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FALLEN ANGEL™

BY JAMES SWALLOW



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James Swallow

Faridah Malik was falling through a dawn sky full of amber sunlight and grey clouds. The howling wind thundered at her, ripples of it streaming over her body and the bare skin of her face, plucking at the thin material of her clothing. She could believe it was alive, the way it toyed with her like a cat with a mouse, batting her back and forth. Somewhere below, concealed in the gossamer strata of smoggy city-haze, the golden towers of Upper Hengsha were reaching up for her, vast glassy daggers catching the light of the rising sun.

She opened her mouth to cry out, but her breath was stolen away and the scream she wanted to release was gone in an instant. The sky took it from her.

Afforded some protection behind a pair of goggles, her eyes scanned the horizon line and looked for a familiar silhouette moving against the drifts of heavy cloud. She found it, maybe a few hundred feet away, turning against the sunrise. A boxy white shape hung between two stubby wings and the blurred discs of massive rotor props. The aircraft was an old military transport from the mid-2010's, a V-22 Osprey years past its wartime prime, decommissioned for civilian flight.

Faridah grinned and changed her attitude, reconfiguring herself in the punishing airflow to alter her body's aerodynamics. At first she was a diving human missile, arms flat to her sides and her legs together, mimicking a dolphin-like profile; but now she let her arms extend out, legs bend and shift. She cut into the wind, widening her silhouette. Slowing. Defying gravity.

But still too fast, she told herself. The Osprey was coming up quickly ahead of her. Faridah pressed the thumb of her right hand into the middle of her palm and held it for a two-count before she felt the quiver that ran through her clothing. The wingsuit's dormant systems activated. Memory-plastic webbing snapped open in sails between her arms and torso, between her thighs and crotch. The wind filled the winglets and she felt velocity suddenly bleeding away.

The aircraft was very close now, and she was coming in behind it, aiming herself on an invisible line between the vertical fins of the Osprey's H-shaped tail. A yawning drop ramp was open beneath the fins, a brightly-lit cargo bay visible within. Five minutes ago and a few thousand feet higher up, she had thrown herself out of that same hatchway and into the pink glow of the cold, pre-dawn air.

Faridah laughed, feeling the sound in her chest more than hearing it as adrenaline surged through her bloodstream. She felt swift and dangerous, and she knew she was utterly alive in this moment, in a way that it would be impossible to express to anyone who had not shared such an experience.

The wintry kiss of the sky, the heavy embrace of gravity and the thundering power of the winds left her elated. Part of her wanted to close her eyes and fall forever.

But then she forced out a banshee whoop and pivoted into a side-slip motion, letting her body be her aerofoil. Faridah plunged into the V-22's turbulent wake and burst through it. The open cargo bay reared up like a hungry mouth and she allowed it to swallow her whole.

* * *

She landed hard against the metal deck and grabbed at a cargo net, shaking as the icy, mingled rush of fear and joy coursed through her. Faridah climbed unsteadily to her feet and started laughing again.

"You're crazy!" shouted a voice from the front of the aircraft, as the drop ramp rose back up to seal off the cargo bay.

"It has been said," Faridah shot back, making her way forward to the flight deck as she pulled off the goggles. She blinked away droplets of sweat.

In the command pilot's seat, a woman with a tight blonde bob and a pleasant, smiling face beamed back at her. Evelyn Carmichael had been one of the first people Faridah Malik had made friends with on arrival in Hengsha,

one American seeking the familiarity of another's company. She was, if Faridah were ever to admit it, the closest thing she had to a sister. Theirs was a friendship forged fast and firm, two against the world and daring it to come at them.

Evelyn presented a bare palm to the other woman and Faridah returned a languid high-five, tapping the control to retract the wingsuit's sails before slipping easily into the co-pilot's position.

Evelyn mirrored Faridah's grin. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you had a lover out there." She jerked her thumb at the sky. "Look at you. You're flushed, your heart is racing..."

Faridah gave an amused shrug, finding a water bottle in the dump bin under the control panel and taking a generous swig. "S'better than sex," she said, between gulps. "Never disappointing." It was Evelyn's turn to laugh, and despite her elfin, spare build, she had a raucous and dirty chuckle that was always infectious. "So, what? You want to have a smoke and then go out again?"

"If only. We are supposed to be working." Faridah leaned forward, running a trained eye over the Osprey's dials and readouts.

Malik and Carmichael were up in the VTOL to give the aging aircraft a check flight; the impromptu skydiving was just a perk of the job. The Osprey had spent the last week in the hanger getting one of its Rolls Royce turbofans replaced, and the aircraft's owner Jai Cheng wanted to be sure it was cleared for operations. Cheng employed the two women as part of ArcAir, a small cargo and logistics company operating in this corner of the East China Sea. It was less than inspiring work, mostly light transport flights between Hengsha and the mainland, or runs out to Hong Kong and Macao – but it allowed Faridah and Evelyn to do what they loved. ArcAir was always busy, and the two women were never short of flight hours they could log. And when they were not flying for Cheng, he let them fly for fun or go weekending on any one of a string of tropical party islands, where flash mob gigs or extreme sports were the big draw.

“Looking good,” said Faridah, peering at the new engine’s temperature gauges. “Green across the board. Reckon we can sign off on this bad boy. Or maybe I can take the stick, and you can play jump-and-scoop.”

Evelyn made a face. “Cliff-diving, yeah. Dune-boarding, okay. Even regular high-altitude low-opening parachuting. But if I get out of a plane, I don’t usually climb back inside in mid-air.” She looked away. “Besides, we should get back to the barn. I promised Lee I’d call him today.”

Faridah tried and failed to hide the scowl that automatically marred her features whenever Lee Hong’s name came up in conversation. “Sure. Right,” she said, settling her headphone-mike rig over her ears. Faridah’s thumb absently brushed the tiny Monroe piercing in her upper lip, and she frowned. It was her only tell, and she hated herself for showing it so easily.

Naturally, Evelyn caught the gesture. “I’d really like it if you could get on with him, Ri. I mean, I know he can be a little rowdy-”

“He’s a hot-head, that’s what he is.” The words slipped out before Faridah realized she was saying them. “It’s not my place to tell you who to date,” she added, trying to back-pedal.

“No, it isn’t.” Evelyn’s tone cooled. “Lee isn’t like the other guys we always meet, the drifters and the trust-fund babies. He’s got plans, he’s got ambition,” she went on, becoming defensive. “And he treats me well.”

For now, Faridah thought, but this time she kept her silence. There were a dozen ripostes she could come up with about Hong, from bringing up his shady family or the stories about his occasional flashes of violent temper. But all those things had been aired between the two friends many times before today, and never found resolution. Faridah learned the hard way that coming down on the wrong side of Evelyn’s love life was a recipe for argument. She didn’t want that; she didn’t want to put a distance between herself and the woman who had been her only friend during those early days in Hengsha, when it seemed like the city was going to eat her alive. But she couldn’t escape the fact that she just didn’t like Evelyn’s taste in men.

Faridah ended any further discussion by patching into the general aviation channel and contacting Hengsha Air Control. “H-A-C, this is ArcAir Zero-Niner-Niner. Maintenance flight is complete, we’re coming back to the pattern. Request clearance for return to Alpha Alpha One Four, over.”

