



## TWENTY

This was not his nightmare. As he found himself behind the controls of an unfamiliar aeroplane, Chamus Aranson instinctively recognised where he was. This was the nightmare that plagued his grandfather's sleep; every detail was exactly as Granddad had described it. He was reliving the plane crash that had crippled the old man fourteen years ago.

It was a routine flight; he was testing a new design, a sleek new monoplane. His route had taken him over the border of Majarak, in the Fringelands. No sooner had Chamus become aware of where he was than he felt the snapping of bullets passing through the fuselage. Somebody was shooting at him from the ground, two hundred feet below. The engine suddenly spat oil and smoke from its vents, and he heard a harsh knocking in the cylinder that told him a piston had been damaged. The engine coughed and stalled. And then the stick went loose and Chamus discovered he had no elevator control. One of the cables must have been cut by a bullet. The powerless aeroplane, weighed down by the heavy engine in its nose, dipped slowly forward and slipped

down through the air, plummeting towards the ground, wind tearing at the edges of its wings.

He woke with a gasp, the image of the ground tilting up towards him still filling his vision. His hands were trembling as he sat up and waited for the disorientation to fade. He remembered how his grandfather often said that it was not the memory of the crash itself that haunted him. It was discovering after the crash landing that his legs were trapped by the buckled firewall that separated the cockpit from the engine compartment. It was the sight of orange flames erupting from the engine cowling and the heat and the smell of burning oil. It was the knowledge that his plane, like all modern aircraft, was made of resin-impregnated wood. It was the certainty that he was going to burn to death.

But Thomex Aranson had not died that day. He had been pulled from the crumpled body of the plane by two Majarak farmers, who had seen the aircraft go down. His legs were crushed and he suffered some burns to his hands and arms, but he survived. He never found out who shot at him or why, but it was probably some Fringelander with a chip on his shoulder who liked taking pot-shots at Altima flyers.

Chamus looked at the alarm clock on the chest of drawers beside his bed.

‘Bugger!’

He was late; he must have knocked the alarm off in his sleep again. He rolled out of bed, threw off his pyjamas and pulled on his school uniform, jamming his feet into his shoes as he shrugged his blazer on. On his way out of his room, he saw his grandfather’s bedroom door was slightly ajar and he peered in. Thomex was rolling from side to side, the old

man’s face twisted in fear, and Chamus wondered if his grandfather was living through the same nightmare that he had just escaped. He watched for a minute longer, wishing he could do something to ease his grandad’s fears. A hand softly clasped his shoulder and his father reached from behind him and closed the door.

‘You’re going to be late for school,’ Kellen said. ‘Where are your things? I’ll give you a lift to the station.’

‘Shouldn’t we wake him up?’ Chamus asked.

‘He barely sleeps as it is. Besides, do you want to be the first person he sees when he wakes up?’

Chamus shook his head. Grandad in a bad mood was not a pretty sight. He grabbed his cap and coat and swung his bag over his shoulder. His mother shoved a bacon sandwich into his hand as he ran for the front door. She never let him leave the house without some kind of breakfast. He took a great big bite out of it once he was settled in the passenger seat of his dad’s car. His father grinned at him.

‘What have you got today? Flying?’

‘Commander Ellese is going to take us up,’ Chamus said around the mouthful of sandwich, referring to one of the school’s founders, a revered war hero. ‘That’s if the weather’s okay. Otherwise we’ve got history.’

Kellen glanced up at the sky above the roof of their large, red-brick house; it was a clear blue with wisps of cloud. Perfect flying weather. He started the engine and pulled out onto the road. Kellen had left the air force to take over his father’s small business, designing and building planes, and knew his son was itching to get airborne. The Benaldon Preparatory Flying School in Victovia combined pilot training

with normal lessons and its students were considered among the elite, destined for the key flying positions in Altima. Kellen hoped that Chamus too would get into the family business, but he knew the boy had his heart set on flying fighters – like every other boy at the school.

They missed the train and the next one was not for twenty minutes. Chamus looked up at the station clock and swore loudly. If he were late he would miss the briefing, and if he missed the briefing he would not be allowed fly.

‘Less of that language from you, your mother would have a fit,’ his father said, but he could see the disappointment on his son’s face. ‘Come on, hop in. I don’t have to be in until the meeting at ten. I’ll drive you.’

Chamus kept looking at his watch as the car sped along the road that ran around the outskirts of the city. It was going to be close.

‘Can’t we go any faster?’ he asked, impatiently.

‘This beast can do nearly ninety miles an hour on the straight,’ Kellen told him proudly. ‘These new two-strokes can really hare along ...’

‘I meant, can’t you *drive* any faster?’

‘Yes, Cham. But not fast enough to escape the police. Let’s keep it under the speed limit, shall we? We’ll get you there on time.’

Chamus idly wondered how a man could have the nerve to be a test pilot and still be afraid of breaking the speed limit. He glanced at his watch again, but it was no comfort.

It was a little after eight when they reached the airfield; the briefing would have already started. Chamus thanked his dad, grabbed his satchel and rushed towards the hangar. He

had missed roll call, so he would have to go straight to the briefing room, face the music and hopefully still get his place on the flight plan.

