

# THE BATTLE FOR NOWHERE

A Mike Cribb Pulp Adventure

In the Style of Doc Savage

By William Skelly

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A CORPSE THAT SHOULDN'T EXIST leads Mike Cribb and his team of master engineers to a secret civilization underneath the frozen continent of Antarctica. But not all is as it seems in the underground utopia. Can Mike and his team untangle a web of deception surrounding the base, and catch a traitor before he discovers the dark secret – a way to turn the fruits of their scientific genius into the most terrible weapon of war ever devised?

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## Chapter I

### RENDEZVOUS

SCOTT anxiously checked his radar scope as he circled at 15,00 feet. The sky outside was pitch dark, and would remain so for another week before the first hints of Antarctic dawn. Although he couldn't see it, Scott knew that below him was a canyon that cut 700 feet into the dolerite sills. Arrival over that canyon had always been cause for relief, but today Greg was late.

Scott re-checked his navigation. He was certain the canyon was directly below him.

*Could the helicopter have gotten lost in the darkness? No, Scott reasoned. Greg has ten times more hours than me flying over this terrain, and I've been doing this for years. With decades of experience like that, he couldn't have missed the rendezvous point. But then...* The alternative was even more unlikely, and unsettling. The chronometer said the helicopter was now twenty minutes overdue.

A blip appeared on the scope.

*There you are!*

A wave of relief passed over Scott. The scope refreshed, and relief turned to apprehension. The blip was moving far too fast to be a supply-laden cargo helicopter, too fast even for the base's fastest rescue helicopter. Scott looked carefully at the aircraft's course. It was on a path to miss Scott's position by five miles.

*Probably just a C130 doing a cargo run between bases,* he reassured himself.

Thankful for the cover of darkness, Scott eased the throttle back to reduce his already low noise signature. His ship was designed to be nearly undetectable by all but the most advanced military radar, but best not to take any chances. He kept circling and watching the scope.

The blip turned. It was now on course to pass within half a mile of Scott. He cut the throttle, feathered his prop, and began gliding on silent wings.

*Try to find me now,* Scott taunted the pilot of what he presumed to be a C130. The course change unnerved Scott, but it could be explained away within reason. The blip was now ten miles away.

The next refresh of the radar scope made Scott's eyes widen with fear. The blip had accelerated and was now travelling 600 miles an hour – faster than any aircraft Scott knew to be stationed at the base. The mysterious ship turned again. It was now on a collision course! At this speed, there was only one minute until impact.

The time for stealth was gone. Scott shoved the throttle forward for maximum power and his prop spun to life. Even at full power, his peculiar ship was incredibly quiet.

*How the hell did he see me?* Scott wondered as he jerked the stick into his lap. His mysterious crate leaped up into a near-vertical power climb. The dull whine of an approaching jet engine filled the air. Tracers streaked below.

Before the unseen enemy could walk the tracers up to Scott's climbing mystery ship, the blip closed on the radar screen. A dark shape roared below. Scott let his climb develop into a

loop and entered a power dive. He knew if he tried to outrun the jet in his prop-driven job, he was a dead duck. His only hope was the canyon below. He was confident nothing could outmaneuver his stealthy craft at low level.

“I’ve got to protect the secret,” Scott whispered to himself.

The enemy crate had come around and was about to make another pass. Scott jammed the stick back into his lap. He clenched his leg muscles to fight the g-force from the pullout. The accelerometer read eight G’s. The nose of the oncoming jet flashed red. Its pilot had anticipated Scott’s maneuver.

Tracer threads weaved around Scott’s plane, each burst closer than the last. Then, a group of threads jabbed directly into his fuselage. The prop-driven craft was rocked by an explosion. He was hit! Scott tried to level out, but another burst took out part of his horizontal tail and he began diving out of control. The jet screamed overhead.

Green flames spurted into the cockpit from behind. Scott looked out the windows and saw that the eerie blaze was spreading to his right wing. Scott patted his seat-pack parachute, but did not move to bail out yet. He used his map-reading flashlight to smash out the side window, then reached under his seat and grabbed a white, three foot long bundle. The bundle writhed as he handled it. That bundle was the only hope for everything he, Greg, and the others had worked for. That it landed in the right hands was critical.

Scott threw the bundle out the window. Following it with his flashlight, he saw it fall a hundred feet before it sprouted wings and sailed off into the darkness. Turning his attention back to his doomed plane, he saw that the sinister flames had spread to the empty co-pilot’s position. It was getting unbearably hot in the cockpit, and the fire was devouring all the oxygen in the cabin.

“If I bail out, you’ll find the wreck!” Scott shouted into the air between gritted teeth. He could not let his mysterious plane and the secret it contained fall into their hands.

“But!” Scott continued, face hard-set. “You’re not gonna find the wreck!”

If he crashed in the bottom of the canyon, nothing could reach the carcass before the eerie green fire consumed everything. Almost nothing created by man could withstand that fire. The remains wouldn’t even be recognizable as having once belonged to a plane. Although he had no horizontal tail, there was still enough rudder authority to steer the diving path of the flaming hulk by a few degrees. Standing on the rudder pedals, Scott guided the crate into the mouth of the canyon. The jet pilot saw a flash, then the canyon was illuminated by a billowing ball of green fire.

## Chapter II

### FROZEN WELCOME

MIKE Cribb held the stick of his modified Dehavilland Twin Otter in an iron grip to keep it from leaping out of his hands. The stick jolted him at regular intervals as the control cables transmitted the force of turbulent gusts hitting the elevator and ailerons. It took a feat of strength just to hold the controls neutral. An onslaught of snow and sleet flew out of the black sky and assaulted the windshield in front of him.

A gust jammed the stick into Mike's left knee. He fought it back and leveled out the ship, then looked at the altimeter. Even though his artificial horizon was level, he was falling at a rate of 5000 feet per minute. Mike's face registered no sign of emotion when he realized this. He had been flying for 20 hours.

As suddenly as the fall began, the altimeter needle stopped spinning, then accelerated upward. The twin-engined ship was now rising at 5000 feet per minute.

"Beats any roller coaster I've been on, huh Mike?" said a man in the copilot's seat. His name was Sammy Scott, and he was a giant: six foot, six inches tall and 250 pounds. Just from looking, few would tell that he had a degree from MIT in mechanical engineering, and was currently pursuing his masters there in aeronautical engineering.

"Will you shut up, Sammy?" a short man sitting just behind Sammy said. "I'm this close to throwing up, and your jokes might just push me over the edge."

Sammy laughed.

"Common, Alex," Sammy replied. "You're just salty our take-off interrupted your come-back in the pool tournament."

"You're right about one thing: when we get back, I'm knocking you off that top leaderboard spot," Alex quipped back.

Alex Chui was five feet even, and skinny. He was an MIT graduate like Sammy, with a degree in electrical engineering, and had just started law school. Alex and Sammy had a rivalry going back to their time together on MIT's sailing team. Although to an outsider they looked ready to throttle each other any minute, they were closer than brothers, and had saved each other's lives multiple times.

Equally unconcerned as Mike about the turbulence was a man sitting next to Alex whose face was buried in a navigational chart. He was Teddy Carlson, software engineer extraordinaire and mixed martial arts master. He had met the others at MIT during undergrad, and now had just started med school. His parka hood covered curly blond hair that went down to his shoulders.

Mike Cribb majored in robotics at MIT, which was now the subject of his masters there. He met the rest of his team Freshman year, and in Junior year had proposed creating a startup prototyping lab in Cambridge. After they graduated two years ago, their lab took off, becoming one of the most advanced in the world. Orders frequently came in from research firms across the country, as well as from local universities and major robotics companies.

Behind the four young engineers, the rest of the plane was filled with piles of supply crates. Many strange things were contained in some of those crates, but none of them was nearly as strange as what lay inside a coffin-sized Pelican case behind the pilot's seat. All four men knew that case was the reason for their expedition. Without it, they would be worse than square zero. Its mysterious contents raised a question that was the adventurers' only clue – a question that could only be answered by one man on Earth.

Teddy looked up from the navigation chart, a look of extreme concentration on his face. He surveyed the instrument panel, then referenced a meteorological report.

"Looks like we'll have to fight this storm all the way to McMurdo," he said. "The turbulence should calm down soon when we cross the ice shelf off Ross Island, but we're likely to hit bad icing conditions soon."

"How are conditions at the runway? What kind of reception will they have for us?" Mike asked.

"The most recent report says they're soaked in," Teddy replied.

Sammy looked out the side window and shouted,

"I see clear ice starting to form on our leading edge! They weren't kidding about those icing conditions."

Mike cycled on the de-icing boots and began climbing. The rime ice formations in the higher altitude cloud layers would be easier for the de-icing boots to break off.

A few minutes later, the men noticed that the ice on the leading edge was still building. Sammy had done a specially careful ground check of the de-icers before takeoff, and found nothing wrong with them, yet when they cycled the boots now there was no response.

"Something's wrong with the de-icing boots, they ain't working!" Sammy warned. "We should contact McMurdo and try to get a beam off their radio aids to navigation. We'll want to go straight in."

Mike eased the throttle forward to compensate for the increased drag, then keyed the mic: "McMurdo, McMurdo. This is November Charlie 16180. We're experiencing ice formation. Can you take us in on a beam?"

In the control tower overlooking the Ice Runway at McMurdo station, a black-gloved hand flicked a toggle switch. The radio direction finding signal in Mike's cockpit died.

"This is McMurdo, we're having trouble with our radio navigation equipment. We're soaked in here with the blizzard. Please redirect to nearest alternate."

"This is NC16180. The nearest alternate is 190 miles away. We have ice forming on our aircraft. Request permission for landing priority."

There was a pause before the controller came back over the air. "This is McMurdo, permission to land denied. Redirect to alternate."

The roboticist turned the mic off. "Alex," he began, "you get a fix on that radio signal before they cut the power?"

"I've got a good enough fix to put us within a few miles of the runway. Once we get closer, I'll need another transmission to get the more precise location."

“I bet our friend will have plenty to say once he sees we’re not redirecting,” Mike said with a grin.

The ice was getting bad. Mike had to give more and more throttle to maintain airspeed, and he was running out of excess power availability. *Why the hell aren’t those boots working?* he wondered, *they’re supposed to be practically bulletproof.*

After ten tense minutes of flying, Teddy’s navigation predicted they would be within a few miles of the runway. Mike prepared to key the mic. “Get ready for your fix, Alex”

“I’m on it,” The electrical engineer replied.

“This is November Charlie 16180, requesting permission for emergency landing at McMurdo ice runway. We are running low on fuel and having trouble maintaining airspeed due to ice formation on aircraft.”

“This is McMurdo. Permission denied,” came the reply. The roboticist turned off his mic.

“I’ve got a vector!” Alex announced in excitement. “Turn onto course three seven degrees.”

Mike knew his stall speed would be increasing, and continually eased the throttle even further forward to increase airspeed and keep a safe margin. The twin turboprops screamed like banshees.