A synthetic voice crackled in her ear. “ArcAir Zero-Niner-Niner, H-A-C confirms. Clear to RTB, over.”

“I got this,” said Evelyn, as she gripped the control yoke. The loose, easy mood in the cockpit had evaporated.

“Sure,” offered Faridah, looking away. Her eyes became glassy as her gaze turned inward. “I guess I’ll check my footage...”

Suddenly she was falling again, this time giddy inside the confines of her own head. Faridah’s skin tingled with the ghostly sense memory of the jump.

She wasn’t the kind of person to be ostentatious about her augmentations. Maybe it was some lingering effect of the conservative family she had been brought up in, but Faridah was circumspect about how people outside her circle of friends perceived her. She never felt the desire to change herself radically by replacing limbs or other obvious elective surgery. What implants she did possess were relatively small pieces of tech – neural augs that gave her better reaction times and sharper optical acuity. There was also the ‘black box’, but that she tended to use more for her own amusement.

The device was essentially a human-scale version of the flight recorder fitted to the V-22; the unit’s wetdrive captured a digitized feed of the impulses from Faridah’s visual and aural senses, a few hours of images and sounds that could be played back, or downloaded through an induction connector placed on her temple. It was a common enough aug for a flyer, designed to be hardy enough that it, like the flight recorder of an aircraft, could be recovered after a fatal crash to determine the root cause. The Chinese aviation authority made them mandatory for all civil pilots operating in their airspace.

Faridah dismissed the need for it, though. She was confident enough in her own abilities to believe that she

could walk away from any hard landing. Instead, she used the playback to store her wilder experiences whenever she could, saving the footage to a hard drive back in her apartment. To anyone else, they would have just seemed like random sensory clips bereft of context and meaning, but to Faridah they were bottled memories. Like looking through someone's home vids, they really didn't have any resonance unless you had actually been there.

Still, the playback pulled her in deep enough that when the Osprey started to descend toward Hengsha, it was almost a shock to disengage and snap back to the real world. The great raised platform of upper metropolis, the gargantuan city-atop-a-city, filled the view through the canopy. It reminded Faridah of a giant's table, the surface dotted with elegant bottles and ornate crockery, each piece made of perfect cut glass or decorated porcelain. Grassy, green arcologies turned toward the sky, like vases full of cut flowers.

These were the domains of the Hengsha's rich and powerful, those who lived in the rarified air of high company management and great wealth; alongside them, the intellectual elite who staffed the exclusive universities and research centers. The sculpted monolith of the Tai Yong Medical corporation's tower dominated the artificial landscape, the surface of it smooth and sleek like the skin of the cybernetic limbs that made the company its colossal fortune.

Evelyn guided them downward, past the thick strata of the pangu – the massive deck that separated the upper district from the one beneath – and they descended toward the old town. Below the upper city, the lower quadrant lay in an endless half-night of eternal shadows. Neon-drenched streets shone around the feet of massive anthill apartment towers and smoky industrial complexes. Drones and other flyers crossed back and forth, the sky becoming busy as the two Hengshas awoke with the new day.

Not that Lower Hengsha ever really slept, Faridah reflected. It was the dark mirror image of the upper city's opulence and luxury, a bestial and dangerous likeness of its dazzling twin. In the lower city, life was cheaper and times were harder; and up above, while things might have shone a little more brightly, they were just a different kind of dangerous.

* * *

Evelyn brought the Osprey around in a spiraling descent, and with Faridah's assistance, she rotated the spinning props on the end of the wings to a vertical mode. The VTOL made a careful touchdown on ArcAir's south pad. The airfield was part of an artificial reef that had been one of the first things built during the founding of Hengsha, and it extended out into the bay.

Faridah couldn't help but glance out over the landing apron to where the company's more modern aircraft were parked. Jai Cheng's other private planes were sleek models with windowless virtual cockpits and swept-back wings. While they were similar in structural configuration to the tilt-rotor V-22, that was where the resemblance ended. The other VTOLs had advanced axial flow engines at their wingtips, making them highly agile and capable of near-supersonic speeds. It was no secret that Faridah Malik coveted the chance to fly one of them. So far Cheng hadn't been willing to give her the job.

As if thinking about him summoned the man, Faridah caught sight of Cheng crossing the apron toward them as Evelyn ran through the Osprey's shutdown checklist. His normally smiling face was set in a grimace, and he had a purposeful manner to his gait that made Faridah worry that he was coming to chew them out about turning the check flight into a joyride. But then she saw the low shape of a six-wheeled robot fuel bowser nosing into place under the Osprey's wing and guessed that something else was up.

Evelyn saw the fuel truck too. "What's this? We barely touch down and we're tanking up again?"

Faridah unstrapped and climbed out of the hatch behind the cockpit to meet her employer as he stepped up. Getting a closer look at him, she had the sense that Cheng was under stress, but she knew that he would never admit that to her.

"Hey, Malik," he began. "Listen, you need to top off and head back out." He jerked a thumb at the control hut

across the short runway. “There’s a new flight plan for you.”

She nodded at the sleeker jet VTOLs. “Can’t one of them take it? Maybe Fynn or one of the other pilots? The replacement engine, it ought to have one of the techs give it a look over-”

He cut her off with a shake of the head. “No can do. A timetable has been moved up, and we have a job to do.” Cheng straightened and self-consciously adjusted the floral lapels of his jacket. “It’s a special request from one of our, ah, elite clients,” he added.

Faridah said nothing. It was an open secret among the ArcAir crews that Cheng’s company had an ongoing relationship with the Red Arrow triad, one of many Chinese organized crime groups that operated in dozens of cities around the world. It wasn’t a shocking truth – in Hengsha it was just a fact of life, the price of doing business in a city where criminal gangs kept the peace better than the corporate rent-a-cops ever could. His so-called ‘elite clients’ were usually senior Red Arrow members, who paid him back in influence for no-questions-asked trips that never got logged by city flight control. Faridah and Evelyn had steered clear of such things, though; if she dwelled on it too long, Malik became uncomfortable with the questions such thoughts raised, and she preferred to stay out of Cheng’s shady dealings as much as she could. If ArcAir was a Red Arrow shell company, she didn’t want to know about it, and she damn well wasn’t going to voice such suspicions openly.

“What’s the op?” Evelyn stood in the open hatch, having heard Cheng’s words. “You want us to go pick up some rich kid’s Benz from the mainland?”

Cheng didn’t respond because his attention had been drawn away by a trio of men crossing the landing pad toward the Osprey. The first drops of rain were starting to fall as they came into the glare of the VTOL’s navigation lights, and the first thing Faridah saw were the guns.

Two of the men wore light ballistic flex-armor and full-face helmet rigs, with stubby shotguns mag-locked to their backs. The pilot had seen their type before, usually on patrol through the rougher parts of the Jiu Shichang

district in Lower Hengsha; troopers from Belltower, the big mercenary contractor that handled most of the city's security. Something about them always set her off, the blunt swagger the troopers put in their walk. The stylized bull-head logo of the PMC appeared on the shoulders of their armor; and it was there on the tactical gear of the third man as well.

