spat a shard of broken tooth from Surges' pistol-work, and he was sick. Because her question was demanded of a god.

No, Marco, only of men.

And the flak trailed away behind them, as did the last whisper of her consciousness.

He crawled out of the cockpit

and lay on the floor just forward of the bomb bays. He lay choking and panting and spitting blood. There was a black fog, full of fractured steel and bright red death that throbbed within it. There was fear, and the face of a woman. He was priest at a screaming ritual, and the dull blade bit a blue-fringed wound.

There was a rubble-heap where a bit of cloth was caught between broken stones, and a shattered wall where once had been a garden and a trellis. It was finished now, all finished.

"You can relax, Pappy, you're okay now."

"Man you're lucky, Pappy! They'll send you home right away. Hell, no need to finish those last four missions."

"Combat fatigue? Hell, Pappy, it could happen to anybody."

He was in the hospital. He sat up and looked around. There was Burnes, and Surges — hanging back — and Winters, and Bix, and Sparley. He shook his head and tried to remember.

La was gone. And her absence was sufficient proof that she had been there.

"It was a good strike, Pappy. We clobbered half the town."

He wanted to order them out. He got them out as quick as he could, but loneliness was no better. Why did it have to be La? And something answered: "Would you spare them all for the one?"