

BLACK '91

CHAPTER SIX: "FRISBEE"

Guthorm maneuvered through the driving rain, dividing his concentration between the crowded highway and the planes waiting patiently on the soaked runway off to his right. The severe weather had almost drowned out the several underpasses he'd just driven through, and a smile had creased his face when the car radio began blaring Lead Zeppelin's "When the Levee Breaks," Guthorm soundlessly mouthing the words throughout. He would have to remember to ask Wayler to add that song to this Friday night's concert. "No biggie" Guthorm commented to the empty car, and he smiled as he rolled the phrase off his lips, the first time he'd ever used that particular human phrase. Yes, he was picking up "the Chicago style," as Guthorm called it, quite nicely. Only a year and a half had they been here, and he was acclimating just fine.

"Just fine," he mused, and allowed his mind to drift once to more to their original project, the original destination they'd been aimed for, before they landed in 1991 Chicago during one of the freakiest electrical storms this city had ever seen. Drought year it was too, at least it was before the eight-and-a-half inches of rain came down in those four hours. The four hours that saw them crash to the pavement of a modern pre-Window timeline, and one they were almost totally unfamiliar with.

One they were apparently destined never to leave.

For the six thousand, nine hundred and twenty-first time, Guthorm kicked himself psychodirectionally for allowing this mistake to happen. "Void!" he swore at himself. Why didn't he check for possible bounces at their target? One little "peer" was all it would have taken, and with Wayler's help they could have seen every consciousness at their target within a matter of hours. As long as Wayler knew which versions of themselves might be living in that alternate reality, there would have been no chance for "bouncing" off one of their parallel selves. Must have been another Wayler or Freja, Guthorm mused as he avoided rear-ending a slowed Datsai in front of him. Couldn't have been Aud or himself, since neither of them had souls that continuously were reborn like these mortal humans. And it was doubtful that it was another Wayler, since he hadn't died in over seven hundred years.

Guthorm kicked himself again at forgetting to perform such an easy task that now forced him to maintain this disguise. The "peer" was an easy enough procedure for a being of his powers, far easier than caging his normal "self" and wearing this disguise of humanity to get through each day. His actual physical structure was quite similar to the humans, and Guthorm smiled again when he realized that he'd never shown his "real" shape to Wayler. It was less draining to keep his bipedal shape at its normal six foot seven height, since there was quite a significant proportion of the population in this time-space that were close to his size. The local sports teams, the Daemons and The Devils, both employed a large collection of rough-and-tumble types that he resembled both in body and demeanor. The kids in the run-down urban neighborhoods often mistook him for the new Daemons power forward, though occasionally one of the North side teens asked if he was the new defensive linemen for The Devils. Except, neither of those teams had any white-skinned players that looked quite like Guthorm — and none of the bravest autograph hounds had ever quite been able to remember seeing such an odd greenish-gold tint to an athlete's hair before.

A fraction of a second later, he kicked himself again, then let his frustration melt away into the angry clouds and returned his concentration to the ground vehicles around him. He liked driving more than any of his three fellow castaways, and whenever they needed to take an extended trip he was always asked to drive. Wayler usually navigated and regaled them with stories about "The Old Times," when beings weird and powerful strode the Earth — or at least a similar Earth, along a similar timeline far off across reality. Guthorm never did quite understand time and dimension travel, nor just what the Void Wayler was talking about when he described intersections, windows, parallel tracks and black ends. It all got too pilotechnical for it to be of any practical benefit. Better to just do it, Guthorm figured, forget trying to explain it. Explaining's for those who can't do, and Guthorm was here to do.

A pair of lightning bolts streaked across the sky, followed quickly by a deafening peal of thunder. The rain seemed to reply as it doubled in intensity, almost obscuring the crowded roadway. Guthorm avoided the worn gullies in the concrete that were now full of water and rode on the crests, but the wind began to pick up in intensity and started to push his old vehicle around. The weight of the four ton auto helped keep it stable, and Guthorm labored just a little harder to keep it up

on the ridges. "Must be real tough to maneuver one of those birds around" he said to the waiting airplanes. "Hate to be in your shoes today."