The radio came alive again: “This is McMurdo to NC16180. Redirect now! Visibility is zero. I repeat: redirect now.”

Ahead of the Otter, a dim red light emerged from the gloom. It was about a mile away and a thousand feet below. The light came from the top of the runway control tower. Oddly, the runway lights were off.

“Zero vis that stretches out a mile,” Sammy jested.

Mike keyed the mic, “This is NC16180, proceeding on instruments. Please light your runway, over.”

“This is McMurdo, our runway lights are malfunctioning. Permission to land denied! Redirect to alternate immediately!”

Mike turned off his mic, then turned to Sammy. “We can’t see the runway, but we can see the tower. What is the tower’s position relative to the runway?”

“The tower is 100 yards North of the runway,” the giant mechanical engineer replied.

“Given our airspeed, if we were to drop a flare right over the tower, how high would we need to be for it to hit the center of the runway?”

Sammy grabbed a notepad and scratched some calculations on it, accounting for wind speed, relative velocity, acceleration due to gravity, air resistance, and other factors.

“50 feet radar altitude, which puts our landing gear five feet above the top of the tower.”

Mike lined himself up for a run at the tower.

“Get ready with that flare, Sammy!” he called.

Sammy grabbed a flare from one of the cases in the back of the plane. He opened a side window. A blast of Antarctic air chilled the cabin. The mechanical engineer struck the flare and

jutted its end outside the window. Crimson flames spurted from the tip of the flare. The hiss of burning magnesium was audible even over the howling wind.

“Now!” Mike called.

The Twin Otter roared over the tower at over 200 miles an hour. The plane’s ski landing gear just missed the antenna array on the tower’s roof. Sammy dropped the flare at just the right moment. It flew forward as it drifted down and landed in the snow, its red glow still visible.

“This is McMurdo. What the hell do you think you’re doing!” A voice squawked out of the radio. “I’ve got military C130s parked on this runway! You can’t see them in this whiteout, and I’m not letting you cause a 90 million dollar collision!”

“Sure,” Mike responded. “You parked C130s *on* the runway in a winter blizzard... We are out of fuel, so it looks like you’ll just have to replace that C130.” He turned his radio off.

“What is that guy’s *deal*?” Alex asked.

Mike pulled the Twin Otter into a shallow climbing turn, then lined up along where the flare indicated the runway should be. He had to keep the plane at full throttle to avoid a stall with all the ice on his wings. Their airspeed was still well over 200 miles an hour.

“We’re coming in hot!” Mike announced to his team. “This icing really ate into our fuel reserves. We won’t get a second shot at this landing.”

Using the flare to orient himself to the runway, he eased the Otter down. The radar altimeter sank. Twenty feet... fifteen feet... ten feet...

They were past the tower now – no room to go around. Five feet... While Mike’s eyes were glued to the instruments, Sammy noticed something ahead of them.

“Mike!” he called, pointing.

A white light blasted into their eyes from the opposite end of the runway, and it was getting closer! The air filled with the crescendoing whine of a jet engine spooling up.

“We gotta go around!” the giant mechanical engineer yelled.

Mike tried to ease the stick back, but before the Otter responded, the white light flashed orange. A splitting roar pierced the team’s eardrums. Their plane jolted, slamming them into their five-point harnesses, then the ship hesitated and dropped. Their landing gear was gone!

The Twin-engined ship slammed into the frozen runway at over 200 miles per hour. Snow and ice cushioned the impact, but not enough to stop metal from crumpling, struts and wings from shearing off. Snow blasted into the cabin from holes ripped in the fuselage. The blinding white light came closer and closer.

Just as the wrecked Otter careened to a stop, Mike and his team saw a white jet fighter soar over them with a deafening roar. The jet had swept wings. Its ski landing gear missed impaling Mike’s cockpit by mere feet.



## Chapter III

### IMPOSSIBLE CORPSE

PROFESSOR Jim Strang was an ancient, wiry man. He was nearly bald except for a wisp of white hair, and looked to be about 85 years old. The plaque on the door of his office was engraved with only one word: *Ornithology*. Taxidermied, Antarctic birds littered the room. Some were perched on carved basswood branches. Others hung from the ceiling by fishing line, preserved with their wings spread in flight positions. The largest of these was a white bird with an eleven foot wingspan. Each specimen had a name tag: *Stercorarius chilensis*, *Anas georgica*, *Pygoscelis antarctica*... A stuffed Emperor Penguin stood on the floor next to the old professor's desk, bearing the name tag: *Aptenodytes forsteri*. Every square inch of wall space was covered in posters depicting various avians. A bird-themed clock on the aging professor's desk read nine thirty in the morning.

Professor Strang was among the last of a dying breed of old-guard biologists. His determination to stick to low-tech methods baffled the younger members of his field. He used no radio tags, no drones, no machine learning models or image processing – just good old binoculars, plastic ankle tags, and a notebook. His methods gave him trouble finding grad students, but they did foster in him an indefatigable determination to achieve his goals. This near-masochism made him the first, and so far only, ornithologist willing to stay at McMurdo Station year round, year after year, for a long-term, nonstop observation of Antarctic birds.

Mike, Alex, and Teddy stood just inside the doorway. The professor sat at his wooden desk. Sammy was talking with the aviation team at the Ice Runway. Teddy leaned gently against the doorframe, occasionally glancing at an object just outside. The tiny office was a tight fit for all four men.

"Thanks for being willing to see us on such short notice," Mike said to the ornithologist.

"Well, with the recommendation Dr. Morrison gave, I would have been foolish to refuse," Professor Strang replied.

Dr. Morrison was a polar region wildlife biologist, world-renowned for his cutting-edge drones and biomimetic cameras. Mike and his team had helped him on many occasions in the past, and were good friends.

"What was so important that you needed to bolt down here?" Professor Strang asked.

"A couple weeks ago, a package arrived at our lab in Cambridge," Mike answered. "We couldn't find anyone at MIT who could identify it. We asked Dr. Morrison, and he couldn't, either. He told us you were the only person on Earth who might know what it is, and if you don't know, then..."

Professor Strang raised an eyebrow.

"All this fuss for a simple identification?" he asked.

"You'll see what he means when you take a look," Sammy interjected.

"Alex, Teddy, can you get the case in here?" Mike said.

The two young men walked into the hallway and lugged in the object Teddy had been eyeing. It was a giant Pelican case, six feet long and three feet wide. Alex popped the case's two latches. He opened the lid.

A wretched smell billowed into the office, some combination of decaying meat and rotten eggs. Sammy and Alex held their noses. Teddy stepped into the hall to escape the pungent odor. The aged ornithologist's eyes flew wide when he saw what was in the case.

"Oh my," he whispered.

Inside the coffin-sized box was the rotting corpse of a white bird! Its six foot span wings were spread in the flight position, held stiff by rigor mortis.

"Do you know what it is?" Alex asked, keeping his hand clamped on his nose.

"It's a continental albatross," the professor replied. "This isn't supposed to exist. Where did you say you got this?"

"It was mailed to us," Mike said.

"What do you mean it shouldn't exist?" Sammy asked.

"The continental albatross is nothing more than a legend, a story," Professor Strang said. He walked up to the case and inspected the bird. His eyes fell on the albatross's head. "Amazing," he whispered.

There was one detail about the dead bird Mike had not told the ornithologist. He dare not. When he had first received the albatross in the mail, a scroll of paper was coiled in its mouth. On that paper was a two word message: *HELP US*.

"What can you tell us about the continental albatross?" Alex asked.

"Supposedly, it's a dwarfed version of the snowy albatross," Professor Strang answered. He stepped back and pointed at the giant, white bird hanging from his ceiling. "Dwarf is a relative word," he continued, "this guy is a snowy albatross. He has an eleven foot wingspan, making him the largest flying bird species in existence."

The professor ambled to the far wall, talking as he went.

"Starting about twenty years ago, the radar operators on the military side of the base started seeing contacts matching a bird with a six foot wingspan. In the Summer, near the coast, that's no issue. The problem is they saw them in Winter, deep in the heart of the Antarctic continent. No flying bird that large can live there, let alone year round. There's no food for them. I dismissed the 'sightings' as an effect of sleep-deprivation."

He made it to the wall.

"Until," the ornithologist said, "I saw this."

He pointed at a poster. It was a pencil sketch of a soaring bird that looked remarkably like the one Mike had brought in the case.

"One of the C130 pilots brought this to me a decade ago. He said he saw this thing gliding outside his cockpit window. He only caught a glimpse, but the young man had an eidetic memory, and a talent for drawing. This sketch is the only evidence of the continental albatross's existence. Or should I say, *was* the only evidence."

He slowly walked back to the case. Mike and his team stood silent. Once the professor made it, he pointed at the dead bird's head and continued.

"Look at the cranial region," he said. "It's massive. Just like the drawing!" he pointed back to the poster. "This creature must have an enormous brain. God knows how smart they are."

"Where did the C130 pilot say he saw one?" Teddy asked.

"He was flying over Terror Canyon."

"Terror Canyon?" Sammy questioned.

"It's a massive system of dolerite canyons North of the Transantarctic Range."

\* \* \* \*

A hazy, amber glow radiated from the horizon. It climbed up the atmosphere and turned the sky purple. In a couple weeks, the sun would rise above the skyline and cast the frozen continent in perpetual daylight. For now, the red dawn cast just enough light to see by silhouette.

Shadows of aircraft taxied across the icy wasteland. Turboprops whined. Mike and his team stood just outside a maintenance hangar off the runway. The dark outline of a massive man spoke.

"It took some sleuthing, but I found what's wrong with the de-icing boots," Sammy said. He held up a pair of cylindrical, cork objects about the size of earplugs. "I found these in the bleed air lines. It's not enough to cause a blockage here at sea level, but they expanded when I put them in a vacuum chamber to simulate altitude."

"Sabotage," Alex muttered.

Sammy nodded.

"Someone must have planted these while we were prepping to take off in South America. This is why the boots cycled on the ground, but conked out when we needed them."

"Did you find out what was up with air traffic control last night?" Mike asked.

"Yeah," Alex piggybacked. "What the hell was up with that guy?"

"Sort of," Sammy replied. "The man who was supposed to be in the tower went missing just before we tried to land. He never reported for duty. All the records say that tower was empty last night."

"What's the damage assessment?" Teddy asked.

"It's bad, but between the four of us, we should be able to get her airworthy in two weeks," Sammy answered. "The impacts are consistent with 20mm cannon fire. Luckily, the guy was a bad shot and missed most of the critical systems."

Mike frowned.

"I don't like this," he said. "From now on, we fly with parachutes."

## Chapter IV

### THE LAND OF TERROR

BLACK, dolerite scars marred the white earth fifteen thousand feet below the Twin Otter. The canyons snaked and twisted in a maze. If the plane went down out here, escape on foot would be impossible.

“See anything?” Mike asked over the intercom.

