

RACE the RED HORIZON



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RACE

THE RED

HORIZON

- THE FLIGHT OF THE PTERONAUT -

SAMPLE

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Daylight comes creeping across the cold dead deserts, chasing away the darkness of night. Another day dawning in the long tale of days. Where the shapeless dark has been before, a new terrain comes into

being, of rust-red plains and a brilliant blue sky above them. Sand and sky, red and blue, each is a mirror of the other, reflecting its pristine perfection: always faultless, forever empty.

Trapped between earth and sky is the restless wind, the master of all movement on the plains. It is the wind that sings the dust-devils into being and laments their passing, smothering the tracks that they make. It is the wind that hisses across the dunes, building their slithering slopes and driving them on their march towards the eternal horizon. It is the wind that whistles around the rocks and the cliffs and the outcrops, taking the dust that was once part of them and turning it against them, grinding them down, leaving only endless emptiness in their place.

Day after day, this is the way that things are and the way that things have been for untold ages past: blue sky, red rock, and the wind's many voices.

But not today. Today is different. Today, there is another note that rises and falls across the sands.

A ragged red plume flares up into the sky, a rising smoke-streak that scatters the whirling winds before it. The track it leaves is straight, an unerring line that cuts across the dust-devils' countless criss-cross trails. It does not deviate; no graceful curves or dizzying loops are left in its wake. It brings an unnatural order to the ageless dunes, a new geometry that scars the landscape.

At the head of the dust-plume is a splinter of metal and glass that glints in the daylight, moving faster and more purposefully than any dust-devil. The velocyte's massive

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wheels churn up the sand, one fore and one aft. The coming day strikes sparks from the supple arch of metal that connects them, and beneath the arch, the barrel of the engine drums away, drowning out the wind. Held out ahead, as if it is trying to outrun its own wheels, is the jutting dart-shape of the cockpit.

The velocyycle thief lies face-forwards beneath the glass of the canopy, watching through the goggles of his facemask as the horizon streams towards him. Noise fills the cockpit. Noise fills everything. The hammering of the engine burrows into the thief's bones, shaking all the way up his spine past his ribs and into his skull until his teeth rattle. Still he does not relent. For mile after racing mile, he keeps the accelerator-stalk pressed as hard as he can, pushing the velocyycle to its absolute maximum.

Ahead and to the left, the horizon shifts and grows, buckling into the silhouette of some highlands. The thief glances down at the radar-screen, and smears away a spatter of drying blood-drops with one red-gloved hand. The screen shows nothing. Nothing and not nothing – only the glowing dot of his vehicle at the centre, the outlines of swelling dunes, and the rocky outcrops up ahead; nothing for the thief to worry about. But he knows that the radar-screen will not remain empty for long.

He kicks back into the steering-stirrups to angle the velocyycle towards the rising cliffs. High ground is where he needs to go, and he is determined to get there by the quickest and most direct path.

It is an uncomfortable ride. The thief is still learning to read the shades and textures of the ground-radar, but even when he can, it makes no difference. Boulders or sand, hollows or ridges, he does not care what lies between him and his goal. The speedometer peaks when he cuts across a stretch of hard-baked rock pavement or on the empty flats, and drops away when the wheels plough into deep-piled dunes. The studded tyres spin and skid, but still the thief presses onwards. No matter what the obstacles, he carries

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on carving out his route towards the highlands, knife-edge straight.

Another number on the instrument-display catches his eye, and he glances quickly at it. The thief guesses it shows how much fuel is left in the tanks, and it is falling steadily towards zero: his reckless dash across the plains is drawing to a close.

The silhouette on the horizon hardens into the dark stripe of a plateau. The thief cannot tell how far away it is, not from the radar – he is used to judging distances by eye. Those eyes peer out through the goggles of his facemask and study the way that the outline of the plateau shifts with each passing mile. He gauges the distance to it by the angle it cuts across the sky and how the perspective changes the shape of its slopes. All those signs tell him that he might have twenty-five or thirty miles to go – a few minutes at the speed he is travelling. Just a few minutes. Maximum speed, no detours or delays. That is all the thief needs if he is going to survive.

When he looks down at the radar-screen again, it is there: another vehicle. The glowing dot flashes strong and steady behind the smudged back-scatter of the velocyycle's dust-wake. They have found him; just as he had expected they would, but far sooner than he had hoped. The miles and miles of empty desert between them will not matter now. Even as he watches the radar, the distance between his velocyycle and the other vehicle shrinks, eaten up by the speed of pursuit.

The thief checks and re-checks, looking from the rushing view of the deserts outside to the instrument-display, to the radar, to the instrument-display, and back to the deserts again.

Highlands, speed, radar, fuel.

Highlands, speed, radar, fuel.

It becomes a ritual, and every time he looks at the radar, the glowing dot that follows him is closer. Unmistakably closer. There is no doubt: his pursuers are approaching him faster than he is approaching the high ground.

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The thief glances up from the blood-spattered radar-screen towards the plateau, willing away the distance. Another jolt. Another drift. Another stretch of bare bedrock where the wheels roar with sudden freedom.

Out there, in the cold dead deserts, the margins of survival are always so small. A finger's width. The blink of an eye. One wrong step. Margins too small to be sure of their impact. Still the thief tries to measure them, to count the costs and to even the odds. His pursuers might not reach him in time. He still has a chance. But if they do catch him, he will not give up without a fight – they know that now.

Another few minutes, another few miles, and the dot has crept right up until it is almost directly behind him. The thief glances over his shoulder through the rear section of the canopy, but the view is obscured by the trailing dust-clouds thrown up from the wheels of his velocyte. Then for a moment the clouds clear and he sees the metal and glass teardrop of the other velocyte, a mile or so behind him. Its steering-fins twitch eagerly, waving and gesturing from their recesses in its streamlined outer skin, urging it into a subtle new angle of pursuit.