His eyes caught an unusually marked airplane beginning its takeoff through the wind and driving rain. It was one of the big ones, a 747, four huge engines and enough steel to build a skyscraper. The engines couldn't be heard through the storm, but Guthorm knew just how loud and powerful they were from the many times he and Aud had watched them takeoff overhead as they parked on the side of Irving Park Road, next to Runway 29. It was a popular event for young lovers to do, making out to the roar of jets landing and taking off. Guthorm just loved the planes, and coming from a race where instantaneous travel had been a reality for generations, it seemed to him still a marvel that backward humans could make these complex machines fly.

The brightly colored plane lumbered down the runway, and as Guthorm's car drove past the end of the runway, he could feel the thrust of the big jet shove against the right side of the car. For a moment the car was balanced between the storm on the left and the jet's push on the right, but quickly the storm's power deepened and nearly forced Guthorm into the next lane. The wind was really picking up now, and other drivers were having difficulty staying on the road, some already parked on the side to wait out the torrents of rain that were now lashing the entire area. Guthorm had heard one of the nightly boxmen talk about "windshear," isolated downdrafts from severe thunderstorms that could split trees like quills, and suddenly worried about the 747.

He looked back over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of the big plane just as it was leaving the ground, nose rising valiantly, the jets slung under the wings screaming for power. The wind was whipping the rain around the plane, almost obscuring it from sight. Guthorm saw a slight waver in the left wing, and it dipped slightly down, causing the outboard engine to grab the runway in a shower of sparks. The engine mount must have suffered damage too, for in one brief terrifying moment, the engine roared flame and spun over and off the wing, ripping the end off and spraying aviation fuel and ripped aluminum all across the tarmac.

"Great," Guthorm said to himself.

He closed all of his faculties down instantly, accepting his momentary blindness as little worse than the obscured vision out of the windshield. He inhaled deeply and forced his mind into a peculiar state Wayler described once as "mental overdrive." Suddenly, every muscle in his body loosened, and the outside world seemed to drop into a slow-motion act. Cars inched along where moments before they had sped through the downpour, the wakes their passing tires through up drifting casually through the air. The wipers on the windshield were now at a creeping pace, giving Guthorm enough time to watch the raindrops touch the glass and slowly spread apart in their watery dance. All sounds were muffled, darker, deeper. Yet while all around him seemed slowed down, Guthorm's psychic self felt free, lifted from the restrictions of normal life, able to run hyper-fast, ungoverned, unchecked. Guthorm knew this effect would only last for a short while and he'd have to act fast to save the crippled airliner, now barely crawling into the darkened sky.

First, he'd have to put this car away somewhere. He spotted a chain link fence that separated the slow-motion cars from the airport grounds, and turned the wheel to aim it through a gap between the cars on his right. Slowly, calmly, the big machine slipped across the pavement and started to spin across the lane of traffic. "Void!" Guthorm swore again. He'd neglected to take into account that the water on the road would make the car slide, and he twisted the wheel back into its original direction. After recovering from the slide, he performed the maneuver again, more carefully this time, and soon had the car angled across the two lanes and headed for the fence. He barely had time to wonder what the other drivers would think about this out of control car careening through their lanes, before he teleported out of the driver's seat.

He appeared in the cockpit just behind the captain's seat, and quickly took in the three officers' actions. The captain, an older distinguished-looking man, was arched back in his seat with his legs jammed hard onto the rudders, forcing with all his might to counter the loss of thrust on one side. Veins were just beginning to bulge on the side of his face that Guthorm could see. The copilot was in the middle of a screamed phrase that was obviously not "Hello and welcome to United." His young face wasn't purple yet, but it was getting there. The navigator, unable to reach any of the controls, sat transfixed in his chair, blindly staring out into the storm that would soon be the cause of their demise.

Guthorm strode up to the pilot, whispered "Good night, sweet prince," and brought his hand down in front of the captain's eyes. The eyes responded by closing, and the tense body began loosening the way a balloon gently deflates when it has a small leak. Guthorm did the same to the copilot and the navigator, and soon all three were slumping slowly down in their seats. Without pressure on the controls, the plane began to pull to the left, but the plane was so damaged from the loss of the engine and a good section of the left wing that it didn't matter too much there were no bodies to interfere with the imminent crash. Guthorm unbuckled the captain and easily lifted his bulk out of the seat. Carrying him like a sack of potatoes under his right arm and twirling the captain's hat in his left, he opened the cockpit door and entered a section of the plane that was reserved for first class passengers as a lounge. It was currently empty, which suited Guthorm just fine. He sat the captain upright in the first seat on the left and placed his hat jauntily on his head. He stepped back to admire his handiwork then hurried back to the cockpit, chuckling all the way. He soon had the copilot and navigator in nearby seats, slumped over in the direction that the plane was leaning.