He sat in the pilot’s seat. Teddy sat in the copilot’s seat, eyes glued to a radar screen. Sammy and Alex scanned the windows. All four men wore seat-pack parachutes over their thick, red parkas. The coffin-like Pelican case carrying the dead continental albatross was stashed in the rear of the plane.

“Nothing yet,” Sammy replied. “I think we’re gonna have to go lower to have a chance of seeing anything.”

“For once, I agree with him,” Alex said.

Mike nodded.

“Sounds good,” he said through the mic.

The roboticist eased the stick forward and descended to seven thousand feet. The four men continued scanning.

“I’ve got something on the radar,” Teddy said. “Looks like a pair of birds, about six foot wingspan.”

“Let’s go!” Sammy exclaimed.

“What’s the heading on that?” Mike asked.

“Two four,” Teddy replied. “Range four and a half miles.”

Mike banked the plane and turned to intercept the radar targets. Alex and Sammy kept their eyes glued to the windows, each hoping to make visual contact first.

“I see it!” Alex called. “Are you sure about that six foot wingspan? Looks more like thirty to me.”

Teddy checked the scope again.

“Yep, the radar says it’s six feet,” he said calmly.

“What the hell?” Sammy whispered as he watched the pair of white wings soar towards them.

“Stealth planes,” Mike said. “These may be the guys that hit us when we tried to land. Strap in and get ready for a scrap!”

The pair of aircraft closed in. Mike and his team secured their five-point harnesses and checked their parachutes. The roboticist advanced the throttle.

His twin-engine cargo plane was far from a fighter jet, but his team had made several custom modifications over the years, including structural strengthening for aerobatic maneuvers. The Otter accelerated to 185 miles per hour.

The two white fighters grew larger in the engineer's field of view. Their cantilever wings were unswept and mounted high on top of their fuselages. They appeared to be single-engine, propeller driven, and they were on a collision course.

Orange flashed from the two planes. Tracer threads stabbed at Mike's Twin Otter.

"Here we go!" he called.

The roboticist pulled the stick back. His Dehavilland leapt into a near-vertical climb. The two fighters sailed past him.

Sammy looked behind.

"They're coming around again," he called.

Mike kept the stick in his lap, pulling the twin-engined cargo plane into a half loop. When it was on its back, he rolled over to complete an Immelman Turn, and sped at the fighters from above.

"We don't have guns!" Alex called. "We won't last forever."

"We know that," Mike replied. "But they don't."

The Otter dived on the pair of mystery ships. Guns fired. .50 caliber rounds sliced through the Dehavilland's wings.

Mike dodged at the last second, passing within five feet of one of the mystery ships. They could see its pilot through the plexiglass windscreen. He wore a strange-looking flight suit, and a helmet with a pitch black visor.

While the two fighters were turning around, Mike jammed the stick forward.

"If we make it to the canyon," he said over the intercom, "we can leverage our maneuverability and loiter time. We can't shoot them down, but there's no way they have as much fuel reserve as we do."

The white birds had reversed, and bore down on Mike. Armor piercing slugs flew. Metal crashed. The Otter's right engine belched black smoke.

Mike's airspeed indicator climbed to 190 miles per hour. The fighter planes closed.

"We're not gonna make it!" Teddy called, watching their closing speeds on the radar scope.

The roboticist pulled the stick into his lap. The otter soared. The pair of enemy planes overshot, then turned seemingly in place and climbed right back onto his tail.

"How did they *do* that!" Sammy said. "I've never seen a ship so maneuverable!"

The three planes danced in the sky. Mike did everything to stay out of their sights, but the fighters were too maneuverable. He dived, climbed, reversed, split-essed. The high-wings stuck to his tail like glue. Bullets punched holes in the Otter's cabin. The right engine died. The twin-engined ship stumbled in the air, then began to fall.

The dive developed into a spin. Mike centered the stick and stood on the opposite rudder pedal. The maze of Antarctic canyons spun below him like a top. Faster... Faster... More slugs slammed into the plane. Fire sprouted on the right wing.

"Bail! Bail! Bail!" Mike shouted.

The young engineers unbuckled their five-point harnesses. Sammy was the first to the door. He flung it open and jumped out. Alex was next.

The ship was rocked by a thunderous crash. The tail had separated from the plane!

Mike and Teddy lifted into the air, weightless, then slammed into the ceiling. They pulled themselves along cargo netting on the roof as their craft tumbled. Loose cases of gear flew out the opening where the tail had separated. Wild G forces tried to rip the men off the netting, but they held firm.

Mike made it to the door first, but waited to give Teddy a hand. Teddy jumped first, then Mike. The flaming hulk that was their plane hurtled below them.

As soon as he was out the door, the roboticist pulled his rip chord. His parachute blossomed, yanking him upwards as it decelerated his fall. He and his team drifted downwards.

The Otter's remains slammed into a dolerite cliff and exploded in a spectacular ball of red and orange fire. A column of black smoke climbed into the Antarctic atmosphere. Mike communicated to his team with hand signals.

*Are you okay?* he asked. Each man responded in turn that they were without major injury. Mike pointed to a cliff above the burning crash site. *Land there*, he signed.

The four young men steered their parachutes to the zone Mike indicated. As they drifted down, they watched the marvelous, white mystery fighters circle the crash site.

After a few circuits, the white ships did something amazing. They dived into the canyon, and seemed to disappear into a spot in the canyon wall! No crash site, no debris, no smoke. They just disappeared.

A few minutes later, the young engineers landed in the snow. Before they had time to cut free from their 'chutes, a gruff voice called to them.

"Freeze!" the voice commanded.

Men in white parkas emerged from the snow around the landing zone. Each held a rifle, trained on Mike and his team.

## Chapter V

### THE SECRET CITY

MUFFLED voices discussed the fate of Mike and his team.

"They're clearly part of it," one of the voices said. "I say we ask them about Scott."

"And what if they don't know anything about Scott?" another voice answered.

"Of course they know about Scott! They were right over where he was shot down."

Mike, Alex, Sammy, and Teddy had been bound, gagged, and blindfolded upon their capture. The four men had been loaded into some sort of aircraft and flown for an hour to a location they knew not. Oddly, the plane that flew them had a nearly silent engine.

After their prisoner transport landed, the men were shuttled into what sounded like a conference room, where they were bound to chairs. They heard another man enter the room.

“What the hell is this!” he cried. “You call that hospitality!”

Mike’s blindfold was pulled off. The ropes binding him were cut. His gag was untied.

“I’m terribly sorry,” the man freeing him said. “You must understand we’ve had to be a bit paranoid lately.”

He freed Sammy, Alex, and Teddy in turn. The men were seated around a steel conference table. The walls of the room were carved from stone. An LED light fixture cast a warm, yellow glow. Three other men were in the room, two of whom were sitting.

One of the sitting men looked to be about 29 or 30 years old. He was thin and about five and a half feet tall, with curly brown hair. He wore a strange looking flight suit. A flight helmet with a black visor rested on the table in front of him. His countenance was a gruff expression of distrust.

The other sitting man looked to be in his late sixties. He wore a white lab coat and smiled amiably.

“I’m Dr. Victor Ewing,” the man who had freed them said, extending his right hand. Mike shook it. Dr. Ewing was in his mid fifties, and he also wore a lab coat. On his left hand, he wore a falconry glove. Perched on the glove was a continental albatross, just like the one Mike had received in the mail.

“But you can call me Victor,” the man continued. “This is Tony Giles,” he gestured to the other man in a lab coat. “And this is Tom Miller,” he gestured to the pilot. “He’s the pilot who brought you in.”

“You mean shot us down!” Sammy interjected.

Tom scowled at Sammy. Sammy scowled back. Victor blushed.

“You’ll have to forgive our poor hospitality,” Victor said. “One of our own pilots was shot down not long before you arrived. Tom was close with him. We’re still grieving. We had no way of knowing you weren’t with them.”

“We still don’t,” Tom said sternly.

“Do you know who these men are, Tom?”

“I know they were flying right over where Scott was gunned down in cold blood,” he replied.

“This is Mike Cribb, Sammy Scott, Alex Chui, and Teddy Carlson,” Victor said.

Tom said nothing.

“May I ask who you are?” Teddy requested.

“I’m Victor, as I said,” the man in the lab coat replied, confused.

“He means who *are* you,” Sammy clarified. “Where are we? What’s going on?”

“Ah yes,” Victor said. He smiled. “We’re the people who sent for your help.”

Sammy looked at Alex and raised an eyebrow.

“As for where you are,” Victor continued, “welcome to *Nowhere*.”

\* \* \* \*

Mike, Sammy, Teddy, and Alex followed Victor as he strolled down a catwalk. Over the railing to their left was a massive, three-story airplane hangar and taxiway. The whole complex had been hewn from bedrock. At the far end of the hangar, was a two-story hole leading to the outside world. It was hidden from the outside by an overhang, and would be visible only to someone who knew what he was looking for.

The area just in front of the opening was divided into bays with smooth, stone floors. Some bays held white fighter planes just like the ones that had shot down Mike and his team. Other bays held aircraft of a similar pattern, but varying in scale and detail. Some were clearly cargo variants. Others were single-man scout ships.

A red light flashed above one of the bays. A klaxon sounded.

“Clear bay sixteen,” a voice sounded over a PA system. “Clear bay sixteen. Incoming landing.”

A white craft sailed through the narrow opening in the wall and touched down in the bay. Its propeller reversed direction upon landing and decelerated the plane. It halted. The distance it had traversed between touchdown and stopping was smaller than a helipad. Mike noticed air brakes on the upper wing surface, and triple-element flaps. Oddly, its engine was nearly silent, even at full throttle. Mike noticed a row of small, cylindrical objects on the plane’s leading edge.

Sammy was a kid in a candy store. The MIT aerospace student stared wide-eyed at all the advanced technology on display. It was clearly decades ahead of even the most advanced military air forces.

The light above bay sixteen turned green.

“Bay sixteen clear. Bay sixteen clear,” the voice over the PA announced.

A man climbed out of the cockpit. He wore a pilot’s suit just like Tom’s. A mechanic ran over and plugged a massive wire into the plane. The electrical cable was the diameter of a fire hose.

“Tony and I founded Nowhere almost twenty years ago,” Victor began as he walked. His albatross was still perched on his falconry glove. “I’m a chemist and a genetic engineer. He’s an electrical and aerospace engineer. It started when I developed an ultra-high energy density battery chemistry – a system capable of holding more energy per pound than jet fuel. We worked together in secret to integrate my batteries into the world’s first practical electric airplane.”

“We knew from the start what we had on our hands. If the world’s militaries got a hold of our tech, it would have been turned into the ultimate weapon of war: silent, stealth warplanes.”

Victor whirled.

“Every piece of technology ever made has been used. Every invention in the history of mankind has been put into the service of war. Except,” he raised a finger. “Except for mine!”

“I knew the world couldn’t handle it. We were all so frustrated with the stupidity of societies run by power-hungry politicians. So, we struck out on our own. We assembled a band of like-minded individuals – scientists, engineers, doctors – and we created our own society: Nowhere. We are pilgrims in our own way, pilgrims of reason. Our religion is logic. Here, we dedicate our lives to science, safe from the rest of the world.”



