

Carl looked up at the sky, he could still see the stars, which meant that the lethal cloud of fallout still had not covered them. In itself that was a small miracle. He had no idea of what it would feel like to have radiation penetrating his flesh and bones - probably, there was no feeling at all, it would be an undetectable process but his imagination caused his flesh to prickle.

The fiery glow in the sky showed no sign of diminishing, if anything it had intensified - but that was more than likely his imagination. It was nothing to do with imagination however, when there was an outburst of activity from the plane. There were sounds of raised voices and it rocked as if it was the venue of physical conflict. Carl watched with the others, helpless to assist, his mouth dry. It was an interminable wait before the victor of the battle emerged leg first from the machine's belly.

The priest released his held breath - it was Brookes. The Flight Sergeant waved to them and they rose from their nests in the grass in one movement, grabbing the smaller children as they did so.

"There's no time to lose on a number of counts," Brookes said.

He looked the worse for wear, with a bloated cheek and eye. He grinned at their looks of concern.

"You should see the other bloke! Now, listen! Command has contacted us - at least, Jack Conroy insisted that it was Command - I wasn't so sure. Whoever it was, was telling us to get to hell out of here. The cloud is spreading out and to add to the problems, there's a large band of hostiles coming our way. Add to it the readings of the radiation counters, which are rising and you will appreciate that we've got to be moving. The main problem is going to be to get this bird off the ground with all of you on board. We had a very tight landing. I've got to raise enough airspeed to take off. Another problem is that I can't manage the controls alone and Jack refuses to help - "

"OK, Understood - what do you want us to do Mr. Brookes?"

"The name is Paul and I would like you all to use it. I want you all to lighten the ship - throw out everything we don't need. I'll taxi the plane out beyond the strip - I know the ground's rough but we'll have to chance it when we are moving slowly at the start of our run. We'll gain a vital few metres - I'd like a volunteer for second pilot - "

"Where's the Flight Officer?"

"I've got him shackled to a main strut in the passenger cabin - he wouldn't promise to behave, so I didn't have any other option."

"Can I talk to him?"

"You're welcome, Mr. Steinbecker - I hope his language is slightly less obscene than it was before."

"I've heard it all before."

"So long as the rest bend their backs while you do it."

Carl intended to bend his back too but he wanted one last attempt to persuade the obstinate Flight Officer to see things their way. Paul pushed him up through the open hatch and pointed to the rear of the ship. Carl found himself in a narrow connecting passage between the Flight Deck and the stripped out passenger section. Looking defiant and decidedly unhappy and handcuffed to a centre strut running from floor to roof, was the captain of the

aircraft. There was strong evidence that he had been making strenuous efforts to free himself. He was breathing heavily from his exertions and sweating profusely. He took a rest and leaned against the strut. He stared coldly at the visiting priest.

"Before you say anything - you'd better hear this - Flight Sergeant Brookes has committed an Act of Mutiny in a time of war - that is a crime punishable by death. It amounts to desertion in the field and a commanding officer is authorised to exercise the right of summary execution. Any person aiding and abetting, counselling or advising such a mutineer, is subject to the same penalties. I don't care whether you consider yourself some specially designated person authorised by Almighty God, to do whatever you think you should. That doesn't concern me to the slightest degree. I am specially designated by my superiors to execute my duties without fear or favour. If I get free, I shall do so without hesitation."

"Thank you for making the position so clear, Flight Officer," Carl responded quietly. "As you so rightly point out - this is a time of war - a time when we are driven by events which are outside of those described in rule books and military regulations. This is no ordinary time of war. This is the end of all human authority and whatever rules human beings have established. It doesn't matter if the rules were civilian or military. You talk of God's authority but not with a clear perception of what that means. If I have been authorised by God, it's because He wants it that way, not because I want it. I've told you already, you don't fight me, you fight against my God. Why is it so impossible for you to see that there is a higher command than your military superiors? I didn't ask, advise or pressure the Flight Sergeant to do as he has done - but our God has done so. Accept the situation! Join us!"

"I'll see you in hell first!"

Carl sighed and shook his head.

"I hope not, Mr. Conroy - I hope not."