Guthorm went back to the cockpit and strapped himself into the captain's chair. Though he was totally unfamiliar with the instruments (in fact, he'd never even been inside a human airplane), he felt warmly confident. His quicktime consciousness had held out this far; all he needed was a few more moments and he should be able to save the stricken plane. There was some slowed-down human speech droning out of the speakers which was probably high-pitched and agitated

at its normal level. Guthorm ignored it and carefully grasped a u-shaped wheel that seemed to be the control mechanism. He carefully drafted a thought in his mind: I am able to operate this craft with an expert's ability, with full knowledge of all the instruments and with sufficient experience in this type of situation to enable me to land it safely. He added, *relatively* safely, and then blinked his eyes.

Wayler had tried to explain to Guthorm once many years ago that what Guthorm and Aud were capable of doing was "jumping" in their consciousness to another time, gaining any ability they needed, and then returning to the exact same time that they had left from, but with an entirely new faculty or ability in tow. Guthorm didn't care to know how it worked, he just did it. The first time Wayler had asked Guthorm to pick a lock, Guthorm did it as easily as a master criminal, but when Wayler asked how often he had done that before, Guthorm had calmly replied, "First time, old boy." Guthorm seemed far more capable than Aud of performing any activity with complete success on the very first attempt, and his success rate seemed to hover around eighty-five percent or so; Aud herself never tried unless Guthorm failed, but her success always seemed assured if they really, really needed it.

As soon as his large eyes blinked back open, his mind was totally flooded with details of the plane, its flight characteristics, names and instructions for every lever and button on the complex control panel in front of him, even recollections of the test pilots who had flown the plane on its initial shakedown flights. Nowhere in the thousands of details was there a reference as to the proper course of action when you're taking off minus a third of a wing. Glancing over the instruments, he checked the hydraulic fluid level (no control lines had been affected other than the outside left flaps), fuel pressure (dropping in tanks One and Two), rate of climb (one hundred thirty feet per second but dropping), and ground speed (one eighty-four). "Great," he said to himself. "Now what the Void do I do?"

The plane had now reached about a hundred feet of altitude and was still nose up and climbing, though listing severely to the left side. He thought initially that the lack of weight on the left would cause the plane to lean hard to the right, but just the opposite was happening. That may have been why the captain was losing his battle when Guthorm appeared. The flaps were still fully extended on both sides, though a soft tug at their levers on the panel showed they were probably jammed, at least on the left wing. Gentle pressure on the rudder pedals showed severe sluggishness. He recalled his initial haste in trying to steer the car off the road, and remembered to adjust the controls slowly at first. But there were few options and he was simply running out of time.

He decided to cut thrust to Number Four engine (outboard on the right wing) out of the theory that what was making the plane pull to the left was the increased lift on the right wing compared to the sheared-off left wing. Dropping power on the outside right engine might just let the plane level off, though he knew that they were already dangerously close to stall speed. Since he was riding what was in effect a flying gas truck, he began dumping jet fuel from all main tanks. Void, he wouldn't be able to travel very far anyway, so the fuel would be merely a dangerous liability. He knew it would take several minutes to unload all the fuel, but whatever he got rid of before the plane hit down would be of some help. He wondered about the risk of fire if he skidded to the ground with fuel leaking from the tanks, but instantly decided if he could actually get back to the ground without flipping or stalling, he'd accept a mere plane fire as nothing more than a minor annoyance.

After a few moments he could sense that the plane was in fact levelling off, but that their airspeed was too low to carry them beyond the populated area that lay in their flight path. He was already over the end of the runway which ended at another major expressway (humans are such idiots, a part of his mind reminded him, for putting too many things too close to each other). The wind was still buffeting the plane about, though in his accelerated mode it actually felt like he was on a gentle lake craft bobbing slowly in mild waves.