Victor turned around and continued walking.

“We started from scratch, but after ten years we finally did it. Here, we are free! Our innovation is not stifled by politics or profit margins. I estimate our technology is at least thirty to forty years ahead of the most advanced in the outside world, and so it shall remain as long as we stay undiscovered.”

“How do you get food and water?” Alex asked.

“We generate our own electricity here from geothermal. Terror Canyon runs along a fault line, so we have a nearly unlimited supply. When you have unlimited energy, a lot of other problems get easier. We can grow as much food as we want in underground farms, powered by electric grow lamps. Water purification is trivial, and we have a nearly endless supply of ice should we ever want to increase our stocks.”

“What about metal?” Sammy asked. “To build your planes. Are those titanium?”

“They’re an advanced carbon fiber composite,” Victor answered.

He came to a door at the end of the catwalk. He opened it and took the men through. They stepped into the upper levels of a gigantic aviary. Continental albatrosses soared between roosts cut into the rock walls. The men stood on a catwalk that ran around the rim of the aviary, hugging the walls. The aviary opened beneath them like an upside-down bowl, extending at least seven stories down and a hundred yards in diameter. There were easily thousands of birds.

Victor raised his gloved, left arm.

“Go see your wife, Gerald. I’m going to show these men the machine shop next.”

“Yes Victor! Have fun!” his albatross squawked. The bird leapt off his arm and glided to a roost several stories below. Another albatross met him there. The birds rubbed their necks together.

“They can *talk*!” Sammy exclaimed.

“Indeed,” Victor replied. “Genetically engineered by yours truly. They are the smartest animals on Earth, second in intelligence only to humans. We breed them here as companions.”

“The continental albatross?” Alex asked.

Victor laughed.

“Is that what they call them out in the world? We try very hard to keep them hidden. The last slip up I know of was ten years ago.”

“We got a dead one in the mail,” Mike said.

“That must have been Scott’s,” Victor concluded.

“You never answered about supplies,” Teddy noted.

“Ah, yes,” Victor replied. “You see, that was how Scott came to tragedy. You are right there are certain materials we cannot make here. Few, but they exist. When we founded Nowhere, there were some sympathetic to our cause who had too many ties to the outside world to join us – children, parents, and friends to care for. They help us by coordinating supply shipments.”

“The utmost secrecy is paramount. We cannot have them drop off supplies here, of course. No one in the outside world can know our location. We also can’t fly our own planes to

McMurdo, as they would be discovered. We had a helicopter pilot at the Station. His name was Gregory. He would drop off pallets of supplies at an outpost in Terror Canyon, and we would pick them up and fly the supplies here.”

“About a month ago, Scott was going to pick up supplies from Gregory, and got shot down over the rendezvous point. We learned later that Gregory went missing just prior to his flight. The problem is how they knew to be at the rendezvous point. Gregory is the only person outside Nowhere who knows when the supply drops are. Unless they tortured it out of him, we have a traitor in our midst.”

“So you called us in to help?” Mike put forward.

“Yes,” Victor confirmed. “One of our sympathizers at McMurdo mailed you Scott’s albatross.”

“Is everyone here an original resident?” Teddy asked.

“No,” Victor replied. “We unfortunately need to recruit new members every now and then. We had a big wave when we finished building Nowhere’s base infrastructure ten years ago. Tom was one of them. He’s our finest pilot, originally a bush pilot from Alaska. Scott trained him in combat aerobatics, so now Tom is our dogfighting instructor.”

“When was your most recent addition?” Mike asked.

“One week before Scott was shot down, we hired a new chemist. His name is Ivan Pavlovich.”

“Can we meet with him?” Alex asked. “Sounds like a good place to start.”

“Yes. I’ll set that up right away,” Victor said. “There’s one more thing,” he added, lowering his voice. “Except for Tony and I, only the pilots know Nowhere’s location. If the men who shot down Scott get our location, they will launch an assault and steal our technology for their evil ends. You *must* find the traitor and catch him *before* he figures out the location of Nowhere.”

## Chapter VI

### THE DRAGON’S DEN

IVAN Pavlovich sat nervously on the opposite side of the steel conference table from Mike, Teddy, Sammy, and Alex. He was 22 years old, and had just graduated from MIT. Like Victor, he wore a white lab coat everywhere he went in the secret, underground city.

“What made you decide to come to Nowhere?” Mike asked the young chemist.

Ivan swallowed.

“I always loved chemistry,” he replied. “I wanted to get to work on chemical problems without all the red tape of industry or academia – just pure science.”

“You like it here?” Sammy asked.

“I’ve only been here a month,” Ivan said.

“And what do you think of your month so far?” Alex pushed.

“It’s...” Ivan swallowed again. “It’s cool. I really like the science. It’s very interesting and all. But...”

“But?” Mike prodded.

“But this investigation stuff is stressful,” the chemist answered. “I mean, talking to you guys is fine, but hearing about people getting shot down, McMurdo personnel disappearing, it’s stressful. I was hoping this would be a little safer. I mean, it’s Antarctica, so I guess I signed up for a certain amount of danger, but I didn’t think I was going to have to worry about murder here. That’s what I left home to escape.”

“What work have you been doing here so far?” Teddy asked.

“Mostly onboarding.”

“Learning how Victor’s battery chemistry works?” Alex asked.

“No,” Ivan replied. “The old man’s surprisingly locked-up about that sort of thing. He only reveals the formula in pieces to his chemists. I’m working on increasing the efficiency of one step by adding a catalyst. To understand his battery chemistry, I’d have to interview every chemist on staff. There are almost a hundred. It’d take years.”

Mike nodded slowly.

“Where do you do this work?” the roboticist asked.

“In the chem lab. It’s where we do both production and R&D for the batteries.”

“Could you take us there?”

“It’s a restricted area. The door is passcode locked. Only chemists have the code, and I’m not supposed to let you in. You’d have to ask Victor.”

“Gotcha,” Mike said quietly.

Someone knocked on the steel door. Sammy got up and opened it. Tom Miller walked in.

“Sorry to interrupt, but Tony scheduled me to start your flight training in twenty minutes. Meet me at bay ten then – *don’t* be late.”

“Flight training?” Sammy asked, surprised.

“Hey, don’t ask me,” Tom replied. “Tony’s the one who scheduled it.”

“Thanks,” Mike said. “We’ll be there. I think we can learn the rest of what we need to know in twenty minutes.”

\* \* \* \*

Tom stood in front of his plane wearing his flight suit. The men were assembled in bay ten. At this close distance, they could see that the little cylinders along the leading edge of the wings were motors. Each had a one foot diameter propeller fitted.

“This is a Snowbird,” Tom began, authoritatively. “Mine is a single-seat fighter variant. We also have transports, cargo planes, scouts, and other varieties. Tony designed all of them. Today, I’ll be familiarizing you with them on the ground. Over the course of your stay here, I will teach you how to fly.”

“I know,” Tom continued, “that you are already pilots, but flying a Snowbird is different. There are many differentiating factors between a snowbird and a conventional aircraft. There’s the electric power source for one, which has a completely different torque characteristics to piston engine or turboprop. There’s also the triple element flaps, air brakes, retractable landing gear, slots, and other complex type features. There’s the 500 mile per hour top speed, the extreme short take-off and landing ability, and other performance figures.”

“But,” Tom paused for emphasis, “The biggest difference is the blown lift.”

“No way!” Sammy said, his eyes aglow with excitement. “You guys have blown lift on these things?”

Tom nodded, smiling proudly. He pointed to his plane.

“Half of the thrust comes from motors on the leading edge of the wing. Their position there accelerates flow in the boundary layer. Combined with the triple-element flaps, this lets us take off in less space than a helicopter. Snowbirds are hypermaneuverable. They can easily pull more Gs than you. Which is why we wear these.”

Tom walked to a row of lockers near his plane. He opened one and held up a flight suit like the one he was wearing.

“These are G force compensation suits. They compress your extremities during high G maneuvers to stop you from blacking out. The US Air Force has G suits that let a trained pilot sustain up to nine Gs. Ours let you do twelve.”

Ten minutes later, they were in the cockpit of a transport variant. Tom was giving a tour of the instrument panel. Every instrument was a physical dial. Every switch was a physical toggle or button. There were only two screens, and they were small. Neither were touch screens.

“Why all steam-gauges?” Sammy interrupted Tom’s lecture. “What’s up with the manual vibes?”

“To keep the pilot in the loop,” Tom explained. “Out here in the Antarctic, you need to be on your game. Mistakes mean death. Trusting an automated, glass cockpit is complacency. Did Tony take it a little overboard? Maybe. But you, the pilot, are in control of every process that happens on this plane.”

“How come I could barely see you guys on our radar?” Teddy asked.

“Snowbirds are stealthy,” Tom answered. He enjoyed the team’s enthusiasm. “The all-composite construction helps. A stealth coating does the rest. With no heat or sound signature, we’re next to invisible to all but the most advanced military radar.”

“Now,” Tom got back on track, “as I was saying, this screen is the chartplotter, and that one’s the LIDAR readout. The LIDAR unit under the fuselage scans the terrain in real-time to give you a 3D model for instrument-only contour flying.”

“So you can fly in the canyons at night?” Alex asked.

“Bingo,” Tom answered. He continued the cockpit tour. “This button controls the shock-starter. This guy delivers an electric impulse to the motor to overcome the initial cogging torque on start-up. Hold down this button until that light turns green. After ten seconds...”

\* \* \* \*

At the edge of an icy runway 700 miles from Nowhere, Igor Nikitovich finished fueling his MIG-15. The ship was a surplus Soviet fighter jet from early in the Cold War. It was single-engined, with swept wings. Igor's was painted white for Antarctic camouflage, and fitted with retractable ski landing gear, among other modifications. A pair of black skulls, five inches across each, were painted just below the cockpit canopy.

Igor was a soldier of fortune, but he wasn't in it for the money. Igor got high on murder and death, and like any true junkie, he built his life around getting his next fix. Before landing in Antarctica, he had worked for private military companies in armed conflicts all over the world. He would take a contract from anyone who gave him a gun and permission to use it.

The mercenary had been fighting for the Russians against Ukraine when he received a mysterious letter, offering an obscene sum in exchange for his services as a war pilot. He was loath to leave the combat he relished, but something about killing from the air excited him. He accepted the offer on the condition that he be guaranteed the opportunity of at least one aerial kill. He had not been disappointed.

A mechanic ran up to him.

"Sir," the mechanic said in a heavy Russian accent. "You're wanted in the communications tent. The boss is calling."

Igor nodded.

Inside an insulated tent, Igor picked up a radio receiver. A distorted voice crackled out of it. The voice was unrecognizable beyond being human. The person on the other end must have fed it through a distortion program before transmitting.

"Give me good news from the Dragon's Den, Igor."

"We got the last plane through McMurdo today," Igor replied in a thick, growly voice. "The full 24 plane squadron is complete, and ready for combat."