Unlike the thief, the pilot of the hunter-velocyte reads the grey-green shadows of the ground-radar like an expert. Every hollow, every drift, every obstacle that slows the thief down, the hunter-pilot avoids. Where the stolen velocyte lurches forwards from one jarring impact to another, crunching over half-buried edges or jolting across the choked-up scar left by some long-dead river, its pursuer takes a weaving detour. Despite its meandering route, the hunter-velocyte is closing the distance. Soon, the two vehicles will be head-to-tail, and the shadows that reach out from the highlands are still miles away: those fine margins of survival are becoming finer by the second.

The dot comes closer. Closer. Closer. Closer. Then the next time that the thief checks, the two dots in his radar-screen have become one, and the hunter-velocyte is behind him. It darts in and out of the billowing wake thrown up by his wheels, looking for a way to draw level. Its pilot is too

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close now to care about the obstacles that the thief blunders through. There is no way to bring the pursuit to an end trapped in the plume of dust thrown up behind his quarry, and the hunter-pilot knows it – he has to come alongside.

The thief knows it too. Every time the hunter-velocycle veers out to one side or the other, he matches it with a blocking move of his own, keeping his wide rear wheel directly in front of his pursuers. His steering is clumsy, but it has the desired effect. Again and again, he counters. Again and again, he keeps his lead.

But it is a game that the thief cannot win. The attempts to draw level have ceased to be random; the pilot of the hunter-velocycle only ever tries to overtake on the right-hand side. Every time, the thief is forced to steer slightly right-wards to block the move, and gradually, the hunter is pushing him away from the highlands and away from safety. With the cliffs now running almost alongside instead of ahead, the thief has a decision to make: keep his lead, or keep his course.

He kicks back hard into the left-hand steering-stirrup. Fins and vanes flare out down one side of his velocycle, catching the wind and pulling the vehicle back in the direction of the cliffs. In an instant, the pilot of the hunter-velocycle does the same. The thief is back on course, but he has lost his lead; the hunter-velocycle has come alongside, throwing up a parallel dusty streak.

The two vehicles dance a duet, their tracks snaking alongside each other across the flats. The thief glances over at the pilot of the hunter-velocycle, huddled forwards like him in the same prone pose beneath the canopy. He cannot see the pilot's face through the transparent visor of the helmet, but he does not need to – they all look the same, each and every one of them.

Abruptly, the thief turns away and glances forwards, first at the rising cliffs, and then down at the radar-screen. Only a few miles left. Five minutes, no more. In the supply-pouch in the small of his back, he can feel the weight of the pistol he took. He only has four shots remaining. Not enough,

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perhaps, when the fuel runs out and it comes to a stand-off, but four shots will have to do.

Except the hunter-pilot will not let it come to a stand-off. The hunter-velocycle bucks slightly as the rear section of the canopy lifts and slides backwards. A passenger sits upright out of the cockpit and into the full force of the wind. The currents catch hold of the hunter-velocycle, slowing it, buffeting it, rocking it on its axis, and the pilot struggles with the steering as the streamlining vanishes.

The movement catches the thief's eye. He glances over at the hunter-velocycle and he sees a new threat: the cold hard glint of daylight running down the barrel of a rifle.

The gunman turns sideways on to the wind and pulls the rifle back into his shoulder, setting the telescopic sight as close as he can to the visor of his helmet. He struggles to stay upright, aiming slightly to the rear of the canopy of the stolen velocycle where the thief's legs are stretched out behind him. Even now, after all that has happened, they will not kill him. Not outright, anyway.

The gunman holds his aim, holds his breath, and squeezes the trigger. The sharp crack of the shot is torn away by the wind.

At the very last instant, the thief veers away. Drowned by the noise of the engines, he does not hear the shot itself. He feels its impact somewhere aft, a dull thud against the rhythm of the engine. No warning-lights flash. No alarms sound. The shot has failed to end the chase.

The gunman steadies himself for another attempt, unbuckling the safety-harness that restricts his movement. He finds a different angle this time, so that the shot will count wherever the bullet strikes.

Lying face-forwards in the cockpit, the thief can do nothing but watch. There is nowhere to go, nowhere to hide – he will never reach the safety of the plateau.

A warning buzz jolts him back into the moment: the fuel is almost gone. For a heartbeat and no more, the thief eases his grip on the accelerator-stalk and hits the brakes. The gunshot comes as the hunter-velocycle flashes on past him

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at full speed. It misses his legs, misses all of him, and punches through one of the windows in the cockpit-canopy.

The decompression-alarm howls, its keening audible even above the engine-noise and the low-fuel warning. Breathable air vents out and the choking atmosphere of the desert floods in. An emergency oxygen-mask pops out from one of the solid sections in the canopy-roof, swinging from a twisted stalk of plastic tubing. The thief bats the mask away and scrapes and paws at the kaleidoscope of canopy-glass that now lies scattered across the radar-screen. He has seen something there that even his unaccustomed eyes have learnt to recognise: loose stones.

With a yank back on the accelerator-stalk and a kick of his right foot, the thief veers away from the highlands and towards the pebble-field. A blinding cloud of dust and grit sprays up from the wheels of his vehicle, and he feels his stomach slip backwards.

Behind and to the left of him, the hunter-velocycle barely slows, slews around, and accelerates in pursuit, but the hunters have lost their advantage. The gunman holds the rim of the open canopy with one hand, his rifle useless for the moment as the hunters come up quickly behind the stolen velocycle's solid rear wheel.

Inside the cockpit, the thief glances down at the radar-screen. He watches the dot of the hunter-velocycle creep up behind him again, cutting away his lead. The thief has no chances remaining; his timing will have to be perfect.

The pebble-field appears ahead, strewn across a wide landscape that might once have been a river, losing its power as it spread out towards a long-dead ocean. The noise from the racing wheels changes to a rumble. Together, nose to tail, the velocycles jolt and judder across the sweep of stones.