Dark skinned, with a cast to his features that suggested Indian or North African extraction, the third man was clearly in charge. He was a head taller than his escorts, clad in high-impact armor plate that looked better suited for a front line combat zone than urban operations. He fairly towered over Cheng, who recovered as best he could at the unexpected arrival.

"Mister Khan," began Cheng, sweat beading on his forehead. "I'm just finalizing the details with my pilots now. They'll be departing momentarily."

Khan gave an airy nod, surveying the Osprey before he glanced at Faridah and Evelyn. "I hope your crew understand we're dealing with a high-value cargo here. We can't afford any mistakes."

Evelyn shot Faridah a look that communicated a shared disquiet, and disappeared back into the aircraft. "I'll check the fuel levels."

The big man held out a data pad to Faridah, and she took it, frowning as she read the flight plan details displayed there. "You want us to go here? These co-ordinates are out across the Yangtze river delta. That's the edge of the East China Sea, there's nowhere to land out there."

"That's not your concern," Khan replied. He had a slow, measured manner that seemed to put the echo of a sneer into everything he said. "Just fly the plane."

"What about the weather?" she insisted, using the pad to point at the sky. The rain was gentle, but the thick black clouds gathering to the East threatened much worse. "Because that really is my concern. This course will send us right into the teeth of a storm front."

“Is that an issue? I was told you were a very good pilot, Ms. Malik.” Something about Khan knowing her name made Faridah’s gut twist. “I’d hate to think Cheng here was overselling you.”

“My crew will return with your cargo in short order,” Cheng insisted, shooting a warning look at Faridah. “The storm is still hours out.” She doubted her employer’s liberal prediction of the weather pattern, but clearly her opinions were going to carry little weight here.

Khan nodded to his men, and they stepped back. One of them cocked his head as he sub-vocalized into an implanted infolink.

“This transfer has to be supervised,” Khan continued. He pushed past Cheng and took a step toward the Osprey. The other man looked as if he was about to protest, but then Khan laid a heavy, lidded stare on him and Cheng swallowed his objection with a nod.

“We’re not exactly set up to carry passengers,” said Faridah.

“I’ll manage,” Khan demurred, then gestured at the hatch. “After you?”

Faridah’s jaw hardened and she climbed back aboard the Osprey. “Just don’t go looking for the flight attendant,” she said over her shoulder.

Khan gave her an indulgent smile and climbed in after her. Faridah felt the Osprey’s nose gear sink slightly as the big man set his weight onto the aircraft. She wondered about the armor he wore, and realized that whatever extra mass he was carrying, it was likely to be in the form of heavy-duty cybernetic limbs and sub-dermal implants. This guy’s a tank, she thought. Which begs the question – what’s he here to protect?

* * *

Faridah and Evelyn changed stations in the cockpit and she took the V-22 out from the ArcAir landing field,

letting the big triple-bladed rotors angle forward and slice into the damp air. Moving fast and true a hundred feet off the whitecaps coming in from the sea, Faridah shifted the angle of the wingtip props to level flight and eased the Osprey's throttles forward. The chattering blades cut into the fine rain falling from the clouds that lead the bigger storm beyond, and despite a flight path that aimed them directly into a steady headwind, they made good time out from Hengsha. Still, the late morning looked like nightfall now, the rising sun that had welcomed Faridah as she jumped lost behind the veil of the oncoming storm.

She and Evelyn kept their conversation to a minimum, sticking to shop talk and call-outs as they left Hengsha airspace for the open sea. Neither of them really needed to say what they were thinking out loud, they knew each other well enough to read the emotions in small gestures or turns of the head. After take off, Evelyn had very deliberately glanced over her shoulder to the rear cabin, where Khan was riding out the bumpy flight in a folding seat. She toyed with her earlobe, made it look like an idle motion, but Faridah read it for what it really meant. He's listening to us.

She gave a small nod. It stood to reason that if Kahn was a much a hanzer as Faridah thought he was, he probably had aural implants capable of snatching their conversation from among the noise of the VTOL's rotors.

"How the temp?" she asked, nodding at the gauge for the replacement engine.

"Good," Evelyn replied. "Would have liked to cool it down some first, but..." She trailed off, catching sight of something out beyond the Osprey's nose. "What's that? Your eleven o'clock?"

Faridah saw it, a slab-sided shape low against the waves, rising and falling in the growing swell. She glanced down at the digital notepad on the thigh of her flight suit, lit with the data Kahn had given her. "We're coming up on the coordinates. Is this what we're looking for?"

It was a cargo ship, an ugly brick of a vessel shouldering its way through the water, heavily laden with containers of varying sizes. They were approaching from the aft, and as Faridah's eyes followed the churn of the ship's wake

she saw a massive corporate sigil above a Panamanian flag and the vessel's name; Bel Canto.

"XNG Shipping," said Evelyn, reading the company identifier painted across the hull. "Judging by the heading, they're on a course for Osaka. Guess they don't have time to stop off in our town."

"Yeah," said Faridah quietly, "how about that." She wondered what could be of interest to someone from Belltower on a ship sailing from Panama to Japan. Everything about this impromptu sortie was ringing a wrong note with her, and it bothered Faridah that she couldn't see a pattern to it. Cheng was in the pocket of the Red Arrow, that was a given... But what connection did he or the triad have with Belltower and their erstwhile passenger? Did the PMC have the same kind of relationship with the triad that ArcAir did?

The questions rose up from that place inside Faridah Malik where she had been carefully hiding them away, unwilling to look too closely at the doubts she had about the city she had made her home.

Ahead on the mid-deck of the Bel Canto, a ring of lights snapped on, designating a landing area. "Can you put us down there?" said Khan, from the cockpit doorway.

Faridah stiffened in her seat. She hadn't heard him approaching, and given his size, the fact he could be stealthy with it troubled her even more.

"Sure," Evelyn was saying. "You shouldn't be moving around the cabin, though."

"Don't worry about me."

"Whatever you say, pal," said Faridah, and she deliberately dipped the Osprey's nose sharply, forcing Khan to grab at the airframe to support himself. Turning the control yoke, she put the aircraft into a tight banking turn that crossed the Bel Canto's mid-deck. Working the tilt-rotors, the pilot guided the Osprey down with a solid bump as the wheels touched the helipad.

"Open the hatch," Khan ordered, and Evelyn complied. When Faridah's co-pilot moved to climb out of her seat, the Belltower mercenary held up a gloved hand. "No. You wait in here. We won't be on deck for long."

When he was gone, Evelyn glanced at Faridah. “He doesn’t want us to get a good look at what they’re loading.”

Faridah leaned forward in her chair, peering through the wet glass of the canopy. She made out figures bringing up cylindrical white containers, tubes a little over two meters long and half a meter around the width.

“So now we both get to add smuggling to our resumes,” Faridah said quietly. “Must be some kinda cargo they don’t want anyone from customs to see.”

“What do you think it is?” asked Evelyn. “Drugs?”

“Maybe...” Faridah considered that possibility. “Weapons would be more likely. Something the government of the People’s Republic would not want on their shores...” An unpleasant thought occurred to her as she realized that the containers would be large enough to hold anything up to and including a tactical nuke. A chill ran through her, and she pushed the thought away.