"Good," the mysterious voice crackled. "I have bad news from Nowhere. Mike Cribb and his men have arrived."

"Mike Cribb? Who is that? Should I know that name?" Igor inquired.

"He's the man you shot at on the McMurdo runway two weeks ago. He survived the crash, and now he's here. Your aim was poor, Igor. You didn't finish the job."

"I only shot at him to clear the runway," Igor said. "Is he important? So there's a few more pilots. Why should I care? I could take on a hundred of those dinky propeller planes."

"Don't call Snowbirds dinky," Igor's boss snapped. "You succeeded before because you had the element of surprise. In a fair fight, they are formidable adversaries. I should know... This Mike Cribb isn't just a pilot. He's a detective, or at least Victor thinks he is."

"Is he onto you?" the mercenary asked.

"Not yet," the voice replied. "But they suspect the young chemist is innocent. These guys aren't as gullible as Victor."

“When are you going to tell me where this place is so I can blow it up?” Igor prodded. “It’s been nearly a month since my last fix.”

“Patience, Igor,” his boss chided. “You and your boys will be let off the leash in time. My work here is not finished. Remember I’ve already satisfied your contract. You will get the violence you crave.”

## Chapter VII

### DOGFIGHT

A week had passed. Mike, Alex, Teddy, and Sammy were nearly finished with their flight training. The four young men had passed their aerobatics exams with flying colors. Tom was slowly starting to warm up to them.

The engineers continued interviewing the residents of Nowhere. As they did, they continued to learn how strangely compartmentalized knowledge was in the mysterious city. Each sector of scientific inquiry was only given access to data and equipment relevant to their own research. No one person had access to the entire base, not even the founding members.

Victor suspected the young chemist, Ivan; however, the more Mike and his team interviewed him and others, the more they believed he was not the real culprit. The traitor was much more familiar with the operations of Nowhere than was possible to learn in the short time Ivan had been there. Victor proved surprisingly hard to dissuade.

Tom knocked on the door to Mike’s quarters.

“Wakey, wakey!” the pilot called. “Big day today. You’re scheduled to meet me in bay ten in half an hour.”

“What?” Mike groaned. It was five in the morning. “My team and I were scheduled to interview Tony this morning.”

“That’s weird,” Tom said. “Because Tony’s the guy who told me to move up your dogfighting training. Change of plans, I guess.”

“I want to talk to Tony about this,” Mike said.

“Fine by me, but good luck finding him in the next half hour.”

\* \* \* \*

Mike soared high over Terror Canyon in a single-seat fighter Snowbird. The roboticist had not found Tony in time. Now, he circled at an altitude of fifteen thousand feet. Tom was in another plane two hundred feet below.

The two men’s planes had been fitted with a special training system, invented by the late Scott. The ships’ lead-compensating gun sights were wired into a weak, infrared laser lined up with the bore axis of the .50 caliber machine guns. In training mode, pressing the trips shined the

laser instead of firing the guns. If it hit the other fighter plane, sensors would detect and record the ‘impact.’

“You’ve done pretty well in your aerobatic elements,” Tom’s voice squawked over the radio into Mike’s headset. “But there’s a difference between ballet and tactics.”

“What would you call what I did in the Otter?” Mike asked over the radio.

Tom laughed.

“Interpretive dance,” he replied. “How about a chance for payback eh? Try to ‘shoot me down.’”

“Now?” Mike asked.

Tom pushed the throttles to the stop and jammed the stick into the dash. His plane dove for the Earth like a speeding bullet.

“Guess,” Tom answered, smiling.

“Okay then,” Mike said.

He grinned, then rolled upside down and dove after the flight instructor.

“Remember,” Tom radioed, “the name of the game is leveraging your ship’s strengths against your enemy’s weaknesses. You’re in a Snowbird. Fly it like one.”

Tom pulled back on the stick. He flipped some switches in the cockpit. His flaps extended. The leading edge motors whirled to life.

Tom’s Snowbird seemingly froze mid air, then leapt upward. The instructor clenched his muscles to fight the G forces.

Mike soared down past him. Tom pushed the stick forward again. The negative Gs pulled him up into his five-point harness. The roboticist’s plane drifted into his sights. He clamped down on the trips.

The weak, infrared laser fired. An alarm blared in Mike’s cockpit.

“You’re getting hit, Mike! I’m shooting you down! What are you gonna do about it?” Tom radioed.

Mike pulled up to escape. The G forces climbed. His suit activated. The meter read eight Gs... nine Gs... The young engineer’s vision darkened and narrowed. His grip on the stick loosened.

“Watch it, kid!” Tom called. “Just because you have a G suit doesn’t mean you don’t have to do any work. You still have to G-strain if you don’t want to black out!”

Mike eased the stick forward. His vision returned. He firewalled it and sped away from Tom, trying to put distance and altitude between him and his instructor. He could use the potential energy difference later to gain a tactical advantage.

“Don’t run, Mike!” Tom warned, speeding after him. “We’re fighting against jets, remember. They’re 150 miles an hour faster than you. They set the terms of the dogfight.”

“Then what *should* I do?” Mike asked.

“You’re in a Snowbird, Mike! Fly it like one! What do you have that they don’t?”

“Maneuverability,” the roboticist replied.

“Bingo!” Tom said. “Use it.”

The former bush pilot rolled his plane onto its back, then dove into the canyon below. Mike pulled into a nose-up attitude and stomped on the left rudder pedal, falling down in a hammerhead turn. He sped after Tom.

“These canyons get tight! Remember what I said about G-strain!” Tom warned before he dipped below the canyon wall.

Mike swooped into the gorge after him. He flicked a switch to activate the LIDAR terrain-mapping system. His chartplotter displayed a map of the maze-like canyons.

The rock cliffs were only two hundred feet apart. A sharp turn loomed ahead. Mike eased back the throttle.

Tom rolled his ship onto its side and made the turn at a 90 degree bank angle, missing the canyon wall by only sixty feet. Fog rolled off his wingtips, condensed by the ultra-high G maneuver. He came out of the turn at 400 miles per hour.

Mike pushed the stick to the left, then yanked it into his lap. He clenched his muscles to fight the G forces. His suit activated. Nine Gs... Ten Gs... He noticed his altitude was dipping. The engineer came out of the turn just fifteen feet off the canyon floor.

“You’re learning,” Tom complimented. “But you nearly hit the ground and disintegrated.”

“How the hell do you maintain altitude in the turn?” Mike asked, catching his breath from the high G maneuver.

“Knife-edge it,” Tom instructed. “Don’t coordinate. You can’t coordinate in a 90 degree bank. Use the side of your fuselage to generate lift. A pinch of rudder is enough at these speeds.”

Another twist in the gorge came up ahead. Tom rolled on the other side and pulled an eleven G turn. Mike followed him in. The acceleration squished him into his seat. Even with the suit and G-straining, his vision narrowed. Streams of fog rolled off his wings. He applied a gentle pressure on the high rudder pedal. His altitude stayed the same.

“This little jaunt is fun, but aren’t you supposed to be trying to shoot me down?” Tom taunted.

Mike grinned.

“On it!” he radioed.

The roboticist firewalled it. He entered the next turn at 500 miles per hour. He deployed the outer element of his flaps to prevent a high-speed stall. His leading-edge motors screamed. The acceleration hit twelve Gs.

He came out of the turn a hundred feet closer to Tom. The instructor drifted near his sights. He ‘fired’ a burst. A close miss.

“There you go!” Tom complimented. “Come on! Make me work for it!”

The two men sped through the twists and turns of Terror Canyon at breakneck speed. A single mistake would mean colliding with a dolerite wall fast enough to be atomized.

Mike gained little by little after each turn, carefully mapping his route through the labyrinth. He fired many close misses.



Tom disappeared behind the next curve, a fork. The instructor had turned left. Mike consulted the canyon map. The paths would reconvene soon, but one was shorter. The roboticist turned right.

Several ultra-high G twists later, the roboticist shot out of the offshoot. Tom was only just barely ahead of him. The roboticist lined up his shot and fired.

“Good, Mike! You knocked out my flaps.” Tom called. “What does that mean about my next turn?”

Mike cornered the former bush pilot in a dead-end. Tom pulled up out of the canyon, but didn’t use his flaps, attempting to accurately simulate the dogfight. His acceleration was limited to prevent a high speed stall.

Mike pulled up after him, pulling as many Gs as he could. His gunsight locked onto Tom. The roboticist’s finger clamped down on the trips. The laser fired. An alarm blared in Tom’s cockpit.

The instructor leveled out and throttled back to cruising speed.

“Excellent work!” he said over the radio. “We’ll make a fighter pilot of you yet. Come on now: again. And this time, the gloves are off!”

\* \* \* \*

Sammy rested his elbows on the table as he ate. The steak tasted amazing, but he had a sneaking suspicion it wasn’t beef. The giant engineer didn’t feel like finding out what it really was. Teddy and Alex were eating with him while they waited for Mike’s return.

“Don’t you think it’s kinda weird,” Sammy said, “that our flight training keeps getting scheduled on top of our investigation last minute?”

“Yeah,” Alex answered. “It’s pretty sus. I wonder if someone’s trying to interfere. You know, stop us from finding the traitor. You think it could be Tom?”

“No,” Sammy shook his head. “Not Tom. He already knows the location of Nowhere. If it was him, he’d have ordered the raid years ago.”

“Tony’s the one scheduling our training, right?” Alex noted. “What if it’s him?”

“He also knows the city’s location,” Sammy pointed out. “He’s not a pilot, but he’s one of the founding members. Tony and Victor *picked* the location for this place.”

“Hm...” Alex contemplated. “I still can’t get over how siloed this place is. It’s all ‘dedicate your life to science,’ but then you’re not allowed to talk about it with anyone outside your team.”

“Yeah,” Sammy agreed mid chew. “It’s freakin’ weird.”

Teddy swallowed, then put his fork down.

“It makes sense if you think about it,” he said quietly. “I mean, it honestly makes the traitor’s plan kind of pointless.”

Sammy blinked.

“Wait a minute,” he said. “Teddy, you’re right! What the hell is this traitor even hoping to gain? With the knowledge fragmented like this, stealing secrets requires interrogating everyone here. If you kill half of them in an armed raid, the information is gone.”

“Unless,” Alex said, raising a finger. “You read their documentation.”

“That’s it!” Sammy exclaimed. “That must be the traitor’s plan. We gotta access this place’s main computer system and check for security breaches. If someone’s been hacking the documentation, that’s our man.”

## Chapter VIII

### THE TRAITOR

ON the snowy ground above Nowhere, a man in a white parka furtively crept up to one of the city’s antenna arrays. He checked over his shoulder to confirm he was alone, then removed a maintenance panel.

The mysterious man withdrew a lithium battery from a pocket in his parka. He reached inside the maintenance bay of the radio array, feeling for something. His fingers found what he was looking for. He manipulated a plug, then pulled out a lithium battery just like the one from his pocket. He swapped in the fresh battery, and placed the used one in his parka.