The thief keeps his eyes on the radar-screen. The dot of the hunter-velocycle creeps closer. And closer. And closer. The fuel warning-light seems to blink in time with the rise and fall of the decompression-alarm, becoming a metronome, ticking away, marking out the time to act.

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One; two; three...

Without warning, the thief pulls the stolen velocyycle around into a sudden switchback turn, aiming at the cliffs and cutting across the path taken by his pursuers.

It is a move that an expert pilot might manage to make one time in ten, and the thief is no expert. The angle of the turn is too sharp to be made at one hundred and thirty miles an hour – too sharp even to be made at sixty.

The back wheel skids out from under him, carving across the sands and sending a scudding fan of crimson dust into the air. The thief fights to maintain control, steering one way and then the other, but it is no use. His velocyycle slides over onto its side, spinning wildly. Stones scatter in all directions. Out of control, the velocyycle tears a gouge into the ground, shearing off all the steering-fins on one side. Shreds of metal and plastic fly into the air, joining the hail of gravel from the wheels.

Too late to steer a safe course, the pilot of the hunter-velocyycle brakes. All the steering-fins punch out at once, but the hunter-velocyycle is too close to stop. The studded front wheel rams into the underside of the stolen velocyycle, slowing both vehicles almost instantly to a walking pace. The impact sends the gunman flying out of the open canopy, and the hunter-velocyycle flips end-over-end over its prey.

Almost weightless, it seems, the hunter-velocyycle spirals gracefully into the air, looping slowly high and far. And then, gathering speed, it comes back down to a splintering crash on its back among the boulders. Fuel from its shattered tanks ignites, fed by a stream of leaking oxygen from the cockpit. Fire races across the wreck, quick and hungry flames that leap high with a whoofing roar. They flare, breathing the last of the air in the cockpit. Then almost as quickly the flames become a whispering flicker, fanned only by the thin ration of oxygen in the poisonous atmosphere.

A smear of smoke mixes with dust, red and black, and lifts across the shining blue of the sky. It flutters there proudly, and as the flames die back to almost nothing, the plains fall silent once again.

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The smoke from the crash does not fly unchallenged for very long. Soon the wind comes and takes hold of it, pushing it, twisting it, folding it inwards and then turning it outwards until it vanishes. The dust-

cloud that the crash kicked up into the sky is also hastened on its way, and then the wind is once again master of all movement on the plains.

In just a few days, the aberration will be gone. The wind will cover the wrecked velocycles, burying them beneath a new dune and hiding them from the sky, making the desert clean and smooth again – as things should be. It has already started to soften the edges of the tracks that the velocycles left behind them, and a sprinkling of rusty sand has been heaped around the broken bodies of both vehicles. It will take time for it to put things right, but time is all it has.

Gently, the wind reaches into the interior of the stolen velocycle where the glass of the canopy has been smashed. It piles fine dust-grains around the red-suited figure that lies inside, making a tomb for him.

But the thief is not dead.

He twitches a hand and lies still. His hand twitches again, and then he moves one of his legs, kicking away the smothering dust. Consciousness returns to him slowly. From somewhere close by, he can hear the whistle of the wind as it explores the canopy, and for a moment he thinks he is somewhere else, somewhere high and far and safe, looking down at the desert plains from a distance. Then the note of the wind falls, and he hears the rattle and hiss of the sand-grains as they creep around him.

Behind the round goggle-lenses of his facemask, the thief opens his eyes, but he is confused by the fragments of canopy-glass that he is lying on. They swirl around and around, and he cannot tell which way is up and which way is

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down. Beyond the glass, he tries to focus on the first fingers of the dunes that the wind has brought in with it. Their shallow swells confuse him still more. Are they near or are they far away? The thief cannot be certain, so he closes his eyes again. In the dark, near or far does not matter. In the dark, he can rest. Sleep is so close; he just has to let go.

How long since he has slept? Days? Hours? He cannot be sure anymore. Not since the sandstorm. Not since the noise of thunder in the night. Not since they found him and took him.

Slowly, the velocyycle thief remembers where he is, and how he comes to be there. And with the memory comes a sense of urgency. If he sleeps, they will come and find him, just as they did before. He must get up, and he must get up now.

With his eyes still closed against the confusion of his surroundings, the thief concentrates through the shifting dark, trying to recall how to get up, which muscles to move, and which direction to move them in. His gloves slide and scrape on his bed of glass, and finally he collects his limbs beneath himself and pushes himself upright.

The movement brings the blood pounding to his head and rushing to his ears, and he realises that he can taste blood too. Its iron tang on his tongue mixes with the acrid smell of burning plastic and rubber from outside, and of dead flesh roasting. He swallows, and then coughs warily, but there is no sharp pain deep down, no rush into his mouth from some internal injury. Just a cut in the lip or the cheek where he has bitten himself beneath his facemask. He can move his arms and legs with no discomfort. Everything feels just as it should, only distant, still numbed by the fog of unconsciousness.

The velocyycle thief possesses an uncanny sense of balance and orientation, and without it, he might have lain there many minutes more. But even so, it is a moment or two before he can open his eyes fully.

He ignores the surroundings that refuse to remain still and focuses instead on the figures that are projected onto

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the inside of his goggles. At first, he struggles to make sense of them, too dazed to read their meaning, but there is no alarm sounding in his ears, so he knows that the skin-suit is intact. As they swim out of the haze, the internal pressure-readings seem to be fine. Internal and external temperature-readings also look normal. Only his water and air-supplies are low, desperately low, but they have been low for days. There is nothing new for the thief to worry about. Just the old familiar worries.

With his wits returning, he crawls around inside the cramped wreck. The cockpit of the velocycle still defies his first attempts to make sense of it, lying over at an angle. Then he finds the handle to open the canopy and tries to slide it back, but he cannot move it. On its side, all the velocycle's weight is pressing down onto the frame, wedging it into the sand; the thief is caged inside.