‘Aranson!’ a voice roared behind him. ‘Where d’you think you’re going?’

He stopped short and stood ramrod straight, spinning on his heel to face Mr Morthrom, the geography and navigation teacher – a squinty-eyed whippet of a man.

‘Sir! I was making my way to the hangar to join my class, sir!’

‘If you miss roll call, you don’t fly. You know the rules, Aranson.’

Chamus nodded. He had been hoping to bypass that particular rule. But there was no chance with Morthrom.

‘Commander Ellese has your class this morning, but it seems you are to miss the honour of flying with him. Go and inform him that you are here and that you will await your class’s return in the library. I shall give you some exercises to do.’

‘Yes, sir!’ Chamus could hardly keep the disappointment from his face. They had not flown for two weeks because of bad weather during their flying periods. Ellese was notorious for breaking the rules, which made him popular with the students. Maybe he would still let him go up with the class. But Cham did not fancy his chances once Morthrom had made up his mind.

As he trudged the last hundred yards to the training planes hangar, a man hurried past him. He glanced back as he passed, and several expressions seemed to ripple across his face at once, so quickly that Chamus thought he had

imagined it. There was a sound like whispering and Chamus stopped for a moment and looked around, puzzled, but could not see anyone else about. Access to the hangar was restricted and he didn't recognise the man, but he looked like a Fringelander. The only ones who worked in the school were caretakers. Cham wondered if this man was new. The stranger was walking very fast and disappeared from sight into the darkness of the big corrugated sheet metal and concrete building. Chamus followed him in and traced his fingertips along the leading edge of the wing of a trainer before making his way to the briefing room.

There were raised voices coming from beyond the doorway. He could hear Ellese demanding to know who the stranger was and what he was doing there. Another voice, one that must be that of the Fringelander, was shouting in a strange language, almost chanting. Chamus walked up to the doorway and peered inside. The stranger was standing in front of Ellese's desk, with the instructor facing him behind it. The boys of Cham's class were sitting at their desks watching the spectacle. The two men were glaring at each other, then the stranger became abruptly silent, his head tilted upwards, his mouth wide open, his eyes rolled back. Even as this was happening, the Fringelander blurred and disappeared, and as he did, the walls of the briefing room faded away, the noticeboards and regulation blue walls turning transparent and vanishing from view.

Chamus went suddenly numb. The classroom was disappearing around him. He found himself standing in an open street, surrounded by adobe buildings. Around him, people were hurrying into their houses, but his class still sat at their

desks in the middle of the street, staring at the open, grey sky in shock. There was the sound of aeroplanes overhead and he heard the torn whistle of bombs falling. An object plummeted down and struck just where the stranger had been standing before he had vanished. The object was a metal javelin, with a barrel-shaped section at its waist, holes running up its side and fins on its tail. Chamus was bewildered. What was going on? They had been in the hangar. How could they suddenly have ended up in a street he had never seen before? It was as if they were all sharing some vivid, waking dream. Then Chamus realised what the javelin was; his heart leapt into his throat. It was a sireniser.

He must have started running, for suddenly the village faded away and he was in the main part of the hangar again. His classmates were still in the briefing room behind him. He did not think about them. He dodged around the parked training planes, instinctively sprinting for open space. He could only have seconds before the sireniser went off. The door was getting wider, but he felt nothing, heard nothing. He had just made it out the door and looked up to see the big, wide sky, when a wall of sound slammed into him and threw him across the concrete apron. The noise was like nothing he had ever heard, it had no pitch, no quality – it just sounded like the end of the world.

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Chamus did not know what was going on. His first sensation was a massive headache and then there was a ringing in his ears. As he opened his eyes, he became aware that the ringing was the only thing he could hear. There were men in

different kinds of uniform around him, some wearing ear-protectors. He could see them talking to each other, see their mouths moving, but he could not hear a thing over the ringing. Judging by the view, he was lying on his back. He went to move his head, and discovered he too was wearing headgear. He should still have been able to hear something. The headache wanted to stay where it was, so he let it and just lay still.

One of the men, in the uniform of an air force medical officer, noticed he was awake and looked down at him with an expression of concern. He lifted his ear protectors carefully, then took them off and leaned forward to listen.

‘Am I deaf?’ he asked the man, his voice sounding as if he were speaking into the back of his skull.

The man shook his head. He wrote out something on a piece of paper and then showed it to Chamus. His vision was blurred and it hurt to focus on anything, but he could just make it out.

‘Your eardrums are intact and your hearing will come back in time,’ it read. ‘You’re going to be alright.’

He nodded slightly to show he understood, but he could only remember flashes of what had happened. He let his head roll gently to the side and looked at the hangar. It was still standing, but only just. The metal girders of the roof had buckled and collapsed; the concrete walls were teetering under the weight of the rest of the structure. Through the huge doorway, he could see that the shockwaves from the sound weapon had wrought devastation on the aircraft and equipment inside – all the work of a weapon that had seemed to appear out of nowhere, as part of some bizarre

vision cast by an unknown Fringelander. He could only remember snatches of what had happened and none of it made sense.

‘The others?’ he asked.

The medical officer shook his head. Chamus closed his eyes and wished the world away from him. He felt a needle prick his arm and then felt nothing more.