An hour later, in the radio tent at the Dragon’s Den, Igor listened attentively to the distorted, unrecognizable voice of his boss.

“My apologies for the radio silence,” the voice said. “I needed to change the batteries on the parasite transmitters.”

“Any updates on these detective guys?” Igor asked.

“They’re closer to finding me than they realize,” his boss responded. “I’ve had to accelerate my plans, but I have good news: my work here is nearly complete. Soon, very soon, I will tell you the location of Nowhere. Have your ships fueled and fully loaded with ammunition. Be ready for take-off at a moment’s notice.”

The transmitter clicked off.

\* \* \* \*

Tony, Victor, Tom, and Mike’s team all sat around the steel conference table. Victor and Tony were dressed in their lab coats as usual. Tom and Mike were still in their flight suits.

“Care to tell me why you called this meeting so last minute?” Victor asked. “Did you finally get incriminating evidence against Ivan?”

“No,” Sammy responded, “but we have something better. We know the traitor’s computer system access code. All we need is for you to tell us whose code it is, and we’ve got the traitor.”

Victor raised an eyebrow. Tony looked intrigued and massaged his chin. Tom glanced between the four young engineers.

“How did you get his computer access code if you don’t know who he is?” Victor inquired.

“We were thinking,” Alex began, “if this guy’s planning an armed raid, he’d need some way of understanding the secret tech here without interrogating everybody, since so many would be killed in the raid. He’d be looking through the digital documentation stored in the computer system.”

“We thought we’d have to look for data breaches,” Sammy piped up, “but, it turns out someone’s been making requests in the system using a full-access, root user passcode.”

“How did you find this out?” Victor asked in a suspicious tone.

Teddy blushed.

“I hacked into the system log files,” the coder said sheepishly.

“It’s been going on for ages!” Alex added. “This guy’s been digging through every area of scientific research on the base since ten years ago! And he’s still active. The most recent request was just this morning.”

“All we need,” Mike said. “Is for you to tell us whose root user access code this is.” Mike pushed forward a pad with an alphanumeric string written on it: *NF27182*. “And we’ve got your traitor.”

Victor kept his eyebrow raised. He and Tony looked at each other. Tony laughed. His mirth spread to Victor. Tom looked intently at the four young men, then back at Victor and Tony.

“What’s so funny?” Sammy demanded.

“It’s just,” Victor said between laughs, “your idea is preposterous! The only people with root user access codes are the three of us!”

The chemist gestured to Tony and Tom.

“You know,” Victor continued. “All this investigating has caused quite a lot of stress in the city. I think we already have plenty of information to arrest Ivan and put this whole debacle behind us.”

“That’s absurd!” Sammy shouted. “Ivan isn’t even *close* to understanding enough to steal Nowhere’s secret tech. Whoever put in these inquiries to the computer system could kill everyone in the base and know enough to build a Snowbird from scratch!”

“We’re so close to finding the traitor,” Mike said calmly. “All you have to do is tell us whose access code this is.”

“Are you implying that one of *us* is the traitor?” Victor asked.

Mike nodded.

“We are,” he said somberly.

“That’s the real absurdity!” Victor snapped. “The three of us already know where Nowhere is! What would we be waiting for?”

Tony looked softly at Mike and his team.

“Victor has a point,” he said calmly, smiling. “I know this is all very exciting, but in this case the simple solution is correct. Ivan *is* the traitor.”

Teddy looked at Tom. The pilot was scowling at Tony and Victor.

“How about you all take a rest for a bit?” Tony continued. “This has clearly gotten you all stressed. I’ll take care of arresting Ivan.”

“An excellent idea!” Victor proclaimed. “You are all dismissed!”

\* \* \* \*

Tom rushed past Mike and the others as soon as he was dismissed from the meeting. He speed walked through the caverns of Nowhere to his quarters, passing pilots, mechanics, and scientists as he went.

His route took him through the lower levels of the aviary. Albatrosses squawked and talked to each other as they soared above him.

“Where are you rushing to, Tom?” one squawked.

“I don’t have time to explain,” Tom said without stopping.

The flight instructor ran through the door on the other side of the aviary.

“Always so grumpy,” the bird said to another albatross, once Tom was outside.

Tom continued on. Eventually, he reached the door to his quarters. Without stopping to take off his flight suit, he sat down at his personal computer terminal.

He flicked a switch. A green and black command prompt appeared on his screen. The pilot punched in his root user access code.

A stream of text flowed down the screen, then stopped with a blank prompt. Tom typed in a command: *sudo whois ID = NF27182*. The computer replied with a single line of text, a name.

Tom gasped when he saw the computer’s display.

“Oh my God,” he whispered.

The pilot leapt out of his seat and sprinted down the hall without even turning off his computer terminal.

\* \* \* \*

Mike, Teddy, Alex, and Sammy all stood just outside the conference room. They could still hear the echoes of Tom’s footsteps as he ran off. Tony and Victor walked off slowly, leaving just the four engineers outside the room.

“This is all giga sus,” Sammy commented, once they were alone.

“I hate to admit I agree with you,” Alex said. “This place is *whack*.”

Mike stood silently, contemplating. After a minute, he spoke.

“Have any of you guys been to the chem lab yet?” he asked.

Sammy, Alex, and Teddy all shook their heads.

“You planning to intercept Tony before he arrests Ivan?” Teddy asked.

“I have a hunch,” Mike said. “I’m going to check it out.”

The roboticist walked down the hall Tony had gone down just minutes before. Just as he rounded the bend and was gone, Sammy, Teddy, and Alex heard footsteps from the other direction. Tom came into view, running towards them.

“Where’s Mike?” he panted.

“He’s off to check out a hunch,” Teddy responded. “He does that sometimes.”

“I gotta show you guys something,” Tom urged. “I know who the traitor is!”

## Chapter IX

### THE BATTLE FOR NOWHERE

MIKE Cribb walked down a gently sloping hallway. The floor was smooth, but the walls and ceiling were left rough-cut from the Antarctic bedrock. The entrance to the chem lab was deep underground, much deeper than the rest of the base.

These passages were poorly lit. LED tube lights were mounted infrequently, casting an eerie, blue glow.

Mike was unsure exactly how many stories he had traveled down, but his map of the base told him the chem lab entrance would be ahead soon.

The roboticist rounded a bend, then froze. A massive, fireproof door was ahead of him, slightly ajar. The door was at least ten inches thick, with gigantic seals on each side, and a tiny porthole of bulletproof glass in its center. That was not what caught Mike’s attention.

The crumpled frame of a man lay in front of the door. Mike slowly approached. The corpse was in a lab coat, lying face down.

Mike turned him over. Ivan’s dead eyes stared back. Blood leaked from a bullet hole in his forehead.

The roboticist heard metal creak inside the chem lab. He silently walked through the door.

The chem lab was a massive complex, at least ten stories tall. Enormous chemical processing machinery towered above him, going all the way to the ceiling. Steel catwalks and ladders snaked through the complex.

Computer terminals, gauges, and lab equipment were everywhere along the catwalks. Test tubes and pipettors could be seen at benches every few feet. The tubes contained strange, brightly colored concoctions.

Warning placards were everywhere: *FLAMMABLE*, *POISONOUS*, *EXPLOSIVE*. On the ground level, massive drums of chemicals stood, climbing three stories high. Pipes carried chemicals from these drums to the processing equipment throughout the lab.

Metal creaked above Mike, near the roof. The roboticist found a ladder and began ascending with the stealth of a jungle cat.

Seven stories up, he peeked from behind a gigantic, rectangular air duct. A man in a lab coat was inspecting test tubes, searching for something.

Mike stepped out from his hiding place. His knee brushed the side of the duct. The flat metal sheet resonated with the impact like a steel drum.

The man in the lab coat whirled. It was Tony Giles! He held a pistol in his right hand!

Mike dodge-rolled. Tony fired. His shot missed Mike. It ricocheted off equipment behind him and into an electrical conduit. Sparks flew. The lights died.

The ten-story chem lab was cast into darkness, illuminated only by the red and green glow of status LEDs on electronics with auxiliary power. Cackling echoed through the cavernous gloom.

Mike army-crawled away from the murderous scientist. He heard Tony clambering down the machinery towards the bottom level. It was the only exit.

The roboticist reached a bench and pulled several test tubes off it. He hurled one roughly in the direction he thought he heard the traitorous plane designer. It hit the side of a gigantic centrifuge, and shattered.

A gunshot barked at the impact site. Flame spat from Tony's muzzle. Mike saw the flash and clambered after it. Using his superb hearing, the young roboticist tracked the escaping traitor. There: A flash of white!

Mike sprang upon Tony. Another shot fired from the gun. The bullet punched through unknown machinery below. The two men wrestled in the darkness.

The MIT graduate clamped down on Tony's wrist with the strength of a hydraulic vice. The old scientist screamed. He dropped the gun. It clattered against steel, falling story after story, bouncing between machines at catwalks.

Tony bit down hard on Mike's hand, then launched his head back, slamming his skull into the roboticist's forehead. Mike's grip weakened just enough. The murderer slithered free from Mike's hold and disappeared.

Mike had to get to the gun first. He climbed down the side of a three story mixing tank. He dropped from one catwalk to the next, combat rolling to absorb the impact.

Quickly, but methodically, the roboticist descended the structure until he saw it. On a catwalk four feet away: the gun. The pistol lay on its side in the center of the catwalk. Mike paused for a minute, listening. He heard nothing.

The young man walked cautiously to the pistol. He bent down to pick it up.

The spry form of Tony dropped from the ceiling. He landed hard on Mike, toppling the roboticist. The gun dropped off the edge of the catwalk, bounced on the side of an autoclave, and fell into the depths of machinery below.

Muscular fingers closed around Mike's neck, pressing into his throat. Each breath grew harder than the last. Tony's face was illuminated from the side by a weak, red status LED several feet away. His countenance warped into a wicked mask of murderous rage.

It was now or never. Mike launched his knee into the traitor's rear, then rolled the two men off the side of the catwalk. They fell ten feet.

Tony landed flat on his back. Something cracked. He couldn't move his right leg. Mike landed on his stomach next to him. The fall left him stunned.

Tony slugged the MIT graduate, then crawled off into the gloom, dragging himself with his arms. He dragged himself onto a motorized lift and pressed the button for 'down.'

Mike came to in less than a minute. Blood dribbled down his face. His neck was scarred from the choking attempt. He got on his feet.

The lift motor whirled. It ran on an auxiliary power source. Mike walked to the control box and looked for a 'stop' button. He found it.

The lift halted. Mike could hear Tony crawl off. The roboticist pressed the 'up' button. A cable snapped. The counterweight fell. Tony had somehow sabotaged the lift!

Mike grabbed a steel cable loosely dangling in front of him. He tugged it. It held firm.

The roboticist doffed his shirt, and used the sleeves like gloves to hold the cable. He wrapped his legs around it and zipped down like a fireman.