Hidden behind a glass panel, he finds the emergency escape lever. He punches through the glass and takes hold of it. Using all the strength he can, he leans back until he feels the lever click. Release-bolts fire above his head with a loud *crack-pop* and a section of the canopy soars a dozen feet into the air. It flaps against the sky and crashes to the ground a few yards away. The thief pushes an arm up through the rectangular opening that is left gaping in the canopy and catches hold of the fuselage.

Slowly, he wriggles out into the daylight. First his head, then his other arm. He heaves his body free of the cocoon of the stolen velocycle, slithers across the wreck, and drops down onto the sand. All across the scales of his skin-suit, red and black patterns of camouflage shift and change, like the shadows of unseen clouds, regulating his body-temperature now that he is out in the open.

The thief lies in the sand for a few more moments, breathing the filtered desert air with his eyes closed. Outside in the daylight the smell of burning flesh and leaking fuel is stronger, and it makes him feel sick.

His eyes flick open again; he must not stay in the dark. The goggle-display tells him that the external temperature is

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nudging five degrees below zero already and it is still early. The day is going to be hot – it might even reach one or two degrees above freezing – and that will play in his favour if he can make it to the cliffs.

Using the wreck of the velocycle for support, the thief stands upright and checks himself over. The scaly exterior of the skin-suit shows a few minor cuts and grazes, but they will heal. Already, the wounds have scabbed over with dark resinous sealant. Searching with his fingers, he reaches around behind his back, checking the shield-shaped carapace that he wears there. That too seems to be intact and undamaged. The thief has been lucky. But luck must be paid for, and he sees the price of it attached to his right ankle. The sturdy silvery loop of metal that fixes the tracker-tag to his leg is also unscathed; it is too much to hope that the crash might have rid him of that.

One single sip of water through the drip-tube inside his facemask sets a warning blinking on the edge of his vision. The thief swats it away with a quick gesture to his temple. Water will have to wait. He looks back in the direction he has come from. Above the rippling haze of the horizon he can see nothing. The wide desert plains look as empty as ever beneath the blue sky. Deceptively empty.

With a growing sense of urgency, the thief leans back inside the wreck of the velocycle. The emergency water-flask is gone – he has seen that already – and wrenches the supply-kit from its fixtures. It is half-empty, its vital contents plundered in piecemeal fashion over the years. Any ration-bars it once contained are now no more than crumpled wrappers thrown back into the case. He will have to make do with the food that he carries in the supply-pouch in the small of his back.

Next he checks the toolbox. It rattles unpromisingly as he prises it free from its mounting. Mixed in among the detritus of broken springs, lengths of half-stripped wire, and oily valves is nothing of any use. Nothing that might cut through the metal loop of the tracker-tag around his ankle. He has

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not been able to prise it off with his knife, and he cannot shoot it off. For now, he is stuck with it.

The thief pulls the pistol from his supply-pouch and paces towards the heat of the flames that have taken hold of the other velocyycle. He shields his goggle-eyes and the skin-suit turns a pale red to reflect the heat. Twisting coils of black smoke trickle out of the cockpit, and any canopy-glass that remains unbroken is smudged and inky on the inside. Anything not destroyed in the crash has been fuel for the fire. What is left of the hunter-velocyycle offers nothing for him to salvage.

Next he searches for the gunman. Caution is unnecessary. Thrown from the open cockpit at full speed, the gunman's body is a hundred paces from the wreckage, lying among some boulders and bent back on itself at an impossible angle. A wide tear flutters along one side of the gunman's suit, exposing a bloody gash and a thrust of broken ribs, still steaming in the cold air. The thief slips the pistol away and turns the gunman's body over.

A scarlet slick has congealed across the visor of the helmet, hiding the face that he knows is inside, the face they all have. Only what the gunman wears – the symbols that have been daubed across the exterior of the suit and the jangle of drift-metal charms hanging around his neck – make him any different from any of the others. One of the charms sticks upright from his chest where the impact of the crash has embedded it – so much for the protection of the gods.

Quickly, the thief examines the gunman's body. The suit is inflexible and rigid, all metal and plastic. Inert. As dead as its wearer. The only similarity with his own skin-suit are the rows of gill-cells that run from spine to breastbone around the gunman's ribcage. On one side, above the ragged wound in the chest, the mesh protectors of the gill-cells have been torn open. The filters inside are almost black from exposure to the air, and red dust already peppers them, clogging the pores. They are useless.

On the other side of the gunman's body, three of the cells are intact, and the thief pops open the mesh protectors one

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by one and slides out the filters. The tapering lozenges he finds inside are not quite the same shape and size as the filters of his skin-suit, so they will not function with maximum efficiency, but judging by the grey-blue colour and spongy texture they have been replaced recently.

Careful to shield himself from the dust-laden wind, the thief seals off the respiratory-capillaries to his internal air-supply and exchanges the grey and crumbling filters he carries for the ones he has scavenged. He takes a few deep breaths, and watches the air-supply readings in his goggle-display blossom with a healthy green glow. Enough air for about a week or so. Not long, but longer than his supply of water will last.

Once more he glances over at the horizon. The straight red line still looks empty beneath the sky, but he knows that if he does not move soon, none of his calculations and rationing of supplies will make any difference. Beyond the wreck of his velocyple, a mile or so distant in the opposite direction, the cliffs rear up into the heights he needs. It is time to go.

He hoists the body of the gunman over his shoulder, walks back to the stolen velocyple, and dumps the body inside through the open escape hatch. A sticky mass of congealed fuel is smeared across the bodywork of the velocyple from a gash in the fuel-tanks, half-frozen now that its liquefying additives have boiled off. The thief picks up a section of broken steering-fin and uses it to scoop up a good amount of the freezing fuel. Once it is pasted inside the cockpit, he takes hold of the emergency oxygen-mask which still dangles there, and slits through the tangled coil of its supply-line with the knife from his belt. With a hiss, what is left of the emergency oxygen-supply seeps out.

