

## **“THE ARCHES”**

The forest was wonderful at this time of year. Everywhere, the leaves had begun to change colour, but it would still be a week or two before the autumn storms transformed the beaten paths between the trees into soggy mud pools. The first mushrooms of the season had popped up, while the chestnut trees started to shed their conkers, spiky shells and all.

Mark Haynes whistled at Thor, his enthusiastic Alsatian. The young dog had bolted off between the scrubs to chase a squirrel up a tree and, despite Mark’s efforts, wouldn’t be convinced it was a lost cause.

“Thor! Heel!”

Reluctantly the Alsatian abandoned its playful hunt and trotted back to its master, tongue hanging out of its muzzle. When it found Mark, it sat down on its haunches, the very image of obedience.

“After a treat to make up for that squirrel, are you?” Mark shook his head, a lopsided grin on his face as he pulled a dog biscuit from his pocket and tossed it up. Thor leapt and snatched the treat out of mid-air.

“If all else fails, I can always sell you to a circus, you crazy mongrel,” Mark said as he roughly petted the Alsatian. When he rose again, the deep colours of evening shining through the trees caught his attention.

“See that, boy? Time to go home.”

Twilight set in before they were halfway back to the car. Mark didn't mind. He knew the forest well enough to find his way around on a moonless night. There had been a time when he would do exactly that, but for a year or two now, his eyes were failing him. Only last week he had tripped over a root and twisted his ankle; not badly, but it had hurt.

Old age comes with infirmities, his mother used to say. He used to roll his eyes at her complaints, but now he was in his fifties himself, he could appreciate her words. Failing eyesight was just the beginning. With every passing day, he realised that his thirty years in the army had left more scars than he would like to admit. The physical ones he could deal with. The others, however...

With a deep sigh, he shook his head and hooked the leash to Thor's collar. “Come on, let's go find the car.”

The path back to their parking spot was as familiar as his own backyard: over the hill, along the forest pond, down the path with the four big chestnut trees, around the bend, past the old ruin...

Mark stopped there, as he did every night.

Between the trees to his right, some small distance from the path, stood the rusted frame of an old military hangar. ‘Ruin’ was too big a word for the remains. ‘Scrap’ came closer.

Once upon a time, the frame had been a so-called blister hangar, albeit a particularly small one. During

the last war, hangars such as these had been used to do maintenance on fighter aircraft. But now it looked lost, if anything. There was no trace left of the improvised airfield that had been here only decades ago. After the war, the airfield had been torn down and vegetation covered what remained, growing like mad until a handful of scrubs became a forest. Now only this one structure remained. Maybe it had been intended as a memorial, but most likely it was simply forgotten.

Mark stared at the rusty arches and ignored Thor pulling at the leash. In the twilight, the hangar looked less dilapidated than it did by day. A few times he had passed here after dark. On those occasions, he could have sworn that the wind carried the sounds of the past, if you listened well enough.

Nothing but an illusion of course, but it intrigued him nevertheless.

The ruined hangar had the same magical attraction as a toy on a child. How he had loved aircraft when he was a boy! He would stare for hours at his father's old photos of bi-planes in a dogfight. Becoming a pilot himself hadn't worked out, but after he had joined the army, he and his unit had often been flown to a combat area in military aircraft, so he had gotten a fair idea of what went on in an aircraft hangar. Modern hangars were a lot bigger, of course, but the smells of metal, grease and kerosene had never changed. Even now he detected that peculiar mix of odours.

Down by his leg, Thor lifted his nose and sniffed the air.

“You smell that, too?”

Mark concentrated on the earthy scents of the forest, but the sharp tang of kerosene didn't fade. Strange. He looked around, but there was no one. No hikers, no cars, nothing. Yet the smell of fuel got stronger.