The cable ended four feet above the ground. Mike took the landing gracefully. He was now on the bottom level. Tony was crawling along the floor, pulling himself with his arms. The gun was six feet in front of him.

Viscous, blue liquid pooled on the ground. It leaked from a hole punched in one of the storage tanks by a stray bullet from earlier.

Mike walked around the crippled scientist and picked up the gun. He aimed it at Tony.

"Talk!" Mike commanded.

"You were very close," Tony groaned. "It's too bad for you that Victor is so trusting."

"Don't toy with me! What were you doing up there?"

"You were right," the murderous traitor replied hoarsely, "that I wasn't waiting to find the location of Nowhere. I was waiting to understand..."

Tony gasped.

"The battery chemistry... In his heart, I think Victor always knew... Always knew I wanted to sell him out... But he couldn't bear the truth... So he..."

Tony pushed himself up into a sitting position. He leaned against the stone wall.

"He hid the full formula from everyone... After all these years, I finally understood... Except... One piece. One secret ingredient... I couldn't figure out where he got it... But now..."

Tony grabbed something in his pocket. He slowly brought his hand out, concealing what he held.

"Now... I know... I should have known all along... It's those damn birds! Those idiotic, talking birds! Their stomach bile is the key. And now... Now I don't need this place anymore..."

The murderous traitor pressed a button on the object in his hand. It was a radio transmitter.

"Calling Dragon's Den! Commence immediate airstrike on eight five degrees, three eight minutes, two nine seconds South! One two one degrees..."

"No!" Mike cried. He dove for the transmitter.

"Four one minutes, three five--"

Mike collided with the scientist. The transmitter skittered across the floor. Mike lost his grip on the gun in the collision. The weapon ricocheted in the opposite direction.

“Seconds East!” Tony finished.

Mike grabbed the transmitter.

“Countermand that order immediately!” he barked into the transmitter.

“It’s no use,” Tony said. “Igor’s been chomping at the bit for weeks. Not even I can call off the airstrike now.”

Mike whirled to look at Tony. The treacherous scientist had crawled to the gun, and was aiming it at Mike!

The roboticist dodged just in time. Tony pulled the trigger an instant too late. His bullet slammed into a storage tank behind Mike. A stream of thin, red liquid gushed from the bullet hole.

The chemical blasted right into Tony’s eyes. He screamed. The concoction seared at his face, burning and blinding him. He doubled over, out of the line of fire, but still burning.

A faint, green glow in Mike’s peripheral vision caught his attention. He turned to look. A small, green flame had ignited where the pools of the red and blue chemicals met.

The red chemical was so runny in consistency that its dribbles snaked across the floor at breakneck speed. More and more green flames were igniting where puddles of the chemicals mixed. The fires at two pools combined, climbing up towards one of the three story tall storage tanks.

“Oh no,” Mike whispered.

He grabbed Tony and lifted him in a fireman’s carry. Running as fast as he could with the extra weight, he sprinted for the exit. The green conflagration built behind him.

The roboticist made it to the fireproof door. He dumped Tony next to Ivan’s corpse and hauled the fireproof door closed. He twisted the heavy-duty dog mechanism to seal it. Through the bulletproof glass, he could see jets of the green inferno clawing at the door.

The storage tanks had caught fire. Steel melted. Catwalks collapsed and crashed to the ground from the upper stories. Nothing in the chem lab would survive the blaze.

A quick check confirmed none of Mike’s clothes had caught fire. He left the two bodies and bolted off towards the heart of the base.

## Chapter X

### NOWHERE FALLS

VICTOR Ewing trudged through the knee deep snow above Nowhere on his way to the antenna array. The array was made up of four transmitting antennas and four receiving antennas, each with an electrical box of amplifying circuitry and driver boards.

“It can’t be,” he muttered to himself. “It can’t be...”

He held a directional radio receiver in his left hand. A display on its handle pointed him to the nearest antenna. Through a set of earphones hooked up to his receiver, he heard occasional bits of chatter.



“Bravo Four, tighten up there.”

“Roger that Bravo Leader.”

“It can’t be,” Victor muttered again.

After the meeting with Mike and his team, Victor had decided to scan through the radio frequencies on a whim. He just had a strange feeling he should. He heard voices he didn’t recognize talking pilot-speak. Normally, that wouldn’t be a problem, since many of the McMurdo pilots communicate via radio. Strangely, his instruments had told him some of the transmissions were coming from Nowhere’s own equipment.

He stepped up to the electrical box for the nearest transmitting antenna, and opened the maintenance panel. He reached his hand inside and felt around.

“Five minutes to target,” he heard through the headphones.

Victor felt something square with a wire coming out. He felt up the wire to a plug and unplugged it. When he snaked his hand back out of the electrical box, he was holding a lithium battery.

His eyes widened. His breathing grew heavy with fear.

“Alpha Flight, this is Alpha Leader. Reform into trail formation. It’s a small target and I want every bomb to hit.”

“Delta Flight, this is Delta Leader. Peel off from Charlie Flight and prepare for pincer maneuver.”

Victor looked down at the battery. His eyebrows narrowed. He looked at the display on his radio direction finder. It indicated the signal was coming from the next transmitting antenna over.

“Four minutes to target.”

Victor thought he heard the roar of jet engines in the distance. The canyons bounced the sound and made it impossible to tell what direction it was coming from. He hurried to the antenna indicated by his direction finder.

The founder of Nowhere popped open the electrical box and pulled out another lithium battery of the same type from the same spot. His breathing rate grew faster.

“Three minutes to target.”

“It can’t be,” Victor muttered once more. “Not Tony... No... It was Ivan...”

He looked at his direction finder. There were transmitters at both of the remaining antennas. The roar of the jets grew louder.

Victor spun around, trying to pin down where the noise was coming from. It sounded like it was coming from all directions. Was it a trick of the canyons?

“Two minutes to target.”

Victor ran for the next antenna. He ripped open the panel. The roar grew louder. He yanked the lithium battery out and ran for the final transmitter. He didn’t even bother to close the panel back up.

“Bravo Leader, this is Alpha Leader. Slow down there. Remember I got first dibs.”

“One minute to target.”

Victor sprinted. He was 50 yards from the final antenna. He tripped in the knee deep snow. He got back up. The sound of incoming jets was deafening.

A stream of six, white, MIG15s appeared over the Southern horizon. Bombs were mounted to hardpoints under their wings.

“Contact!” Igor’s voice squawked into Victor’s earphones.

The white planes screamed towards Nowhere in a dive. Igor lined up the radio towers in his bombsights. He flicked a switch in his cockpit.

A pair of 220 pound, bunker-penetrating bombs dropped from his wings. They pounded into the cliff above Nowhere and detonated. The Earth shook from the explosion. The shockwave toppled Victor off his feet. He landed face-first in the snow.

Victor got up and tried to run the remaining distance to the last radio antenna. Each of the remaining five MIGs zoomed over in turn to lay their eggs of death. Another stream of six MIGs screamed in from the East. Then another from the West and another from the South. It was open season.

“Keep your eyes peeled. No bugs in the air yet.”

“Stick to your quadrant, Delta Flight.”

“I’m peeling up behind you, Bravo Two.”

“This is Alpha Leader, I’ve spotted a target in the field between the antennas. I’m going to give him a few squirts.”

“Charlie Flight, break formation for strafing.”

Igor lined up the distant form of Victor in his gunsight. The founder of Nowhere looked like an ant from this altitude. The mercenary opened fire.

Streams of lead pounded into the dolerite beneath the snow. Twin geysers of earth and snow erupted where the bullets impacted. The geysers swept into curtains as Igor walked the tracers towards the fleeing scientist.

Victor ran for his life. The snow boiled behind him into a wall of death. Not even an olympic sprinter could have outrun it.

The founder of Nowhere was ten yards from the final antenna when he was cut down by twenty millimeter hail.

“Woohoo!” Igor cheered into his radio. “Now *this* is what I came for!”

“Nice shot, Igor!”

“We got bugs in the air! Bugs in the air!”

“Charlie Flight, this is Charlie Leader. Peel off and take out those bogies!”

“This is Bravo Three. I’ve got contact with the bugs!”

\* \* \* \*

In Nowhere’s main hangar, alarms blared. Pilots hastily got into G suits and ran to their ships. Mechanics ran to and fro, prepping planes for take-off. Snowbirds launched through the

cave opening into the fray. The whole complex shook. Rocks fell. Bombs punched through the ceiling and detonated, killing ground crews and residents.

Mike ran into the chaotic scene, battered and bruised. He saw Sammy, Teddy, and Alex talking frantically with Tom. The roboticist ran to them.

“It was Tony!” he called. “He called in the airstrike!”

“We know,” Tom said, solemnly.

“It’s the birds,” Mike said frantically. “They were the final piece of the puzzle Tony needed.”

“Enough analyzing,” Tom said. “You’re all fighter pilots now. Use your training! Get up there and blast these guys out of the sky. I’m going to give the order to evacuate and then get up there myself.”

“Where’s Victor?” Mike asked.

“If Victor doesn’t die in this raid, I’ll kill him myself,” Tom declared before running to an intercom.

“All fighter pilots, report to the flightline! All pilots, report for combat! This is not a drill! All other residents use the evacuation tunnels. Rendezvous at Terror Canyon Outpost. This is not a drill! I repeat...”

Mike noticed a figure in a mangled lab coat hobble towards one of the scout planes. The roboticist ran after him.

“Stop that man!” he shouted. “Don’t let him take off!”

Before the confused ground crew understood what was going on, Tony had clambered into the cockpit and taken off.

“I don’t get it,” Sammy said, watching Tony’s snowbird disappear. “If he needs the birds to replicate the formula, why is he bombing this place? Nowhere is the only place in the world with continental albatrosses.”

Mike paused a minute, then understood the traitor’s plan.

“There’s one continental albatross outside of Nowhere,” he said. “Where our Otter crashed. If Tony can recover that Pelican case and extract DNA from the dead bird, he has everything he needs to replicate the battery chemistry.”

“Sammy, Alex, Teddy,” Mike commanded. “You guys help Tom defend Nowhere. I’m going to take out Tony.”

## Chapter XI

### INTO THE DRAGON’S DEN

MIKE landed behind a snow drift, just hidden from the runway at the Dragon’s Den. The roboticist had been able to use the jets’ radio chatter with their home base to get a vector. He flew straight there, hoping his direct route would keep him ahead of Tony, and his head start would keep him ahead of the MIGs.

Before he left his plane, Mike went aft to the battery compartment. He drilled a hole in the side of the power cell, and held a test tube up to the stream of liquid that poured out. He corked the tube and hid it in his parka.

Peering over the drift, he saw all the MIGs were still out on their attack run against Nowhere. Ground crews waited idly for their ships to return. The Dragon's Den had only one prepared runway, for which snow had been compacted and plowed with a bulldozer. The surrounding area was covered in deep snow.

A white shape appeared in the sky: Tony's Snowbird. He landed hard, collapsing his plane's landing gear. A crew chief ran over to the ship to help the treacherous scientist out.