A glowing piece of rubber tubing from the other wreck is all it takes to start the fire. The thief steps back as the fuel catches. Rippling waves of blue and yellow flame wash across the interior of the velocyple, lapping tongues that take hold of anything flammable. Plastic whines and pops as the flames gut the cockpit, and a thick black cloud of smoke

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drifts upwards. It can be seen for miles, a sure marker of the thief's location. But with the tracker-tag still attached to his ankle, that does not matter, and he will leave nothing behind that can be used against him.

03

The high wall of the cliffs casts a long shadow out across the dunes. Ages before, the plateau might have been an island in a shallow sea, and the cliffs the ramparts of its coastline, or the edge of the continental shelf.

Now, the seas have dried to nothing, and the rivers that once cut valleys through that high wall have trickled away to unknown ends in the choking sand.

The thief crosses into the shadow, and the temperature-readings in his goggle-display plummet to twenty degrees below freezing. Despite the super-insulated layers of the skin-suit he feels the chill deepen, and the suit responds by burning some of its store of sugars to keep him warm. Even so, he quickens his pace to stave off a shiver.

Less easy to deal with than the cold is his hunger. His stomach growls. He has bled the pigment from two transparent sections of the skin-suit, exposing the blue-purple swirls of the photosynthesising tattoos across his chest and shoulders, but in the shadow of the cliffs the output of the tattoos is minimal. The sugars they provide will just about keep him going – he feels them trickling into his bloodstream already – but they are no cure for the gnawing hunger of an empty stomach.

With one hand, he shuts off the capillary-tubes that feed oxygen into his facemask. With the other, he reaches into the supply-pouch that nestles beneath the shield-shaped carapace on his back and fumbles around until he finds a ration-bar. In one swift practised movement, the thief unclips a section of his facemask, hinging it down, and squeezes half the contents of the foil wrapper into his mouth, saving the rest for later. The desert air bites at his lips, cold and dry, and he quickly repositions the facemask and turns the air-supply back on. It is not much of a meal, but it will expand in his stomach and keep him going.

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Worse even than the lack of food is the lack of water. He follows the mouthful of the ration-bar with another careful sip at the drip-tube. The few drops of water he swirls around his sandpapery tongue only intensify the burning thirst, and the low-water warning blinks back into the goggle-display. He swipes it away once again, but it will not be long before it remains on the edge of his vision. Down in the constant cold beneath the cliffs, the dead rivers are places to dig down to the permafrost in the hope of finding water-ice to melt, but the thief has no time to replenish his supplies.

As he gets closer to the plateau, the reason for his haste becomes louder. Something echoes back at him from the walls of rock, something that might be the ghosts of sounds he has never heard, of rolling waves and crashing breakers. But the thief knows those sounds for what they really are: the rise and fall of engine-noise, carried on the wind.

Behind him, the plains look more and more empty by the minute. Already the outlines of the wrecked velocycles and the tracks they cut across the dunes have become blurred and indistinct – even the trail of his bootprints is hard to see. The thief is not fooled. The emptiness of the desert is an illusion, no more real than the shimmering islands of a *fata morgana* that float above the sands.

Beyond the mirage, a new plume of dust rises up into the sky, a swirling red cloud, bigger and more threatening than that made by any velocycle. By now the wrecks of the velocycles have finished burning and only a faint inky smudge hangs in the air to show where they are. But whatever drives the dust-cloud onwards, it needs no signposts; there is no doubting the menacing intent that steers it straight towards the cliffs. It moves more slowly than the velocycles, making barely half their speed, but that is still many times faster than the thief can run. Even so, there is nothing else he can do – at the sight of the swirling red cloud, the thief runs.

The land starts to rise towards the plateau. At first the incline is gentle, but then it steepens, and the thief is forced

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to slow his pace, bent almost double by the angle of the ascent. At their base, the cliffs are littered with fragments that frost-heave and wind-erosion have brought crashing down. Boulders lie in heaps where they have fallen, like irregular eggs on nests of smashed stone.

The thief looks up at the cliffs, and then back at the growing dust-plume. If he can find an easy way up, he might climb high enough above the plains before the cloud reaches the wrecks, but it will be close – the chase and the crash have eaten away at his headstart more than he had realised. He needs a quick and easy way up.

Quick and easy are rare qualities in the desert. As he gets nearer to the cliffs, the thief can see the curves that the wind has carved across them. Extending to a height of twelve or fifteen feet above the ground, their vertical faces are almost perfectly smooth and utterly unclimbable, undulating in silken waves that offer no purchase; he will need to find a recent rockfall to make a start.

He turns aside, running parallel to the cliffs. Up ahead, part of the cliff wall seems weaker than the rest. Perhaps it is a flaw in the million year-old rocks that have been laid down layer by layer, or just the way that the formation is standing half in the full glare of daylight, half in shadow, so that the freeze-thaw actions of day and night are particularly aggressive. Either way, it is a place of crevices and terraces that the thief can use to gain height above the plains.

Staring up at the rockface, glancing across the fissures he can see, he clammers over the rubble at their base. As he goes, his eyes follow near-invisible networks so far, reading them like a map. Time and again his gaze turns aside as he sees how each possibility becomes an impossibility, trailing away into smooth stretches of nothing, or ending at an impassable obstacle. None of the routes he can see leads high enough.

Then the thief finds a path, a crooked crumbling path, a difficult and dangerous climb, but not quite impossible. It is a route he has to take. Over his shoulder, the dull rumble

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grows on the edge of his hearing, and he can almost feel the ground trembling as the dust-cloud approaches. The thief restores the camouflaged sections to his skin-suit to cover his tattoos and starts to climb.

His first step is not really a step at all. The lower sections of the cliff are still polished smooth, so he takes a running jump, up an untidy ramp of boulders, and then leaps as high as he can. Arms and legs outstretched, the thief slams against the cliff-face and somehow he hangs there, finding the merest faults to cling to.