The Osprey shifted on its undercarriage as four of the capsules were dragged aboard and lashed down with cargo nets. Sharp white light flashed in the corner of Faridah’s eye, drawing her attention away. Over the sound of the waves came the low, bass rumble of thunder, followed a few seconds later by a second flash of light. This time, she was looking right at the lightning as it zigzagged down to the surface of the sea. Faridah’s augmented vision cut the glare from the jagged line of white, and she saw the flash-glow pool on the Bel Canto’s deck.

There was Kahn, standing off to one side in conversation with a tall, whipcord-thin woman dressed in shiny black leather; but not exactly in conversation, she thought, he’s doing all the talking. Tugged by the wind, a spindly pennant of black hair trailed from the top of the woman’s half-shaven head, and her expression was one of feral patience. She was very still, Faridah noticed, while Kahn was moving from foot to foot around her. Fighter’s reflexes, she guessed. The big Belltower merc seemed to consider the woman a threat, despite the obvious disparity in their physical builds.

Faridah watched the woman give Khan something – a pocket secretary, maybe? – and then wordlessly dismiss him, stalking away across the deck. It was then she noticed the woman's legs; they were augmentations, but exotics of a type Faridah had never seen before. Steel curves, thin like the limbs of a gazelle, that gave her walk an unnatural grace.

The lightning came again and Faridah blinked reflexively. Impossibly, in that instant the woman with the black jacket was gone. Faridah frowned and rubbed at her eyes, unsure of what she had – or had not – just seen.

"Pilot," called Khan, as he climbed back into the cargo compartment. "We're done here. Close up and get in the air."

Evelyn scowled. "This is going to be fun." Faridah's co-pilot tapped out a command on the control panel in front of her. "No, wait. Not fun. The other thing. Sure you can do this?"

"Buckle up," Faridah said, by way of a reply, and applied power to the rotors. The VTOL quivered and then rose sharply into the air, slipping sideways as a crosswind caught it. She gritted her teeth and compensated with a foot down on the rudder pedal, angling the props to lift them safely away. One of the Bel Canto's masts came unpleasantly close to the tail planes, but then they were up from the freighter's deck.

The Osprey turned hard and lurched unto a wall of heavy rain, shouldering its way back toward the Chinese coastline.

* * *

They were six miles out when the VTOL was hit.

In the half-second it took to happen, Faridah was cursing herself, cursing Cheng, cursing Khan and whoever the hell had set them up for this idiotic flight into danger. Lifting off the Bel Canto, she had made the choice to gun the motors and push the Osprey back to shore as fast as it could go, gambling on the power of the engines and

the tailwind to get them home before the storm could overtake the aircraft. The other option – to push up through the cloud, go high and over the storm front – hadn't seemed safe. But it was too late to second-guess herself now.

The sky that had toyed with her only hours earlier now seemed determined to grab Faridah's aircraft and rip it apart. The wind beat at the Osprey's wings, turbulent air causing it to drop into gut-twisting dives that brought the churning surface of the ocean too close for comfort.

But she was getting it there. Together with Evelyn, they were going to make it back ahead of the storm. And then the lightning.

A shriek of ionized air rattled the canopy windows and a spear of white light, bright as a laser, stroked the VTOL's fuselage. A fug of burnt-plastic smell flooded the cockpit, and lights went out across the dashboard in a wave from right to left as the electrical system overloaded. The Osprey twitched and lost power, the control returns becoming thick and unresponsive. Back in the cargo bay, something big and heavy shifted abruptly, crashing against the inside of the fuselage.

Faridah swore under her breath and punched the restart panel, but the controls remained dark. The Osprey's starboard wing dipped into the hard wind and the aircraft shuddered toward a flat spin.

"Screens are not coming back up," called Evelyn. "Ah, hell." She had her hands on the controls, struggling with the same inputs as Faridah. "We got a short. And this son of a bitch glides like a brick."

"The secondaries!" said Faridah, reaching for the latch on her chest that secured her four-point harness. "I'll go for it. Can you hold this thing on your own?"

"No!" Evelyn shot back, grimacing as the Osprey ignored every effort she made to bring it to a stable attitude. "So be quick!"

She didn't need to explain what she was doing; both pilots knew that the reconfigured VTOL had a secondary set of circuit breakers behind a panel in the cargo bay, and if Faridah could get to them, they had a chance to get

power running back to the Osprey's vital systems before it collided with the wave tops. At their speed and angle, it would be like striking a concrete wall. The V-22 would crumple and sink in seconds.

Faridah launched herself out of the pilot's chair and across the cramped cabin, catching sight of the sea flashing past the nose as the spin dragged them down. She cracked her arm against the hatchway, nerves numbed by the impact, but Faridah couldn't let it slow her.

She slipped across the tilting deck into the cargo bay and almost fell over Khan. He lay sprawled on the metal flooring, groaning and semi-conscious. The ends of the seatbelt on his chair flapped against the frame where the first bucking impact had jarred them loose; Khan had fallen hard, cracking his head on the deck, but she had no time to look to him.

Faridah pushed forward, past the white cargo pods straining against their nets, fighting the pull of gravity dragging her toward the hull wall as the Osprey's death-spin tightened. Hand over hand, she pulled her way to the breaker panel and tore off the cover with a savage yank. Faridah clawed at the flip-switches and with a sudden shiver of power, the doused lights inside the cargo bay flashed back on.

From the cockpit, Evelyn gave a yelp of success and the Osprey rocked as she applied more power to the props. The aircraft's engines howled and the fuselage creaked under the tension, but Faridah could immediately sense the shift in attitude and she knew that her friend had arrested their deadly descent.

Relief came over her in a wave and she let out the breath she didn't know she had been holding. Faridah started back toward the front of the aircraft, and it was only then she noticed how cold it was in the cargo bay.

The containers were radiating a meat locker chill, and from one of them came a spill of white vapor and the sharp tang of cryogenic chemicals. The capsule's lid was cracked open a few centimeters, doubtless jarred by the same tremor through the hull that had unseated Khan. Faridah went closer and saw that the curve of the cylinder was actually clear plastic, whitened by a layer of frost. And inside-

Inside was a man. A pale and lined patrician face, framed with shoulder-length grey hair. His expression was not one of a sleeper's repose, but of apprehension frozen in a single moment. Faridah reached for the container.

"What are you doing in here?" Khan was on his feet, one hand pressed to his head to staunch the wound there, the other holding on to a hull brace. "Step away." The mercenary hove closer, his broad shoulders and towering build filling the compartment with a ready threat.

"Right," said Faridah, "Yeah." She moved past him before he could react and slipped back into the cockpit.

Evelyn threw her a weary but triumphant look. "Damn, girl, that was too close..." She trailed off, seeing her friend's troubled expression. "Ri, are you okay? Are you hurt?"

Faridah shook her head firmly, falling into the pilot's chair. "Just... Let's just get this thing down."

Evelyn nodded. "Right. Nearest pad is-

"No." Khan was in the doorway again. The hard edges of his face were made even uglier by the streaks of blood from the cut on his forehead. "You land at the destination you were given and nowhere else, understand?"

"In case you weren't paying attention, we were just struck by lightning," growled Faridah. "We need to land, anywhere. Now."