He turned away, there wasn't time for protracted arguments. He dropped down to the earth below the plane's belly and shook his head at the enquiring glance from the Flight Sergeant. Paul shrugged.

"I hate to say it but I told you so. You're wasting your time - "

"I had to try - I thought it might solve the problem of the second pilot."

"I wouldn't trust Jack Conroy with the controls now, not even if he swore allegiance on a stack of bibles!"

The cargo doors on the sides of the plane were now open and a steady stream of brothers and sisters were moving items of equipment to the side of the strip. Bert Harris broke away from a returning group.

"There's not much else - except for one item which is giving a lot of vocal trouble - If Conroy doesn't want to join us, he's against us - right? Isn't that what the scriptures say, Carl? If you want my opinion, I suggest we offload him. He'll be trouble sooner or later - and he's so much surplus weight!"

Paul Brookes' voice was very small.

"He's not a bad sort of fellow - he doesn't deserve to be left to certain death."

"He'd be getting the same chance he was willing to give us!" Bert answered grimly. "Like I said - he's extra unproductive weight, we can do without him and he might make the difference between getting airborne or otherwise."

"I take it that you're saying that he isn't a soul - he's a nuisance item?"

Carl questioned acidly. "My God! Have we come down to this? Is this all it means to be New

Apostolic?"

"If the plane doesn't get off the ground because of excess weight - there'll be no New Apostolics!" Bert argued angrily.

Carl glared at him with rising fury. It was beginning to show that Bert Harris had been away from the mainstream of the congregation for a long time - but then, he wasn't the only one in the group.

"All right, Bert - have it your way - but on one condition - everyone who isn't productive, who could be termed a burden to the rest of us - anyone who might cause trouble in the future - they stay behind too - starting with him!"

Carl pointed to the staring figure of the Apostle. Bert looked hard at the old man.

"You're right - O.K!"

Carl swallowed - Had it gone that far with Bert?

"And the children - especially the small ones, not much weight perhaps, but every little helps! Will you tell the parents? I haven't got the nerve to do it."

This time, the stubborn brother hesitated. Carl waited impassively. Bert Harris shrugged - a familiar gesture of dismissal.

"Have it your way, Carl - but the time's fast coming when we won't be able to afford the luxury of this kind of thinking - "

"If that time ever comes, Bert," Carl responded grimly. "We won't be New Apostolic in name or in nature."

Brother Harris returned to the group he had left and assisted with one of the last items to leave the plane.

"Thanks - I wouldn't have let you leave him - " Paul said quietly.

Carl grinned wryly.

"I knew that and you knew that but he didn't."

Paul looked at the cloud over the city. The redness was going out of the sky as the available fuel below was exhausted. There was little doubt that the high winds were beginning to spread the lethal pall.

"Better get your people aboard - I want you to concentrate them at the back of the plane. I'm going to try to taxi the plane up the slope. When we take off, I'm going to give her maximum acceleration, that's why the tail has to be heavy - on the other hand, if we don't make it off the ground, those in the rear will have a better chance of survival."

Carl nodded in agreement - it was their only option. He reminded himself again that it was God's provision and that He would have to take a hand to get this bird to fly, even if it meant defying His own Laws of Gravity. Carl urged the sixty Apostolics to board the plane and position themselves where he indicated. When this was done, he approached the shackled Flight Officer.

"I'm giving you another chance to reconsider, Mr. Conroy. There are some who are talking of leaving you behind - your crewman didn't like the idea and neither did I. The chances are very slim that we are going to get off the ground without the help of a second pilot. You might like to return the favour and help us to get out of here."

"You're doing me no favours, Steinbecker."

Carl walked forward to the cockpit, there was no point in beating his head against the wall.

"Your second pilot reporting - "

Paul eyed him critically.

"Have you ever done any flying?" he asked casually, as he flicked the

switches to start the twin engines.

"No - but then, neither has anyone else in my group."

Paul sighed and leaned back in his seat. He eyed the far end of the short landing strip.

"Well, I guess the next best thing to a qualified second pilot, is to have a priest up front - at least I can leave the praying in expert hands!"

"What do I have to do? - apart from praying, I mean."