He has started his ascent, and right from the very beginning, it takes its toll on his strength and skill. In his goggle-display, the graphic that shows his air-supply pulses with the rise and fall of his chest; every in-breath turns it green, drawing the toxic desert air through the filters of the gill-cells, blooming red again as he breathes out. The skin-suit breathes with him, adding a little of the oxygen it exhales to the supply from the gill-cells, keeping him going, making every breath count for two. And beneath its red and black scales, the skin-suit's muscles work in concert with his own. They knot and flex, sensing the movements of his body as he stretches and strains, helping him to climb.

Tacking backwards and forwards across the cliff-face, working always at the maximum extent of his reach, the thief goes as quickly as he dares. As he climbs higher, away from the scouring action of the sand, handholds are easier to find, but the walls get steeper.

There are places where fragile sections of rock give way under his hands and leave him scrabbling for purchase. What seem like stable ledges tumble away beneath his boots, clattering down among the boulders at the base, so that he has to jump to the next foothold and trust to luck that it will take his weight. Sometimes it does. Sometimes it is only another fragile leaping-off point from which to make one more desperate lunge.

Even with the assistance of his symbiotic second skin, the thief's arms and legs burn from the effort. But despite all the difficulties and the dangers, again and again, from one

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handhold to the next, foot by foot, he heaves himself upwards.

At two hundred feet, a great vertical sheet of the cliff-face has fallen away, leaving a stepped ledge. The fall must have been recent, because the handholds and footholds are sharp-edged and unweathered. For a few minutes, the thief makes good progress, and then he allows himself a quick glance back across the desert plains.

The billowing column of dust has almost reached the remains of the velocycles. Waves of sand and gravel foam up all around the thing that makes it, obscuring its vastness, and the snakeskin pattern of its tracks is strung out behind. For a moment, the blood-red clouds drift away, and the thing at the centre of the dust-storm reveals itself.

Daylight slants across the storm-shields on its flanks, glittering where they have been polished to burning silver by century after century of wind-blown dust. The rays break into dazzling streams across a riddle of girders and pipework, splintering from the cranes and drill-masts that rear up above the armoured upper-deck. Streamers of smoke and steam snag around revetments and battlements, torn into tatters as the metal monster thunders along. Beneath the vast shadow that it casts, parallel rows of tracks churn, a clanking army of toothed metal plates that leave their marks on the shifting sand.

It is the Crawler. Undaunted. Untiring. Unstoppable.

Almost half as high as the plateau itself, the Crawler does not look like it should even stand upright, let alone move at such speed. But it is moving, and the noise of it shakes the cliffs, sending powdery streams of dust and showers of rock-fragments cascading down.

The Crawler did not slow as it neared the charred remains of the velocycles. They were rare treasures, lost in the age-old wastes, dug out from some dune and made whole again with half-forgotten skill and ingenuity. Now their blackened bones offered nothing to salvage, and the Crawler had a greater prize to play for. It did not stop and it did not swerve

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aside. It ploughed on over the wrecks, grinding them and shredding them and flattening whatever was left, burying them back beneath the sands. The hunt was on, and it would not be distracted.

In just a minute more, the Crawler had reached the steep incline at the base of the plateau, defying the shadows that gathered there with its silvered sides. It knew that its prey was there among the rocks somewhere; the tracker-tag told it that. But the accuracy of the signal was limited and it was no use any more – the last strike had to be made face-to-face.

The thunder of its engines faded away and the Crawler rocked to a halt. At some secret signal, hatches opened all along its steel flanks. Figures emerged from inside, a suited swarm of them, daubed with symbols to bring luck in the hunt. Like a flood they came pouring out, running along the external walkways, seeking out the best vantage-points. War-masks of metal and plastic covered the transparent visors of their helmets, shielding from view the one face that they all shared.

The Crawler's drones turned towards the cliffs, an unmoving army, intensely quiet. Only the bone ornaments that were tied along the balustrades made any sound as they swayed and jingled against each other. Hidden behind the dark slits in the masks, unseen eyes searched for the thief.

Wedge between two boulders, the thief has stopped dead. The mottled scales of his skin-suit hide his outline perfectly, red and black against the rockface and fissures at his back. He stares at the Crawler, now just a few hundred feet away, an iron and steel counterpart to the cliffs he has just climbed. Metal and rock, the two heights make a dark and narrow valley with a thin strip of sky at the top, and he is trapped between them.

Standing as still as the stones around him, the thief's arms and legs start to shake from the effort. He relaxes the muscles and then tenses them again by turns, shifting the

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burden of his bodyweight slightly each time. Even with the strength of the skin-suit to help him, it is little relief. The tendons running beneath the sole of his foot feel like they will snap any second. Willing his aching muscles to respond, the thief presses his foot harder against the cliff-face, grinding away the flaking surface to make the slightest of indentations. But the change in the direction of pressure only makes things worse. His foot starts to cramp. He has to move. Striking out suddenly, the thief leaps from cover, lunging for the next handhold.

As one, the Crawler's drones turned in his direction. They had seen him. A tremor ran through their ranks. Some rushed forwards wielding long-barrelled harpoon launchers, firing them into the face of the cliff. Pitons drove deep and cams expanded to grip the rock. Each harpoon trailed a line behind it, and each line bristled with swarming figures that crossed the gap.

Using the lines to aid them, a handful of drones reached the top of the plateau. They stared down at the thief, ready with long poles that were fitted with hooks or the loop of a noose, seeing which way he would go next. Others tried to follow him, or to second-guess where he would turn aside. A cautious shot rang out, a failed attempt to herd the thief into the path of one group of net-wielders – shooting out his legs would do no good now – and the bullet struck splinters from the rock barely two feet from him.

More and more lines hiss into the cliff-face and the thief climbs as quickly as he can. But no matter where he goes, the web is closing in. He twists and turns, trying to keep to his route as the rockface seethes around him.