"No," Kahn repeated, and he let his hand drop to the big Diamondback revolver holstered at his hip, nodding toward the lights of Upper Hengsha. "Do as you were told. Don't make me say it again."

Trailing a thin streamer of smoke from the starboard engine, the Osprey performed an inelegant touchdown on a wide octagonal landing pad outside a dome-shaped building. Here on the northern edge of upper city, where the government had zoned light engineering works and low-impact industry, there was little air traffic.

The storm, which mercifully had not followed them up the Yangtze beyond the river mouth, had still pushed a front of rain before it. As the aircraft settled, the noise of water off the canopy became a steady drumming.

"Where the hell is this?" said Faridah, scanning the view. "No pad transponder here, no geo-code." She studied the non-descript dome beyond, looking for anything like an identifier or corporate logo and coming up empty. The place had a clinical appearance to it, like a hospital or a laboratory.

"This district is usually off-limits to commercial traffic," offered Evelyn. "Government complexes around here, that's what Lee told me. That and all the top secret research and development centers for the big corporations... Tearglass, Kaiga, Tai Yong, those guys. They keep everything on the down-low for security reasons."

Faridah nodded, taking that in. She couldn't stop thinking about the face of the man inside the cryo-capsule. Khan was already out on the pad, supervising the unloading of the containers as box-lifter robots came in to carry the cylinders away in their metal claws.

Evelyn was climbing out of her seat. "I gotta get up on the wing, check where we got burned," she said, shaking her head. "I mean, if we can't take off again-"

"Make sure we can," Faridah told her, as she watched Kahn follow the loaders down a ramp and into a staging area below the landing pad. "I have to look at something..."

She pushed past her friend and made for the crew hatch. Evelyn called out, her expression a mix of confusion and worry. "Faridah! Don't. Just...don't get involved. Let's do this and get back to ArcAir. Whatever Cheng is into, we don't want to know about it, right?"

Faridah reached for the answer she usually gave, the choice to look the other way and push aside what troubled her; it wasn't there anymore.

"Just be ready to get airborne," she told her, slipping out of the aircraft and down toward the ramp.

* * *

It was easy enough for her to avoid being seen by the slow-moving gaze of the pad's Big Bro security monitor, and Faridah used racks of storage containers to hide herself as she found a vantage point on the wide concrete ramp. Crouching low, she watched the robots lay down the cryo-containers and retreat. Waiting for Khan was an oriental man in a sharply-tailored business suit and three more of the same kinds of Belltower troopers she had seen at ArcAir. A nervous young woman who appeared to be some kind of medical technician stood nearby.

"Were there any problems?" said the man in the suit, eyeing Khan's injury. He was clearly an executive of some sort.

"Bumpy flight," Khan replied. "Shall we get this done? I'm sure our employer doesn't want to waste her time and mine."

The suit nodded. "As you say." He nodded to the woman. "Open them."

The medic produced a handheld device and tapped out a code on its surface. The four capsules hissed open, releasing gusts of mist into the room. Each of them had a person lying inside, and the woman walked between them, taking readings and administering swift injections. "Intact," she announced, after a while.

Faridah's mind filled with questions as the four people in the capsules awakened and rose.

"Where is this?" said one, a portly Asian man.

"Welcome to Hengsha," said the executive, with a false smile. "And to your new employment!"

The group exchanged anxious glances. "We...we work for Isolay," said the grey-haired man, the one Faridah had glimpsed in the cargo bay. "In Lima," he added.

Isolay was one of the major manufacturers of human augmentation technologies in the western world, and Faridah recalled that they were in bitter competition with several of their Far Eastern rivals in China and Japan. If

these people were here, she doubted it was because they wished it.

The executive was nodding and smiling indulgently, as if he were talking to a child. "You are no longer employees of that company. Your skills were not being valued there. And so, it was decided that you might prefer to bring your expertise to a more... Lucrative workplace. We have taken the liberty of doubling your fees. You will be provided with new accommodation and facilities that far outstrip anything Isolay could offer you."

Suddenly, it was all clear to her. Faridah was witnessing the tail end of what was known as an 'enforced contractual transfer' – a fancy term for kidnapping. The old guy and these other former Isolay employees had probably been stolen off the streets in Lima for their knowledge and abilities, extracted forcibly and brought to their new homes. A brain-drain from one corporation to another, at gunpoint.

Faridah's jaw stiffened. It sickened her to know that she had been a part of something like this, through ArcAir and the Red Arrow in some kind of unholy alliance with Belltower and whatever corporation had ordered the trafficking of these people. She found herself wondering what other cargoes she had unknowingly carried for the triads, what might have been hidden in the crates and containers that she and Evelyn had never thought to consider. Part of her was ashamed that she had ever looked the other way.

You always suspected something like this was going on, said a voice inside her mind. And now you know for sure.

The older man was talking. "We don't want this," he snapped, gesturing sharply at the suit. "I have a wife and a daughter in Lima! A life! I did not agree to come work for thieves and kidnappers!"

"Now, wait," said the Asian man. "We should hear them out-"

"No!" The voice of the grey-haired man rose to a shout and he stepped toward the suit, shaking his fist. "You have no right, you have taken us against our will! This is a criminal act! Release us now!"

"We were informed this gentleman would be difficult," said Khan, with a sigh.

“Yes...” said the executive. “I had hoped he might change his mind. But I see that is not so.” Something passed between the man in the suit and Khan, a sly look and a turn of the head.

It was enough for the mercenary to draw his pistol, and in one smooth motion, place it on the old man’s chest and pull the trigger. The gun barked and the grey haired man was thrown back against his cryo-capsule by the blast.

The fixed, machine-like smile on the executive’s face did not waver in the slightest. “Would anyone else like to contest the details of their new contract?”

Faridah’s hand flew to her mouth and she recoiled from what she had seen. The casual brutality of the execution made her gorge rise, and for a long second she felt like she might throw up. An edge of panic in her movements, Faridah scrambled to her feet and sprinted away back up the ramp, back toward the parked VTOL.

She did not see Khan looking up toward the spot where she had been hiding, his brow furrowing as he parsed the sounds of movement gathered by his aural augmentations.

* * *

“So, the damage is not as bad as it looks,” Evelyn began, as Faridah raced up the Osprey’s drop ramp. “I think we’ll be able to make it back to ArcAir without any more-”

“Spin it up,” Faridah broke in, before she could finish her sentence. “We’re leaving.”

Her friend saw the pallid cast to her face. “Ri, what is it? What’s wrong, did that asshole Khan do something?”

Faridah frowned, the echo of the gunshot still ringing in her ears. “I saw...,” she started to speak, but she couldn’t say it aloud. “We... We’ve got to get out of here right now!”

The words had barely left her mouth before a low, skirling alarm tone sounded, and the shadows of men in

ballistic armor appeared on the ramp, moving swiftly toward the landing pad with their weapons drawn.

As the Belltower troopers drew level, the Osprey's twin rotors were already chopping at the air. The downdraft beat hard at them, making it impossible for the troopers to draw a bead on the aircraft. Still, they opened fire, ten-gauge blasts crashing from the muzzles of their Widowmaker shotguns.