Thor put his nose down and followed it. First Mark thought the dog had picked up the trail of a mouse or another small animal, but then he noticed that the Alsatian held his nose above the fallen leaves. Above, not between. He hadn't trained with Thor beyond the basic puppy training, but to make the dog follow whatever it had detected was easy enough. A bit more leeway on the leash, and natural canine curiosity did the rest.

By now the sun had set completely and he could no longer see the ground. Taking care where he put his feet, Mark followed his dog as it dove into the bushes and towards the derelict hangar. Initially Thor headed straight for the ruins, but before he got that far, the scents of dead vegetation, mushrooms, wet earth and small mammals got so overwhelming that the young dog forgot everything else.

Mark smirked as the Alsatian buried its nose all the way in a pile of leaves. Thor might have lost interest in the strange smell, but *he* hadn't. The sting of fuel fumes made his own nostrils tingle. He glanced at Thor again, but the dog appeared oblivious to the

peculiar stink.

Was he imagining things? Or was there really something inside the overgrown ruin? The old frame was little more than a few rusted arches, but it still made a perfect hiding place for anything that didn't stand the light of day.

He decided to circle the building. It wasn't the first time he toyed with that idea, but for some reason he had never actually done so. He couldn't see much by the remaining light of dusk, but since he was here already, he might as well satisfy his own curiosity.

Out of habit he counted the number of paces it took to pass the full length of the hangar. Twenty paces. Some twenty yards then. He raised a brow. It hadn't looked that big from the forest path.

The hangar was about twelve yards wide. The frame arched beautifully from one end to the other, as the frame of a blister hangar should. The better part of the corrugated steel plating that used to pass for a roof back in those days had long since corroded away, and the plain brick wall that had once sealed one end of hangar had crumbled completely. Only the plating around the far end, where the aircraft used to enter, looked remotely the way it once had.

"Strange," he said to Thor, who had abandoned the leaves and was now stalking around the remnants of the hangar. "These things were never intended for durability. You wouldn't expect there to be anything left at all after so long."

Mark stepped under the first arch, onto what had once been the hangar floor: broken concrete slabs with grass, weeds and young trees growing between the cracks. Otherwise the ruin was empty. He took a deep breath. The scent of kerosene was gone, but he did smell something else. Almost like... cigarette smoke?

Quickly he turned to look around, but saw no glow or shimmer that might indicate fire. He sniffed again. It was still there; the smell of full-strength tobacco, such as his army comrades used to smoke.

Slowly he began to recognise more and different odours, like sweet alcohol, whiskey and beer. And the stale but familiar stench of too many people in a crowded room filled with the blue smoke of cigarettes.

Mark smiled. The smells reminded him of the evenings he had spent in the pub with his comrades, drinking to the future they were certain they had. Drinking to each other, and to the death of the enemy. Those were good memories of the many years he had served his country. Training together, eating together, bunking together. They had shared everything: the solidarity only found among brothers-in-arms. No wonder his wife had left him, accusing him of having given his heart to his comrades first.

In the darkness, lights went on inside his mind. Memories rose unbidden, bearing images from a time long ago, when life was simple and dreams pleasant.

The hangar, too, seemed to relish its past. Without understanding how or why, Mark saw what it had

looked like during the war. The floor beneath his feet was undamaged, stained with oil and spilled grease. The arches above were clean, the corrugated plating intact. In front of him stood a fighter plane with a single propeller and a canvas skin. The little voice in the back of his head said she was old, but she looked so new that he could scarcely believe she had ever seen combat.

Around the aircraft he could make out shadows that might be people. They were tending to the motor, fixing a tear in the canvas or repairing the machine guns. He heard the indistinct chatter of voices, and a lady's voice singing over a radio with bad reception. In the distance he heard several engines. Other aircraft, he knew without needing to see them.

Involuntarily he made another step forward. The aircraft and the noises faded away until all he could hear was the radio. Behind him, Thor whined.

"Stay!" he told the dog. "I'll be right back. Right... back..."