Paul went through an alarming series of strange instructions, indicating levers and controls and the sequence in which he wanted them utilised. At the end, he looked at Carl, sighed again and went through the entire speech once more.

"That's all I have time to tell you - Look after the engines - see those two throttles? They must be advanced equally! If you get one engine going faster than the other, I won't be able to hold her and she'll slew off the strip - which is narrow enough. God only knows."

"God does know - trust Him."

"If you say so - but I'll be busy too."

He advanced one of the throttles and the plane started to slew around in a one hundred and eighty degree arc. It faced the rough field beyond the end of the strip and started to taxi forward.

"Your first prayer should be that we don't hit a pothole or a soft spot."

"I'm way ahead of you, Paul - way ahead of you."

The plane jolted forward drunkenly, finding every depression in the ground - eventually, they ran out of field and Paul slewed the ship around to face the way they had come. The extra distance they had gained was pitifully small.

"Not much is it?" Paul murmured. "Now, you can pray that it is going to be enough."

Carl said nothing, instead he listened to the last minute instructions the young pilot was giving him.

"I'm going to hold her with the brakes locked on, whilst you increase the throttles. This gizmo controls the richness of the fuel mixture - it's like a choke on a car. When I tell you, I want you to switch over to the other setting - that'll be after we get off the ground - if we get off the ground! The book says these things can practically fly themselves - we're about to find out if that was all sales talk - Are you ready Priest Steinbecker?"

Carl nodded.

"Increase power - engines and prayer!"

Carl did as he was told on both accounts. The plane shuddered as the engines started to race. The vibration grew to unimaginable proportions.

"Here we go - good luck!" Paul yelled.

He released the wheel brakes and the plane jolted forward. He wrestled with the control stick as she tried to go in all directions on the rough ground. He steadied her and she was already going at a fair lick by the time they reached the end of the strip proper, where she had previously been parked."

Open up - more - more - more!"

Carl obeyed, his knuckles white with tension.

"More! - We've got to get more speed!"

The far end of the strip rushed towards them. Carl clenched his teeth in a ferocious grimace. He pushed forward the throttles until they could go no further. Paul was silent, clasping the wheel and stick tightly. Suddenly, when

it seemed that they couldn't help ploughing into a line of stunted trees straddling the end of the runway, he hugged the stick back to his chest and braced his feet against the foot controls. He rattled off a string of commands, which incredibly, Carl managed to do right. Paul banked the machine, the first indication that they had left the ground. Carl was sure that the wing tip was no more than a metre from the ground on one side, while the other shaved the top branches from the trees. There was a blur of foliage and then, they found some sky.

Paul gave a whoop of exuberance, he jerked his head round and grinned triumphantly at Carl.

"Now! Wasn't that just great?" he enthused.

Carl managed a nod - it was a great effort.

"Now do me another favour and get this ship in trim," Paul continued.

"It feels as if we're brushing the ground with our tail. Distribute our passengers - and you'd better make it quick!"

Carl went back to the passenger section. The great open space was in a turmoil of screaming children and shouting adults. Flight Officer Conroy stood shackled in the centre of the plane. He was very pale.

"Tell my insane Flight Sergeant that I'll personally ensure that he never sets foot in another military aircraft, as long as he has breath!"

"Will that be before or after you have him shot for mutiny?"

Carl passed him without waiting for an answer. He turned his attention to the disorderly crowd of refugees and bellowed for silence.

"When you've stopped screaming at each other, you will notice that we're off the ground and not piled up in the river. Now - get a hold on yourselves and spread out. The plane's out of trim, so make it fast - " They did as he said, it took a little time to sort them out. When he was satisfied, he returned to the cockpit. Paul was reclining in his chair taking it easy.

"I could do with a beer," he grinned. "Don't worry, the ship's on Auto - it's a very good invention - you point her in the direction you want to go and set the controls. Incidentally, which way do we want to go?"

Carl eased into the second pilot's seat and shook his head.

"I'll have to leave that to you - I have no idea."

Paul narrowed his eyes and studied the priest.

"We have fuel for about five hours," he said after a while. "That means we could reach any major city - except that there are no major cities in one piece anymore. Five hours fuel will give us a maximum range of about fifteen hundred miles. We can go that distance in any direction you like to nominate but at the end of five hours, we have to come down - end of story - "

Carl thought about it.