The VTOL lifted off with a full-power surge to the engines, kicking up a small hurricane of dust and loose debris that blinded the troopers and covered the aircraft's escape.

* * *

"They were firing at us!" Evelyn gave Faridah a hard look, her voice rising. "Why the hell were they trying to bring us down?"

"Did you hear the shot?" Faridah's gaze was fixed on the view out of the cockpit. "Before?"

"What?" Evelyn's expression became one of confusion. "Look, if we just go back there, you can explain all this, right?"

Faridah shook her head, angling the Osprey to thread the needle through a suntrap in the upper deck of the city complex. "That's not gonna work." The aircraft dropped through a wide open void in the pangu and fell into the shadows of Lower Hengsha.

Evelyn heard the firm refusal in her friend's tone and was silent for long minutes. As they turned inbound toward the artificial reef and the ArcAir landing strip, she found her voice again. "Faridah, what did you do back there? You can tell me. Was it something about that cargo?"

People. There were innocent people in those containers. The words pushed at her lips and she wanted to shout them out loud. Murder. We're party to kidnapping and a cold-blooded murder. But instead her throat

tightened and she found she could not speak. Faridah was suddenly very aware of the implant in her skull, feeling the false weight of the augmentation as if it had grown heavier because of what it now carried. There, in the memory buffer of her black box, was the footage of Khan executing the Isolay scientist. A killing caught in motion. She could not unsee it.

All she had to do was blink-click the right series of commands and the footage would replay in her mind's eye. The gunshot. The old man's rag-doll body hurled away by the blast. She felt sick again.

Faridah shuddered and shook her head. "We...have to land."

* * *

The Osprey came down on the south pad and Evelyn unstrapped, climbing out of her seat to face her. "Talk to me," she said, raising her voice to pitch it over the sound of the rotors as they slowed to idle. "I'm your friend, I'm in this with you. Remember? You and me against the world, right?"

"Right," Faridah replied, in a weak voice. But still she said nothing. An icy chill filled the pilot's gut, the color draining from her face. After what she had witnessed, could she put her best friend at risk by sharing that knowledge? The Belltower troopers had been coming for her; but Evelyn Carmichael was just someone who was unlucky enough to be friends with a reckless, foolish woman whose conscience had pushed her over the edge.

Faridah looked up, out of the canopy, and her gaze found Jai Cheng. He stood on the flight apron near one of the jets, and he was staring right at her. He had a vu-phone pressed to his ear and in his expression there was absolutely no hint of the friendly, affable guy Faridah had got to know over the months she had worked for him. In that second she realized her grave mistake in coming back to the ArcAir landing field.

Cheng was talking to them right now, she knew it instinctively; on the other end of that call there had to be someone from the Red Arrow demanding the head of Faridah Malik on a platter.

"I'm sorry..." She said. "Ev, I've put you in danger."

"What are you talking about?" said the other woman.

Faridah did not get the chance to reply. There was a clanking sound from the rear compartment and she turned in her seat to see Lau climbing into the cargo bay.

Lau was what passed for security at ArcAir, and both Faridah and Evelyn had learned early on to avoid him. A former go-ganger from the bad side of Beijing, he was all angles and foul moods, his shorn scalp covered with violent tattoos depicting fiery dragons and monstrous animals. Barely contained by the mock-leather biker's rig he wore, Lau had a tricky manner and a thuggish attitude. "Hey," he said, addressing Evelyn. "Cheng sent me. Wants to talk to you." He pointed out on to the apron. "Don't keep him waiting."

"You should do what he says," Faridah said quickly, before her friend could protest. "It's okay."

Evelyn gave her a suspicious look. "All right," she said reluctantly. "I'll see you in debrief?"

"In debrief, yeah," lied Faridah. "Be right there."

Lau waited for the other pilot to step off the open drop ramp and disappear out of sight, then he pulled a compact MAO automatic from his belt loop and aimed it into the cockpit. "Good girl," he sniffed. "Now don't make me put a bullet in that pretty guilao ass of yours. We don't want to make this any harder than it has to be."

"No," said Faridah. Her hands were still on the controls, and outside the Osprey's pitched rotors were still turning lazily.

"Shut this thing down," Lau demanded. "There are some people who want to have a talk with you."

"Sure." What she did next did not feel like a deliberate decision; instead her body seemed to react without Faridah's conscious input.

With one hand she slammed the throttles all the way to the stops, feeding maximum power to the engines in

a fraction of a second. Rotors howling, the Osprey jerked forward and leapt clumsily off the landing pad. With the other hand, she pulled back sharply on the flight yoke, and the aircraft's nose rose sharply.

Lau stumbled as the VTOL left the ground, his free hand flailing for something to grab at as the deck tilted underneath his feet. He cried out and jerked the trigger of his pistol, sending wild shots into the walls of the cabin and through the hatchway into the cockpit.

A ricochet cracked the armored glass of the canopy and whined off the panel, causing Faridah to flinch away. She pulled on the controls and the Osprey tipped out of its near-stall, wallowing into a steep turn.

Shifting the pitch of the wingtip engines, Faridah put the aircraft into a climb and powered away from the ArcAir landing strip, skimming the roofs of nearby warehouses.

"You go tsao de bitch!" Lau shouted, punctuating his words with another salvo of shots. "You're crazy!"

"It has been said," Faridah nodded to herself as she put the Osprey into a hard, fast wing-over to shake loose the gun thug. Lau gave a high-pitched scream that trailed away to nothing as he lost his grip and tumbled through the open hatch at the back of the aircraft.

She tried not to think about what would happen to Lau, dashed to the ground somewhere below or thrown out over the shore. He was going to kill you, she told herself. You had no choice.

A chaotic mix of emotions ran through Faridah; sorrow and anger, fear and elation. She touched on a moment of memory from the skydive earlier that morning, the sheer sense of wild freedom that had come over her. This felt the same, but colored with shadows. It was the thrill of cheating death, of stealing away from the darkness.

"I know what you did," she said to the air. "I saw what I wasn't supposed to see..."

"ArcAir Zero-Niner-Niner." Faridah jumped at the sound of the voice through her headset. "Malik. This is Cheng. Turn around before you do something we'll all regret."

She hesitated, drawing on her strength to keep her voice level and calm. "I already regret something, Jai. Working for you. And your pals in the Red Arrow."

She heard him sigh. "I wish you hadn't said that."

"Do you know what was in those containers? Do you know what that bastard Khan did?"

"I've always known. It's just business. Now, get back here. Unless you want your friend to suffer in your place."

The pilot's eyes narrowed. "Evelyn doesn't know anything. You hurt her and I'll tell the whole world what you and Belltower are doing out here." She shifted course, staying low to follow the coastal edge of the lower city.

Cheng sighed again. "Ah, Malik. If that's how you want it, okay. You're not going to live that long." The radio channel cut with a crackle of static, his threat echoing in her thoughts.

A heartbeat later, something small and angular shot past the Osprey's cockpit in a blur, nearly forcing the VTOL into a collision.

* * *

The drones deployed from Belltower's central security tower in Upper Hengsha within moments of an alert signal sent under the authorization of Major Nahari Khan, an operational field officer of the Hengsha District Command.