The sultry voice of the lady singer changed to another song, upbeat and familiar. The various lamps were dimmed. The floor was no longer made of concrete, but lined with cheap linoleum, worn through in places. Left and right of him were small tables with simple wooden chairs, each of them occupied by men drinking, smoking and playing cards. At the far end of the crowded room, several soldiers in uniform lounged at the bar.

Mark stood speechless. He recognised this place, but that was impossible! His favourite watering hole had burned to the ground ten years ago. Kitchen fire, the newspapers had said. How could this be?

One of the soldiers at the bar looked in his direction and waved.

“Yo, Haynes! Get your arse over here!”

Despite the hubbub in the pub, the soldier’s voice was loud and clear. Without a second thought, Mark went over to the bar, already searching his pockets for cigarettes and a lighter out of sheer habit. When he pulled them out, he realised he was in uniform, too. For a moment that seemed misplaced, but in the next instance that feeling was gone.

At the bar, three soldiers moved over to make some space for him.

“You want something?” asked the one who had greeted him.

Mark stared at him in disbelief. “Tim Fairbanks?”

His comrades began to laugh and Tim slapped his shoulder. “He doesn't know me anymore!” he shouted merrily. “That's it, Haynes, no more drinks for you. Sounds like you have had plenty already!”

But Mark didn't get the joke. “Weren't you...?” He meant to say ‘dead’, but in the light of the situation, that had to be wrong. “Didn't something... happen to you?”

Tim shrugged and grinned. “Ah, things happen all the time. We all run into a bullet at one time or

another,” he chuckled and emptied his glass in one go.

Yes, of course. Mark reckoned he had confused his friend with someone else on their brigade. He ran a hand over his face to lose the thought.

The barkeeper, a big guy with tiny pig eyes and a barrel-sized belly, winked at him and served him a pint of beer. Mark nodded and, almost as an afterthought, realised that the barkeeper had died in a fire. Wait, what fire? ‘The Four Roses’ was still here, wasn't it? Of course it was. How else could he be leaning on Fat Joe's counter?

Ronald Johnson raised his half empty glass. “To us!” he shouted.

Everyone joined in on the toast. Their glasses collided with such force that Dicky Mortimer's shattered in his hand. The young man cursed a mile a minute when one of the shards cut into a finger, and he cursed louder still as beer seeped into the cut.

Mark laughed so hard he could barely keep breathing. Through his laughter he watched the Benjamin of their unit clumsily wrap his handkerchief around his own hand for a bandage. A big, red stain shone through the thin linen even before he could tie it up. Tim hiccupped with laughter and helped the boy, while a voice in the back of Mark's head remarked how Dicky had bled even more after getting a grenade shrapnel in his thigh.

*Remember? Remember all that blood on your*

*hands? His blood? You tried to put pressure on the wound, but it didn't help one bit. Afterwards the medic had said there was nothing you could have done for him. Remember that? But you know better, don't you, Mark? He was just a kid. And your responsibility.*

A swig of beer went down the wrong way and he coughed violently.

“Careful!” said Ronald. “Don't go choking on it! Waste of damn good beer, that is!” The soldier grinned, his mouth growing too wide for his face.

Mark blinked twice. No, Ronald's mouth was completely normal. But he was certain it had...

*From one ear to the other. Fortunately the top half of his head was still recognisable, because the rest of his body wasn't much to look at anymore. Landmine, wasn't it?*

Mark coughed again to the point of retching.

“Jeez, man, what's up with you?” Ronald said around the rim of his glass.

“Nothing,” Mark muttered. “It's nothing.” He finished his drink and gestured at Fat Joe for a refill.

The fat barkeeper took the glass and filled it until it overflowed. In the meantime Mark gazed at him, and Fat Joe gazed back. For a fraction of a second, the man seemed to have no eyes at all.

Mark started and fell over, barstool and all. Tim grabbed him by his arm and held him up before he hit the ground.

“You've been off your rockers, haven't you, Haynes? Couldn't stand waiting for us?”