"Cities are out - there's no percentage in flying out over the ocean, or trying to reach another landmass. Our scriptures nominate a place in the wilderness as being our destination."

"This country has a fair amount of wilderness - "

"A lot of it would be within range of fifteen hundred miles - "

"Correct - but I still wonder how much use it's going to be to you. The last reports we had from Europe indicated a massive cloud cover of debris and radioactive dust. In a matter of months, it'll spread throughout the atmosphere."

"Our scriptures tell us that we will be sustained in the wilderness - we don't fear the cloud."

"You sure have a lot of confidence in your bible."

"We're here, aren't we?"

Paul stared ahead and nodded.

"Shall I tell you why I decided to help you?"

Carl nodded.

"If you want to - I'll admit to being curious why you would commit an act of mutiny punishable by death, as Conroy hasn't hesitated to tell me - "

"I recognised someone in your party."

"Is that so?"

"My home town is - was - in the North Province. Before I joined the military I was sweet on a girl - what you might call a nice, clean hometown romance. It was serious enough at the time and we even talked about marriage. The problem was that she wanted me to follow her religion. Because I was keen on her, I went along with the idea and attended services off and on for quite a while. It didn't jell with me - I guess I was young and didn't want to hear what they were trying to say. The whole thing came to a head when a special visitor was due to hold a service. She invited me as usual but for some reason, I wasn't so keen. I tried to make her come to a pop concert - a special one-time appearance of a group - I can't even remember their name now, but then they were big time. She refused and we had a flaming row and in the end, because I wanted her, I gave in and attended the service.

Right in the middle of it, while the main speaker was still preaching, he suddenly diverted from his theme and started to tell the younger ones that they should court and marry their own kind and that if they didn't, there would always be trouble - always a conflict! He used an expression <that's always stuck with me - 'A dove doesn't mate with a crow'. I tell you, I went cold and then I got angry. I walked out of the service when it was time for the next speaker - I never saw the girl again."

Carl stared at him. How often had he not heard the same parable in Youth Services.

"Apostle Carter?"

Paul nodded.

"You see, I know all about the First Resurrection. I know what happens after. When the city was nuked, I wondered what had become of you all - I wanted to know. When we were diverted and we landed back there and you said you were New Apostolics - I knew what I had to do!"

Carl blinked back tears. How often had it not been said that a word of testimony was never wasted - even if it didn't bear fruit at the time - Gathered in Time or Eternity - Sure would the Harvest be.

Paul was staring out of the window.

"So - where to - Pr. Steinbecker?"

"Before we decide that, Paul, I want to say something. Our God is True and He doesn't let anyone go so easily. You couldn't become His Child during the Time of Grace, but He didn't forget you. You have become an instrument in His hands to save His people. We can see how marvellously He has worked - don't imagine for a moment that any of this is coincidence - we don't know that word - it isn't in the dictionary of New Apostolics. You have helped us but in so doing, you have become part of us."

Paul laughed a little unsteadily.

"You'll have me howling in a minute - let's keep things practical. We've got to get this bird on to the ground again and that isn't going to be so easy

either."

"A little honest emotion doesn't hurt anyone - don't be ashamed of your emotions, Paul. We got this plane into the air - you, me and above all, God - and the same trio will get her down - believe me."

"I do, Carl - I do - but please, let me into a secret - Where!"

Paul produced a series of large scale maps from a locker and drew an arc across them, indicating the limit of their fuel. It covered an immense amount of country but a little inspection discounted a fair proportion of it. It was either too close to the devastated cities, or covered moderately populated areas where there would be civil strife. Some likely places had no facilities for landing an aircraft as large as theirs.

"There's just nothing at that range," Carl complained in frustration.

"Then, look within the arc - "

Carl folded the maps and studied each segment - he was almost ready to give up again, when he saw the place that had to be right. It was situated in the midst of country so close to being desert, that it qualified for the name. It was a green patch, tiny, almost invisible, in the centre of the russets and reds on the map's colour code. There was a landing strip close by but not actually within the spot of green. There might have been other places he could have found, if he had cared to look further but it was the name that clinched it.

The Wilde Ranges!