Fast, low-observable mobiles, each of the three unmanned aerial vehicles resembled a delta-winged lawn dart. Powerful vectored thrusters kept the drones in the air, and a globe of sensor eyes and camera windows on the nose allowed the machines to function in a semi-autonomous mode. Their limited, dog-smart on-board artificial intelligences were quick enough to lock on to the silhouette of the fleeing V-22 Osprey; they were assisted by the Red Arrow's provision of the target's transponder frequency, and in short order the drones had been able to

triangulate the target's location. Typically, these autonomous aircraft were deployed in long, loitering missions for surveillance of persons of interest to Belltower and its clients. But not today.

Khan used a voice interface to give the machines simple and direct orders. "Weapons free," he told them. "Seek and destroy."

* * *

Shards of red tracer fire lashed past the Osprey's cockpit and Faridah pushed the nose down, dropping out of the mid-level air corridor over the city and into the narrow confines of Lower Hengsha's streets. Canyons of glass and steel hemmed her in on both sides, and in some places the spinning rotors on the VTOL's wingtips chopped air less than four meters away from the balconies of apartment blocks. She saw the ghosts of terrified faces peering through windows as she shot past.

Without pilots on board, the Belltower drones were capable of making steep high-g turns that would have caused a human to black out and crash. They moved like a flock of raptors, harrying her at every turn.

The Osprey blew across a wide rooftop yard in a snarl of engine noise, blasting aside lines of hanging washing in a brief hurricane of sound and fury. As she pivoted the aircraft into another turn, Faridah caught a glimpse of the lead drone – a black shape with a sharp, smooth profile and the muzzle of a gun pod slung beneath its fuselage. More tracer shots crackled through the air, and she did her best to jink away – but the V-22 wasn't a fighter plane and it lacked the agility to duel with the smaller robot flyers. Hours earlier, she had been risking her life for the sheer hell of it. Now she had no other choice.

Part of her couldn't believe this was happening. An aerial chase through downtown Hengsha? It would be impossible to keep something like that out of the news feeds and off the social network sites. Belltower and whomever was pulling their strings couldn't hope to hush that up...could they?

Then she thought about all the reports of 'gang warfare' and unusual 'accidents' she saw on the local Picus TV affiliate and wondered how many of them had been people like her, who saw too much and didn't run fast enough.

That galvanized Faridah and she concentrated on the path ahead, thinking her way through streets that were familiar to her from forays into the nightclubs of the Kuaigan and Daigong districts.

"All right boys," she said to the drones. "Try to keep up."

A crossroads came up fast, the junction of Perfume Row and the Street of Six Dragons. Faridah stamped on the Osprey's rudder pedals and made the aircraft drift into a wallowing spin, trading speed and height for angle and impetus. She threw the VTOL into a ninety-degree turn and shot away in a southerly direction. Six Dragon Street was a three-lane roadway, comparatively wide for a Hengsha avenue, but up off the ground the width of it was choked by tall illuminated billboards that extended out from the side of the buildings.

She waited until the last second to put the Osprey into a heavy half-roll, pitching it up on to one wingtip as a neon screen advertising Happy Carp Beer loomed large before her.

The lead drone, bore-sighted on putting rounds into the back of its target, detected the billboard too late. Fast, but too fast to maneuver in the tight confines of the street, the unmanned aerial vehicle collided with the shimmering lights. Glass and metal rained down on the street below. The smoking fuselage of the drone ripped through the billboard and carried on for half a block before its forward momentum planted it in a deserted alleyway.

"Splash one," Faridah called out the words, defiant and challenging. "Who's next?"

Networking with its cohort right until the moment it was destroyed, the second drone took a different tack. It described a wide barrel roll that took it up over the Osprey. The drone's gun pod pivoted and strafed the VTOL as it passed. Faridah felt the punching recoil of heavy-gauge rounds as they punctured the wings and the fuselage. Warning lights pinged into life on the dashboard, but nothing was on fire and nothing was dead, so for now she ignored them.

Faridah gripped the controls grimly. She was a damn good pilot, that was never in doubt; but the Osprey had limits and so did she. The drones were going to get her, it was only a matter of time. To get out of this alive, she had to think fast and think smart. She had to find another way out.

In the meantime...

It was dangerous to alter the pitch of the rotors over a certain airspeed and Faridah was well past that red line, but she didn't have the liberty of following the manual. Yanking the controls over hard to port, the pilot threw the Osprey down a blind corner, ripping through a web of power cables strung between two narrow housing towers.

The second drone blared past, pulling into a vertical Immelmann turn that would bring it back toward the fleeing VTOL; the third drone mimicked Faridah's course and followed her around the blind corner.

The side street ended in a brick wall that climbed high off the ground, and floating there in front of it was the Osprey, the tilt-rotors pitched up to make the aircraft hover like a helicopter.

Faridah watched the drone pass over top of her cockpit, airbrakes deploying as it frantically tried to bleed off speed. She revved the engines and applied power, and in the throat of the blocked passage, the confined downdraft was like a sudden blast of wind. The surge disrupted the airflow over the third drone's razor-thin winglets and spun it into the wall with a concussive burst of fire.

Still turning in place, spinning upwards, Faridah guided the Osprey past more gaping windows and the bright panels of holographic signs. There were more red lights on the control panel now, and she could feel the aircraft becoming sluggish. Hydraulic pressure was ebbing away, engine heat levels were rising too fast.

"One last thing, big guy," she said to it, willing the machine to stay airborne for a few moments more. "Don't let me down now."

Below and to the starboard, light glittered off black metal and Faridah knew that the last of the drones was coming around, drawing a firing solution on her that would rip the Osprey apart. They were over a construction

zone now, the skeletons of bank towers and office blocks on all sides. She saw figures in orange hazard vests scrambling away even as their robotic co-workers ignored the sight of the aircraft buzzing overhead.

Laser light from a rangefinder licked the front of the aircraft, flickering as it touched the bullet-shattered glass.

“You think you got me?” she asked. “You haven’t got me.”

Faridah pivoted the props and pushed the throttle forward, the Osprey dropping into a dive that took it straight toward the rising drone. She tried to imagine what the Belltower operator monitoring the machine’s nose camera was thinking in those last seconds, as the big VTOL came thundering in to fill the screen. Was that bastard Khan watching? Did he see her face through the canopy in the last seconds, the hard daring in her eyes, the refusal to surrender in the set of her jaw?

The drone tried to veer away, but the Osprey slammed into the unmanned vehicle, in a jousting pass that tore the smaller aircraft in two. The VTOL suffered for the act, the airframe ripping open and spurts of fire igniting along the ventral surface of its wings.

Black smoke pouring from holes in the fuselage, the Osprey howled as it twisted into a flat spin. Skidding through the air, its port rotors sliced the thick plastic sheath covering the scaffolding around the unfinished upper floors of a L.I.M.B. clinic, and the Osprey crashed tail-first into the skeletal concrete frame of the building, lodging there.

Fire bloomed around the point of impact, orange and black lighting up the surroundings, reflecting back off the underside of the pangu overhead.

The Osprey burned fast, never to rise again.