The thief changes direction suddenly, pushing off from one ledge and catching hold of another. The nets are closing in. He turns again, and again, leaping for handholds that seem like sheer rock, finding purchase on the merest faultline.

The hunt is almost over.

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Almost surrounded, the thief reaches a spur of the cliff that juts out into space. There he stops – his ascent can go no further. An overhanging lip of rock projects above him like a shelf, barring the route to the top of the plateau. He can overcome it, but it will be slow and careful work, and the Crawler's drones will be waiting for him at the summit.

The thief is trapped.

But it is not the summit of the plateau that the thief was ever aiming for. Standing on the spur of rock, he does not look up; instead, he stares across and down, gauging his height and the distance to the armour of the Crawler's upper-deck. Only for a second he stands there, his eyes taking it all in. And then he moves.

Mute and motionless, the Crawler's drones can only watch as the thief takes two rapid steps towards the end of the spur and kicks off into the empty air.

As he leaps out above the drop, the thief finds the handles that are hidden away at his shoulders. Grasping them tightly, he depresses the thumb-locks, and in one swift movement, he extends his arms upwards and forwards in a sweeping arc.

From within the protective housing on his back, a framework of struts and spars explodes outwards. Overlapping leaves of tissue spread and stretch, section by section. Folds fan out and flatten themselves. Wires go taut, pulling, tightening, locking everything into place. In the next instant, chaos becomes order, and two broad wings catch the currents.

With a crack and a snap, the thief beats the wings once, and then once more. He has left the ground behind and taken to the air – he is a Pteronaut again!

04

The Pteronaut is in the air, but he is falling, not flying. His launching leap can still end in death among the boulders at the foot of the cliffs. For now, the Crawler and its drones are forgotten; gravity is the enemy that

he must battle.

He pushes his feet into the tail-spine that extends from the wing-case, bracing himself against it, and beats the wings harder and harder. The sliding spiderweb of struts and hinges on his back translates the frantic movements of his arms into curving cyclical motions of the wings. Efficient soaring upstrokes follow graceful sweeping downstrokes, stitched seamlessly together with a sinuous *sneek-sneek* of the mechanism.

Efficient and graceful it might be, but it is not working. Beat after beat fails to halt his fall. Gravity is too strong. Even without the readings for altitude, airspeed, and climb-rate that have appeared in his goggle-display, the Pteronaut can see that. Beyond the translucent constellation that the readings form, the red rocks rush towards him. He has not climbed high enough, and the Crawler is too close – there is nowhere to go but straight down.

The Pteronaut beats the wings faster, desperate to carve an upwards path. Struts creak. Wing-tissue strains. He angles his wings against the flow of air and tries to defy the unforgiving vertical grain of his fall. His chest heaves. Pure oxygen seeps into the facemask; the skin-suit has sensed the urgency in his rapid breaths and is fighting gravity with him.

Another fifty feet go by.

More oxygen.

More beats of the wings.

A hundred feet.

He cannot counter the downward force. The cliffs flash past, a blood-red smear. The silver slopes of the Crawler

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sparkle as they mirror his doom. The Pteronaut stares into the bone-splintering smile of the boulders below.

Suddenly he has it. From one instant to the next, the fall becomes a dive, and then the dive becomes a swooping glide. The currents that were hurtling him to his death now respond to the beats of his wings and keep him aloft. The pull of gravity is held at arm's length.

The Pteronaut is flying, but he cannot fly far. He is trapped within a narrow chasm. The cliffs he took such risks to climb are behind him, the Crawler ahead, and the freedom of the blue sky shines bright above him, criss-crossed by the taut tangle of the harpoonists' lines. He angles the wings and arches his back, flexing his spine like a bent bow as he tries to turn. There are inches to spare. His wing-tip strokes the Crawler's sides, and as his back straightens, he finally faces along the length of the chasm.

For two or three seconds, he keeps the wings utterly still, his arms tense and unbending, and holds the line of the glide as the spars creak and the wing-tissue flutters. Then he hears the noise of descent change to ascent, and he starts to beat the wings again, mastering his course through the air. Two flicking beats lift him higher, carrying him on through the narrow chasm towards freedom. The Pteronaut is flying, really flying, and despite his gasping breaths, it feels good.

In another second, the metal wall of the Crawler's flanks comes to an abrupt end. The Pteronaut flies beyond the Crawler's bulk and out from shelter, emerging into the full force of the winds that sweep off the plains.

Air-currents break into jagged eddies across the boulders at the base of the cliffs. Gust after gust threatens to flip him over. The Pteronaut grips the wings tightly, fighting the invisible turmoil. He is too close to the plateau and the ramparts it throws up in the way of the wind. See-sawing from side to side in the turbulence, he adjusts his flight. He must get higher and into smoother air. There the currents will help him instead of hindering him, lifting him above the unassailable obstacle of the plateau. Escape is fifty feet away. Forty feet. Thirty feet...

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But the Crawler did not stand idly by and watch its prey escape. Its engines roared with fury and its smoke-stacks spouted black streamers high into the sky. The drones hurried away from the cliffs, racing back across the lines that they had fired. They knew that the Crawler would not wait; any who were too slow would be left behind.

The roar of the Crawler's engines became a rumble, and the rattling mountain of metal heaved itself into motion. The toothed track-plates span beneath its bulk and the rows of separate drive-units swivelled in their sockets, slithering across the sand as they changed direction. Trailing the last broken lines from the harpoons behind it, the Crawler churned up the dust and ground the boulders into gravel. The hunt was on again.

Two hundred yards ahead of the Crawler, the Pteronaut fights his way above the turbulence and finds some lift. He soars up against the cliffs with the wind under his wings. But it is too little, too late: the Crawler is moving and he feels it close behind him, closer and closer by the second. The Pteronaut does not have the strength to outrun it, and the updraughts cannot carry him high enough fast enough. He feels the bow-wave building as the Crawler shoulders the air out of its way. Anywhere else, that wave would have aided him, lifting him as it approached, but so close to the cliffs it is a hurricane that jostles him with one sideways gust after another.