*Tim hadn't. If he had waited, he wouldn't have walked into the empty village square. If he had waited, you might have spotted that sniper in time. Then he would have been alive today. Then he wouldn't have died in your arms, bleeding like a pig at the slaughter. You could have brought him home safely, like you promised his mother you would.*

“No! That—that wasn't my fault!”

Ronald gave him a flat look and then looked at the others. “What's he on about?”

Tim grinned. “He thinks it isn't his fault. Funny, that.”

Now Ronald and Dicky began to chuckle, too, but without a trace of mirth.

Mark wrenched himself out of Tim's grasp and staggered away. His chest hurt, too constricted to breathe, but his memories crystal clear. His friends, good men, all of them... They had each died a gruesome death before his eyes, and he had done nothing to save them. Nothing! He told himself time and again that there was nothing he *could* have done, but that made no difference. Those images haunted him every single day. And every single night...

A heavy silence fell over the pub. From the corner of his eye, Mark saw that all chairs and tables were empty. Only his friends still stood by the bar, looking at him. Even Fat Joe had gone.

“You can’t—You can’t be here!” he yelled. “You’re dead! All of you!” The room spun about him, fading in and out of focus. Cold sweat poured down his brow in quick bursts, like a dog licking his face.

Wait, a dog? He’d never had a dog. Or...?

Cracks appeared along the walls of the empty bar. Through them he saw the outlines of trees in the dark. And arches.

“What the Hell is this place?”

“Just something familiar,” Ronald said with a casual shrug. “A place we knew you’d remember.”

He did. He remembered it all. He remembered far too much. But... “What for?”

“Leave no man behind,” Dicky said solemnly. “That’s what you always told us. That we should never leave a man behind.”

*That’s what you said; that’s what you told them to do. But you... You returned home without them. One by one, you left them behind. You keep telling yourself that it wasn’t your fault, but you know that is a lie. You’ve been lying to yourself every night since...*

His whole body trembled and his heart pounded like it would burst from his ribcage. “I failed you,” he whispered. “I failed all of you...”

The three soldiers looked at each other. Then Tim sauntered over and put a hand on Mark’s shoulder. He squeezed a little too hard.

“Water under the bridge, Haynes. It doesn’t matter anymore. C’mon, have a drink with us, and we’ll

forget any of this ever happened.”

Ronald held out a glass of whisky to him. Mark gazed at it, hesitant to make a grasp. To forget... To forget was all he had ever longed for, but now it was within reach, he felt like he was forgetting something else, too. Instinctively he looked over his shoulder, at the pub's exit, but as soon as he did, he couldn't remember why.

Around them, the noises of the pub rose once more. The tables were occupied, people chatted all around and Fat Joe stood behind the bar, cleaning glasses while from the radio in the corner came the voice of Vera Lynn.

And another sound, something that seeped in through the few remaining cracks in the plaster.

“You guys hear that?” Mark asked.

“Hear what?”

“A dog. I thought I heard a dog howling just now. Somewhere outside.”

“There's nothing out there,” said Tim. “Now, how about that drink?”

The glass that Ronald handed him felt lighter than he expected. He twirled it in his hand and watched the lights of the pub reflect in the whisky's perfect colour. Through the glass, he saw the cracks in the wall fill up by themselves. As they did, the howling noise faded, too.

“Anything the matter, Haynes?”

It seemed to him there was, but it slipped his mind.

“It’s just...” Something. “...those cracks over there.”  
He pointed at the wall.

“What cracks?” asked Dicky.

“You’re seeing things,” said Ronald. “More drinks’ll  
remedy that.”

But Tim’s eyes followed the thin lines as they  
disappeared towards the ceiling. “No man gets left  
behind,” he muttered. Then the last of the fractures  
vanished and he turned back to Mark.

“There,” he said, raising his glass. “Now none of us  
will ever go anywhere anymore.”