

The Shepherd

The shepherd threw another stick on the fire and inched closer for warmth. Tossing the stick created a shower of sparks which rose into the sky. He watched them rise, and then his attention shifted to the millions of stars that shone against the blackness of the night sky. The Milky Way cut a swath across this sky, splitting into two bands near the horizon. It was a clear, moonless night. Nights like this always seemed to be the coldest.

He turned his attention back to Earth and surveyed his flock. Everything was quiet. They were huddled together for warmth. The first frost couldn't be more than a few weeks away. Then it would be time to go down to lower pastures. Close to the village. He looked forward to seeing his family again. He was drifting off to sleep when he suddenly became aware that the flock was stirring.

He sat up and surveyed the area. Everything was still quiet, but the sheep were definitely uneasy. The rams were alert and were staring at the woods that surrounded the meadow. The shepherd picked up his staff and joined his flock.

Away from the fire, his eyes adjusted to the night. Even without a moon, the fire bathed the meadow with a glow that let him see there was no danger within the clearing. Peering into the woods, he thought he detected movement. Probably a wolf. A lone wolf wouldn't attack a ram directly, but it would worry the flock all night, prowling through the woods looking for an opportunity to rush in, grab a lamb, and drag it into the woods. Sometimes the wolf would show itself in the clearing. The rams wouldn't attack it, but if the shepherd ran at it, swinging his staff and shouting, the wolf would retreat. Usually it would leave the flock alone after that and go off in search of easier prey.

More movement. This was not a solitary wolf. A pack of wolves was lurking in the woods. The situation was much more dangerous. One or two wolves would try to draw the rams to one area while the others attacked from the far side of the flock. The shepherd had to focus on the unprotected areas.

A wolf stepped into the clearing. The rams moved to protect the flock from that wolf. The shepherd saw a wolf creeping to the edge of the woods at the other side of the clearing. He ran at it, swinging his staff and shouting. The wolf retreated into the darkness. Another wolf tried to enter from a different spot, and he chased it back.

A wolf showed itself in a different area. The rams moved to block an attack from this direction and the shepherd had to fend off forays from another part of the woods. The wolves were relentless. They kept probing the defenses of the flock, looking for an opportunity to exploit a weakness. It also seemed they were becoming less fearful of the shepherd. They were slower to run from his attacks, and were reappearing closer to where he had just chased one away. He had just finished chasing one into the woods when another appeared nearby. That one was slow to retreat and his staff connected with its hip as it turned away. It yelped in pain as it limped into the woods. The next one retreated immediately as he charged it, as did the one after that. They seemed to have learned that he was dangerous as well as frightening.

Too late he realized the wolves were leading him away from the flock. They had led him into a cul-de-sac of the meadow, where he was surrounded on three sides by woods. He turned to run back to the flock, but a snarling wolf was blocking his way. This one didn't retreat as he ran toward it. He swung his staff and hit it in the side of the head as it was starting to leap. It collapsed on the ground without a sound. He heard a snarl behind him and turned just the wolf was about to leap. This one partially dodged his staff. His staff smashed into its shoulder, but the wolf sunk his fangs into the staff. He frantically tried to pull the staff free, but the wolf hung on. He saw another wolf leap at him from the side. Instinctively he let go of his staff and threw his hands up for protection against the gleaming teeth that filled his vision. . .

"Bill! Bill! Wake up! It's just a dream!" Lt. Bill Garland slowly became aware that his roommate was shaking his shoulder and staring into his face. He was lying in his own bunk, still quivering, and drenched in sweat.

"Oh, sorry George. Was I screaming?"

"Don't worry about it. We all have screaming nightmares in this bloody job. It's the war. I dream there's a fighter on my tail and my guns have jammed." George was climbing back into his bunk.

"This was a dream about wolves and sheep. I've never experienced anything so sinister." He sat for a moment trying to bring himself back to reality. "What time is it, anyway?" Bill knew that George had a watch with a glowing dial.

George pulled an arm out from under the covers and looked at his watch. He had his back to Bill. "Four-thirty," he said to the wall. "Old Rumsey will be coming around in a few minutes to roust everyone who's on the morning patrol."

"I'm on the morning patrol," Bill answered. "I'll intercept him so he doesn't wake you when he comes for me." He still couldn't get the dream out of his mind. "In my dream it was early fall."

"It's spring now," George said with obvious irritation. "It's also 1917, in case you've forgotten the year, too."

Bill realized George was trying to go back to sleep. He got up quietly and dressed in the dark. He stepped out of the hut in time to keep Rumsey from knocking on the door. Then he walked to the Officer's mess. He wasn't really hungry, but he knew he needed energy so he forced himself to eat some eggs. Mercifully, most dreams don't linger. By the time he finished eating he vaguely remembered that he'd had a bad dream, but that was all.

At the Operations hut he was briefed on the patrol. He and a couple pilots from B-Flight were to meet a squadron of bombers over Amiens and escort them over the trenches to a rail head about 30 kilometers behind the German lines. He pulled on his fur-lined suit and flying boots. They would be flying at 15,000 ft., the maximum altitude for the heavily laden bombers, and he knew it was going to be cold.

They took off as soon as the first rays of sun showed in the clouds overhead. There was just enough pre-dawn light to see the ground. The trees at the edge of the flying field formed a black horizon. They had no trouble meeting up with the bombers, and crossing the lines was uneventful. German anti-aircraft gunners greeted them with the usual barrage of hate, but they soon flew out of range with no damage. The real danger came from fighters.

Bill scrunched down in his seat, trying to get a little more protection from his windscreen. He was cold already, and the patrol had barely begun. A blanket of clouds lay above them, with intermittent patches of blue sky showing through. Bill scanned the clouds uncomfortably. The clouds weren't very thick, and they could provide cover for enemy fighters flying above them. The bombers were almost completely dependent on their tiny escort for protection. The bombers had guns, of course, and they could fend off a single fighter for a while, but they were ancient, slow, clumsy aircraft that should have been taken out of service a year ago. Didn't the politicians back home know they were no match for the new German Albatros fighters? Why didn't they have new aircraft? And why did the staff officers keep ordering suicide missions like this, where obsolete bombers and outnumbered escorts had to fly far behind enemy lines. Wouldn't it be smarter to wait for the new airplanes they all knew were coming? With missions like this, there wouldn't be any pilots left to fly the new airplanes.

When Bill had arrived in France he was glad to be assigned to a fighter squadron instead of a bombing or observation unit. Even then, he knew those units were hopelessly outclassed by the German fighters. He was still glad to be flying fighters, but the new crop of enemy planes left him feeling hopelessly outclassed as well. Still, it was better than being a sitting duck in one of those bombers.

Every few seconds he twisted in the cockpit, scanning the horizon – over – under – behind – searching for danger. There! He caught a glimpse of an Albatros through a gap in the clouds. He only saw one, but he knew there were more. German fighters never flew alone. They hunted in packs. They were probably waiting for the bombers to get deeper into German territory before attacking, so they could cut off their retreat.

Evidently the bombers had seen the fighter, too. They tightened their formation, and the sun flashed off the goggles of a gunner as he searched the sky for threats. Bill sensed that they were uneasy. He was uneasy too. He had the uncomfortable sensation that he'd been here before. Not this exact situation. Not yesterday's patrol or any of the other patrols he'd flown. But something similar. And sinister. . .