Failed by the currents, trapped against the cliffs, the Pteronaut has one chance remaining: the desert. It stretches out to the horizon on his left. He flicks the wings into a new shape, banking sharply across the buffeting bow-wave of the Crawler, and veers sideways across its snout. For one deadly second, the roar of the Crawler is louder than ever in his ears, the dust from the tracks robs him of his sight, and their churning cuts the air-currents into shreds. Then the terror and the turmoil is behind him, and he is out of the dust-cloud and soaring across the sand.

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The Pteronaut's escape is still not certain. His speed falls to almost nothing as he heads straight into the wind coming off the plains. If he cannot go forwards, he must go upwards. Angling the wings in their sockets, the Pteronaut tries to get as much lift as he can. He climbs, carving a steep and rapid ascent out of the air. Then he swoops towards the sand again, trading height for speed. At the end of every racing dip, he must climb again. And again. And again.

It is exhausting. There is no way that the Pteronaut can outrun the Crawler on the plains, not even with the muscles of his skin-suit and the extra oxygen it supplies. Fatigue means nothing to the turbines and drive-shafts of the Crawler, and he is already tiring. Every wing-beat is an illusion of freedom, a desperate attempt to hold off the inevitable fall to the ground. And it is an illusion that is coming to an end.

The Crawler was far less manoeuvrable than its prey. Its tracks skidded and slewed as it tried to change direction. Gears crashed and pistons hammered in protest. Just as the birdman fought gravity in his fall, so the Crawler railed against its own inertia, spinning up the dust as it struggled for control. Unable to stop and turn quickly like its prey, it thundered along in the shadow of the cliffs.

Then at last the Crawler mastered its momentum. The chaotic clanking of its tracks faltered, becoming ordered as it slowed enough to align its drive-units and forge a new path across the plains. With the noise of an iron avalanche, it turned away from the plateau. Engines drumming, its tracks a billowing blur, it came tearing after its prey at full speed.

Running ahead of the Crawler, a few desperate yards and no more, the Pteronaut's feels the force of its bow-wave like a blow from an invisible fist; he can even see its effects, lifting the top-most layer of sand from the ridges of the dunes. He has to keep ahead of it. Behind the crest of the bow-wave, the onrushing currents will suck him in and flip him around. Then the Crawler will have him.

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Seconds before the full force of the blow falls, the Pteronaut's wings fill with the sudden rise in pressure. That is what he has been waiting for. He bends the wings to catch it and soars ahead of the lift-zone it forms, stealing as much height as he can. It is a knife-edge of air and no more, and if he stays too long within it, it will bat him out of the sky.

The knife-edge passes him by. The currents start to break up. That is the moment when he must act. The Pteronaut banks sharply. Almost stalling, skirting the unseen edges of the bow-wave, he twists back on his own flightpath and converts all his height for speed. A hand's width from his wing-tips, the silver scales of the Crawler sweep past. Then, dipping and accelerating once more, he is heading back towards the cliffs, leaving the Crawler to chase his fading slipstream.

For a few seconds, the Pteronaut holds his arms out straight on either side, gasping for breath. He swoops towards the plateau in a gliding dive, faster than before. The rushing wind sings between spars and struts. The taut tissue of his wings beats like a drum, then goes silent. Beneath him, the desert blurs, and the Pteronaut flies low enough to hear the hiss of the sand-grains running before his shadow.

Just when it seems that he must crash headlong into the dunes, the air-currents start to rise. For countless miles, they have hurried above the desert, meeting no barrier other than the impermanent slopes of wind-driven sand. Now the angular solidity of the plateau thrusts up above the plains, and the air-currents quicken as they reach it.

Like he is riding on a wave towards the ancient shoreline, the rising air carries the Pteronaut upwards. He turns aside just before the wave splinters against the cliffs, staying out of the ragged eddies that batter the rocks. Parallel to the summit, at right-angles to the wind, he keeps within the lift-zone. All the long and difficult climb up the precipice rushes past in a flicker, the rapid descent of his launch in reverse. Twitching the wings to stay stable, he soars higher and higher with every breath.

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Then the Pteronaut is suddenly above the plateau, with the freedom of the blue sky all around him. He has done it; he is back in the sky, high and safe and out of reach. He has escaped from the Crawler.

05

Back down on the plains, the Crawler had made its turn. It roared towards the plateau as fast as its tracks could carry it, but the birdman had already made his lead count. Stranded beneath the high

walls of the cliffs, the Crawler watched the birdman follow the edge of the plateau, becoming a distant speck as he soared with the currents of air until they lost their upward power. Then the speck turned away over the plateau and vanished from sight.

The Crawler slowed as it approached the towering cliffs, a glittering thunderstorm trapped down on the plains. Its turbines rumbled and its deck-plates juddered. The echoes of its engine-noise battered the rocks that blocked its path, but the rocks stood unmoved. The Crawler could not follow the birdman up onto the plateau. Even with all its immense power, it would take a hundred years for it to smash a route that it could climb. It had to search for another way.

Slowly, the Crawler's tracks started to roll again, carrying it along. The birdman was lost behind the barrier of the old coastline, and minute by minute he was getting further away. But although the Crawler had lost sight of its prey, it had not lost hope. Not yet.

Even if it could no longer track the birdman in the visible spectrum, the ringing call of the tracker-tag he carried on his ankle was still clear enough. He would have to travel far across the plateau to outrun the range of the tag, and the Crawler was tireless. It would skirt the high walls of rock, and sooner or later, it would find a way to climb them. Somewhere there would be a ravine that was wide enough to admit its bulk or a canyon that opened low enough for it to reach. It just had to find it.

The Crawler would not give up. If it had to search for a thousand miles, it would find the path it sought. And the birdman could not fly during the freezing hours of the night.

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When the deadly cold of darkness came, he would have to roost somewhere, and then the Crawler would catch up with him.

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