* * *

“Why won’t anyone tell me what is going on?” shouted Evelyn, her patience cracking. “Faridah gets us shot at, she spooks and runs... That’s not like her!” She glared at Cheng from across the ArcAir pilot’s lounge, her hands tightening into fists. “What did you make us do, Jai?”

“Your job,” he shot back, matching her angry tone. “Didn’t I tell you a hundred times, just fly the damn helos and let me worry about the rest. Is that so hard for you to understand?”

“You pay us to be pilots, not blind!”

His vu-phone sounded with a samisen ring-tone, and he cut it off within the first few notes, ignoring the woman’s retort. “Go for Cheng,” he said. The man was silent for a moment, and Evelyn could hear the mutter of a deep, indolent voice on the other end of the line. Khan, she guessed, calling to check in.

Cheng looked at her coldly. “What about the other one?” There was another distant reply and his lips thinned. “You’re certain of that...? All right. I’ll take it from here.”

He hung up and studied Evelyn. Her anger cooled as the seriousness of her situation caught up with her. If all the stories about Cheng’s relationship with the Red Arrow were true, then Evelyn and Faridah could be in the worst kind of trouble...

“Malik took the Osprey downtown, did something foolish. She clipped a building.”

Evelyn backed away a step, feeling a sudden hollow open up inside her. “No...”

“Went up in flames,” Cheng continued, without an iota of pity. “Malik’s dead, and she’s cost me an aircraft and my reputation. You get that? Do you?”

“No,” Evelyn was shaking her head. She suddenly felt dizzy. “That’s not possible.”

He turned away. “People are gonna ask... And I’m going to tell them I caught her skimming from ArcAir’s

finances.”

“That’s not true!” The denial burst from her in a snarl. “I won’t lie about her!” Evelyn aimed a finger at him. “This is because of you! She’s dead because of you!” Tears prickled her eyes. She could hardly believe it. Faridah, gone? Evelyn tried to hold on to the memory of that moment in the air after the skydive, her friend’s bright smile and sheer sense of life. It faded from her, guttering out like a doused candle.

Cheng advanced toward Evelyn, shaking his head. “Think very carefully about what you’re going to say next. The only reason you’re standing here right now is because Lee Hong has a thing for you, and his family have influence. The people I work for don’t want to piss them off, so be grateful...” He lowered his voice to a harsh whisper. “So you say and do nothing. Be smart. Because if you do open your damn mouth, not even your well-connected new boyfriend will be able to help you.”

In that moment, Evelyn hated him more than she could express, and she turned away, fighting to hold her grief in check.

Out beyond the edges of the landing field, among the towers of Lower Hengsha, a pillar of black smoke was rising.

* * *

There was an axiom that all pilots shared, dating back to the days of the first propeller-driven flyers, when the skies were harsh and deadly to all those who reached for them. Any landing you can walk away from is a good one.

It didn’t matter if your aircraft came apart around you; if you made it down alive, you could consider yourself lucky.

Faridah Malik didn’t feel very damned lucky at all, despite the evidence to the contrary. As she sheltered on a high balcony, on a derelict building across from the construction site where the Osprey had made its final

touchdown, all she felt was a weight of sorrow.

Flames consumed the VTOL, stripping away the skin of the fuselage and exposing the ribs of the hull beneath. She heard glass fracture and pop, smelled the acrid tang of burning aviation fuel. The Osprey was being devoured before her eyes, and her life here in Hengsha went with it.

Those final moments before the aircraft collided with the drone were a blur of impressions, and she knew if she wanted to, she could recall them through the memory buffer in her implant, freeze-frame each one and sift it for detail. But the thought of that rang a wrong note with her. All at once, the only thing Faridah wanted was to get away from this place, and to deactivate the black box implant once and for all.

She remembered the impulse clearly enough. The certain knowledge that she was a dead woman unless she could escape the claws of the Red Arrow and their Belltower cohorts. They wanted her dead...so she would die for them.

In the seconds before the fatal impact, Faridah detached her harness and threw herself toward the crew hatch. She struck the tab on the wingsuit and felt the sails snap open as she left the Osprey behind. The air, swelling around her. The fall, arrested.

Then the blast, hot gas and fumes hitting her back in a tidal wave of force. It blew her into the side of the derelict apartment block, and she might have fallen all the way to the streets far below if she hadn't been ready, if Faridah Malik hadn't been as quick as she was.

So now she sat, watching the fire eating her life, and picked through the pockets of her suit for all that remained. Faridah found her vu-phone, and thought about tossing it from the window; then another idea occurred to her.

Evelyn's name blinked at her from the top of her contact list. She wanted to hear her friend's voice, to know that she was alive and well, but she hesitated to tap the 'call' key. I'm dead. I'm going to have to stay that way for

a while. If Cheng or Khan know I'm alive... Evelyn won't be safe. They'll use her to get to me.

That truth brought another in its wake. She could not stay in Hengsha. Belltower's security forces ruled the lower city, and all it would take was one watchful trooper to recognize her face.

She thumbed down the list and found a different name. Maji Duc Tranh. An older guy, divorced from a capricious wife who had left him with a sickly son and a hard job working for Hengsha's much-denigrated State Police authority.

I owe you the greatest debt a father can know. Maji had said those words to Faridah one cold morning, years ago on the rooftop helipad of a pediatric hospital in Taiwan. She had been an air-ambulance pilot then, and Maji's son would have died that day if not for the mercy flight Faridah had flown. Anything you need, he had said. You only have to ask.

He was surprised to hear her voice when he answered. News had already filtered out to the State Police, a grudging report from Belltower Security to let the local law know that they were handling this 'incident'. They were saying she was dead. That she was a thief and a fool.

Faridah let the lie wash over her and told Maji that she was calling in the debt. He didn't hesitate to offer his help. He was a good man, and he knew people who could get her out of the city. It would be done by nightfall, he told her. Debt paid, and gladly done.

"But where will you go?" he asked.

It could not be close, she knew that. Seoul or Hong Kong, even Tokyo would be too near, too much of a risk. The Red Arrow triad had influence all across the Pacific Rim. She had to go far, and – at least for now – stay dead.

Faridah asked Maji to watch out for Evelyn while she was gone. In time, once she was safe and far from the eyes of the Red Arrow, he could pass a message to her friend and let her know that she had cheated death, done it one more time.

The question still echoed. Where will you go? With one single act, with a moment of defiance, Faridah had destroyed the life she had made for herself here. That should have been cause for sadness, but it wasn't.

That darker emotion fell away now, burning off like the shell of the stricken Osprey. Beyond it, she felt renewed. She felt free and she felt bold. Faridah vowed that what she had seen, what she knew about Cheng and ArcAir, would find its way to net and to people who spread the truth. When Jai Cheng's secrets were forced into the light, the Red Arrow would turn its attention to him, and all his mistakes. Payback's a bitch, she thought.

There was one other thing in the pocket of the wingsuit; a business card, an archaic thing in a digital age, crumpled and torn, long forgotten. Faridah remembered being given it by a friend of her uncle's. He'd talked about a job, a tech company back home in Michigan that needed good pilots like her.

The company logo was a stylized wing, raised high to capture the air. The name – Sarif – made her think of angels. Angels falling, catching the wind in skies full of amber sunlight and grey clouds.

"Detroit," she told Maji. "I'm going to Detroit."