Not enough power, nowhere to land, and only one chance to try a miracle. Guthorm's mind tried to think of something, anything to get the wounded craft back to ground. He realized that the wheels were still down, and hoping for any amount of extra speed, he decided to retract them and lose the wind resistance that they caused. The plane was definitely levelling now but was also slowing down. With the storm still swirling in slow-motion around him, he was frantically pulling back on the stick when he caught hold of a nearly forgotten fragment of a memory that one of the first test pilots had had. Seems he had been trying to land the "Big Behemoth" as the pilot liked to call it, when a sudden powerful gust of wind bounced off the runway ahead of him and threw the plane back up into the air. For just a moment the pilot had felt like a frisbee, and though Guthorm didn't quite grasp the comparison to a small plastic toy, the image triggered a plan in his head.

He quickly calculated the current speed and angle of climb, ran over some design specs that he could see from fifteen-year-old blueprints, and did something no pilot in his right mind would do: he reversed thrust on the remaining left engine. Simultaneously, Guthorm's left leg went rigid on the pedal, demanding all the left rudder that the big bird could manage. Even in his accelerated state, he could feel the desired effect very quickly, as the right side of the plane began to yaw forward. He yanked the control stick back to its limits, hearing hundreds of flight instructors screaming at would-be pilots that that particular action would certainly create a stall. Oddly enough, that was exactly what Guthorm was hoping for. The combination of stall and yaw, coupled with the strong wind blowing in from in front of the plane, would give him his one chance in a million.

To the passengers waiting on taxiing planes still on the ground, to the baggage handlers out in the storm, to the drivers in their cars on the nearby highways, all looking on in horror at the doomed airplane, an amazing thing occurred. Just after the plane's wheels lifted up into the hull (one person interviewed later wondered if the pilot was insane or "just plain asleep at the wheel"), the plane nosed up into the air and spun around on its axis, so that instead of its nose point-

ing up, its tail swung up high into the air, "just like a frisbee" one stewardess on a nearby plane remarked. When it got to the top of its arc and the nose was pointing back down the runway it had just left, it came hurtling back down at a dangerous angle, still streaming jet fuel and aluminum fragments. It seemed it would dive nose-first into the ground, but the powerful wind pushing, now from behind, gave it enough speed to allow the courageous air crew to belly land back on the runway, screeching for a hundred yards in a shower of smoke and debris. There was a great deal of fuel all over the place, but the tremendous rainfall had caused it to be diluted beyond the point where it would easily catch fire.'

Guthorm was fighting to shut down all power to the engines and shut off the fuel dumping pumps as the big jet bounced and flopped down the runway, and did his best to aim the plane off onto the smoother grass nearby. Parts of the plane were breaking off left and right, but the main passenger compartment was still in one piece. It hit the edge of the concrete and began to tip over as it slid on the rain-soaked grass, but the intact right wing dug into the turf and prevented the plane from going completely over. As it slowed to a grinding halt, the wing snapped off and the cabin lurched over on its right, in one piece, smoking and hissing, damaged beyond repair, but still miraculously in one piece.

Humming joyfully to himself in his fast-forward mode, Guthorm quickly gathered up the three officers and replaced them in their chairs, buckling them in and adjusting their hands to their respective position. He carefully raised his hand in front of each of their faces, awakening them to their wondrous new life as heroes, and said "Nice landing, guys. See ya 'round," and vanished from the compartment.

Guthorm appeared some thirty feet or so behind his crashed car, in real time again, looking out over the runway at his good deed for the day. Cars were stopping all along the road, many pulling off onto the shoulder in order to get a better look at the downed airliner. He looked west through the crowd for his car, and saw it stuck nose-first into the retaining fence next to the roadway. As luck would have it, a Chicago Police car was already on the scene, its occupant speedily writing a ticket from the dry warmth inside his own vehicle.

"Oh well, there goes my good driving record," Guthorm muttered to himself as he turned and walked back down the shoulder of the road. He pulled up his collar against the rain and began to hum a tune as he avoided the many cars pulling over to the side.

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The news stories the next day carried front-page coverage complete with large color pictures about the "Miracle Landing" of Flight 171, the "Frisbee Flight." The three crewmembers were all hailed as heroes, and though their interviews were short on details (one GAA spokesperson said it was common for pilots just after a crash to suffer temporary amnesia), all three were reported as performing heroically to save the plane. The airplane's manufacturer, McDonnell-Fairchild, was flabbergasted at the maneuvers the three had taken to save the airliner, and were busy trying to reduplicate it on all of their computerized flight trainers (so far without success).

Guthorm missed most of the stories, as well as the live broadcasts the box played through most of the morning. He was busy trying to get his damaged car out of the Chicago Police Department Auto Pound.