Tony limped from the plane to a nearby, orange tent. He directed two of the ground crew to carry the coffin-sized Pelican case from his Snowbird to the tent. A few minutes later, the men left that tent, and Tony limped over to a tent hangar on the flight line. His two ground crew were left outside as guards.

Teddy had personally trained Mike, Alex, and Sammy in advanced mixed martial arts. Mike put his training to use, silently taking out the guards. He crept into the tent.

The tent was small, only ten feet by ten feet. The back wall was hard, with a single window. The rest of the tent was sewn from technical fabrics. The interior was furnished with a single, steel chair and a single, aluminum table. The Pelican case rested on this table.

Mike rushed over to the case and opened its two latches. The decaying continental albatross was inside, preserved since the crash by the sub-zero cold. Mike cut open the bird with his pocket knife, searching for the gallbladder.

He found the bile storage organ, and poked a hole in it. He then withdrew the test tube of battery acid from his parka. He poured the liquid into the cavity surrounding the punctured gallbladder. Bile slowly leaked into the space with the battery acid.

Mike heard jets overhead. Based on the sound, only a quarter of Igor's MIGs had survived the dogfight with the Snowbirds. He slammed the case shut and popped the first latch closed. He moved to close the second latch. The tent opening rustled.

"Freeze!" Tony's voice ordered. The muzzle of a gun pressed into Mike's back. "Hands in the air! Face me!"

Mike raised his hands, then slowly turned to face Tony. One of the latches on the Pelican case was still unlocked. The case would stay closed, but it was not airtight.

The Nowhere cofounder was severely disfigured from his exposure to the red liquid in the chem lab. Deep chemical burns covered most of his face. His left eye was so severely burned that it was beyond use. His right eye was swollen nearly shut, but Tony could still see out of it, barely. His right leg was paralyzed from severe nerve damage sustained when he fell on his back. It was a miracle the murderer hadn't crashed on the flight over.

"You surprised me," Tony said. "You saved my life in the chem lab. You carried me out of the flames. That was a terrible mistake on your part."

Tony stepped back from Mike. Igor stepped into the tent behind him.

“But,” Tony continued, “I’m feeling generous. If you’re willing to agree to my terms, I might just return the favor and let you live.”

“What are your terms?” Mike asked.

“You let us take the case without interference. We tie you up. Then, we leave you here.”

Mike glanced at the Pelican case behind him. A wisp of smoke escaped from the imperfect seal.

“I agree,” Mike said.

“Come on!” Igor growled. “Let me kill him!”

“I probably should, Igor,” Tony replied. “And he should have left me to die in the chem lab. Leave him alone. You want to kill people? Go back to Nowhere and finish the job.”

Igor eyed Tony’s chemical burns.

“You’re pretty beat up, maybe I should fly the case to McMurdo.”

“No!” Tony snapped. “I hired you to be a killer, not a busboy! Are you afraid of the Snowbirds now? Huh, coward? I don’t want anything left alive down there! Do you understand? Not even the damned birds!”

Igor smiled evilly.

“Yes, sir,” he said.

After the two had tied up Mike, a pair of mechanics grabbed the case. Neither noticed the open latch. On their way out, Tony said to Igor,

“Remember, my plane gets takeoff priority. You and your sellswords can lap up the scraps of Nowhere after I’ve left.”

As soon as he was alone, Mike began trying to work free of his bonds. As he struggled, he watched the incoming MIGs land through the window in the back wall of the tent.

A few minutes later, Tony’s MIG taxied onto the runway. The jet was fueled, armed with bombs and 20mm ammo, and ready for takeoff. The Pelican case had been loaded into cargo space just behind the pilot’s seat. Tony strapped himself in. Behind him on the taxiway was Igor, then four more MIGs.

As he went through the pre-flight checklist and engine runup sequence, Tony noticed a strange smell. He turned around. Smoke was hissing out of the Pelican case. Occasionally, he saw flashes of green through the seam in the case.

Tony reached back and pulled the case into his lap. Then he made a mistake. He opened it. Green fire erupted into the cockpit. Tongues of flame jetted into the murderer’s face. He panicked and screamed. His whole body was on fire. The blaze devoured the oxygen in the cabin, making it almost impossible to breathe.

Tony urgently reached for the lever to jettison his cockpit canopy. He found it. He pulled it. That may very well have been the worst thing Tony could have done.

Explosive bolts fired. The canopy launched into the air and away from the plane. Oxygen rushed into the cabin, feeding the inferno. The green fire whooshed into a torrent of destruction.

The growing fire spread to the fuel tank behind the cockpit. Burning jet fuel added orange flames to the blaze.

Tony couldn't get out of his harness in time. He suffered a similar fate to Scott, the first pilot from Nowhere he had ordered killed.

While Tony burned, flaming jet fuel dripped from the melting MIG onto its bomb racks. One of the 220 pound bombs detonated, triggering the other in a chain reaction.

Tony's MIG disintegrated in a massive explosion. Fire and shrapnel launched into the air. Large chunks of flaming debris flew into Igor's MIG, waiting just behind Tony's. The missiles took out the mercenary's landing gear and punched through his windscreen.

Igor blew his canopy and cut through his harness. He practically jumped out of his plane, racing away before it caught fire and exploded like Tony's.

The ground crews ran for it. There were four more MIGs on the taxiway, but the two wrecked ones blocked the runway. One of them tried firing his 20mm cannons at the burning hulks to clear them, but the rounds only detonated the bombs mounted to Igor's plane.

The remaining MIGs were trapped. The snow outside the prepared runway was deep enough to swallow their landing gear. The pilots began to unbuckle their harnesses and leave their trapped planes.

Through his window in the tent, Mike saw a squadron of Snowbirds appear in the sky. The mixed group of fighters and transport ships raced in at 500 miles per hour.

The white stealth planes screamed overhead. .50 caliber machine gun fire strafed the MIGs on the ground. The remaining mercenary pilots fled into the snow. One of the rounds hit the magazine. Bombs detonated.

Parachutists streamed out of the transport Snowbirds. The assaulting force of men in white parkas, armed with rifles, prepared to storm the runway from above.

Someone knocked on Mike's window. It was Alex! Teddy and Sammy showed their faces in turn.

"Want a hand?" Alex asked through the glass.

"I'd appreciate it," Mike said. He hadn't made much progress with his bonds.

The three young men ran to the front of the tent and walked in.

"When we saw the surviving MIGs turn around to refuel," Sammy said as he untied Mike, "We figured you'd have company. I assumed you'd appreciate some backup."

"We left right away," Alex added, "but the MIG's were so much faster that they got here first. Sorry for the delay."

"What happened to the lead MIGs on the runway?" Teddy asked.

Mike smiled sheepishly.

"I knew from Tony's revelation that the albatross's bile was reactive with the battery chemistry," he answered. "I figured a reaction would destroy the DNA and keep the tech secret. I didn't realize that it was *that* reactive."

"Are you telling me you turned that dead bird into a bomb?!" Sammy exclaimed.

"I guess so," Mike replied.

Sammy laughed raucously. Alex snickered, then burst into laughter. Mike and Teddy joined the mirth.

“Now there’s one for the logbook!” Sammy proclaimed between laughs.

Tom burst into the tent, his rifle drawn.

“Oh, it’s you,” he said.

He slowly lowered his rifle. Blood leaked from a gash on his face. Crimson spatters also coated his white parka. Not all the blood was his.

“I took out the remaining mercenaries,” Tom explained. “Some of them put up a fight. We’re just dealing with the ground crew now.”

## Chapter XII

### THE MYTH

NOWHERE had been reduced to rubble. The bunker-busting bombs had collapsed the stone ceiling onto the secret, underground city. Its pilots fought bravely, buying valuable time for the residents and their albatrosses to escape. The technology was mostly destroyed, but the people who made it were safe.

Once the threat was neutralized, the citizens regrouped at the outpost in Terror Canyon. Hundreds of survivors huddled together in a massive, stone room. Crates of supplies were stacked in other rooms. They would have enough food for quite a while.

“I’ve contacted our people at McMurdo,” Tom told Mike and his team. “A helicopter is gonna pick you guys up here.”

“What about you guys?” Mike asked. “What about the people of Nowhere?”

“We will rebuild,” Tom declared. “The survivors elected me their new leader for the reconstruction. I will not make the same mistakes Victor did.”

“We could help you,” Sammy said.

Tom smiled.

“Thanks, but we can manage on our own. We have for years. You guys have lives to get back to. I heard this one,” he pointed at Alex, “has a date with the Cambridge Police Chief.”

“How did you hear about that!” Alex protested.

Sammy snickered.

“Sammy!” Alex chided. He slapped the huge aerospace student on the shoulder.

“How do we explain our disappearance?” Teddy asked. “I presume the people back at McMurdo have been looking for us for weeks.”

“They haven’t been,” Tom said, smiling, “because you were on a birding trip for Professor Strang to find the continental albatross. After much searching, you determined the bird is indeed a myth. The specimen mailed to you was an example of clever taxidermy.”

“What are you talking about?” Alex asked.

“You haven’t figured it out yet?” Tom queried.

The four young engineers shook their heads.

“Professor Strang is the guy who mailed you the albatross. He’s one of our people on the other side. We radioed him once we brought you to Nowhere, and he told everyone your cover story.”

Mike smiled.

“Thanks, for everything,” he said. “If you ever need anything in the future, let us know.”

“Although you could find a less cryptic way than mailing us another dead bird!” Sammy quipped.

“You know,” Teddy said, “It wouldn’t be that hard for me to set them up with an access point for our encrypted satellite comms network.”

“Thanks for the offer,” Tom said. “We may just take you up on that. And if you guys ever need something from me, and I mean *anything*, give me a ring.”

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At a Villa in Sinaloa, Mexico, a middle-aged man in a salmon polo shirt and white golf shorts dialed a number on his smartphone. He sat alone at a mahogany dinner table. Strings of incandescent bulbs, hanging above, cast a yellow glow on the white, stucco walls.

“I heard a report from your team in Antarctica,” he said into the phone in Spanish. “Your operation was an abysmal failure! I can’t afford to lose this kind of investment on such a farce!”

“I’m sorry, Manuel,” a feminine voice replied through the phone, also speaking Spanish. “There was an unanticipated factor. The residents somehow called in Mike Cribb, and he discovered my man on the inside.”

“I’m aware of the details!” Manuel snapped. “An ‘unanticipated factor,’ isn’t a good enough excuse. You pulled funds for an entire squadron of surplus Soviet jets *and* mercenary pilots for them from *my* funding pool! And you lost all of it!”

“Manuel,” the feminine voice protested, “if it had worked, we could have pulled more product across the border than you can imagine. It was worth a shot.”

“But it didn’t work,” Manuel retorted. “You don’t seem to be getting the message. *I’m* in charge of your operations. *You* report to *me*, and *I* didn’t authorize this nonsense. You fucked this up, and I’m giving you a warning: *Don’t* get distracted again,” he snarled, “*La Vibora*.”