

The Hobbyist

By Chris Tihor

Soaring. A shining bird of prey. Sun warming her glistening metal skin. Wind grasping at her limbs, fumbling hopelessly. Twisting. Racing. Wrenching free of gravity itself. Hurling towards the blinding brilliance of the dazzling clouds...

Rachel started, and looked around. She blinked as she was pulled back to the waking world. She was, as she always seemed to be doing these days, waiting. Sometimes it was waiting in an intersection for the light to change, fingers tapping irritably on the steering wheel of her car. Sometimes it was waiting in the grocery line watching the scrolling celebrity headlines on the racks of tabloid datapads as the shopper ahead argued over an expired coupon. Often it was waiting for sleep to come, or not to come as was more frequently the case. Today, it was, most appropriately, waiting in a waiting room - the waiting room of the counsellor to which she had been assigned.

Rachel sat up straighter and shifted position on her chair, one of the professionally unremarkable pieces of furniture that lined the walls of the space. She silently cursed her slip, and hoped that none of the other occupants of the waiting room had noticed her unintended nap. If they did, there was no indication of it on their faces. It was ironic, she thought, that the sleep which eluded her at night should pounce on her during the day when she least desired it. She reached into her handbag for her smartphone and absently fiddled with it, more as an outlet for her nervous energy than due to an interest in any of the numerous postings that scrolled by under her touch. She briefly considered seeking distraction in the numerous outdated magazines and datapads stacked tidily on a nearby side table. Fortunately she was saved from making that choice by the timely arrival of the receptionist, who appeared from around the end of a gray partition.

"Rachel Varley? Ms. Block will see you now."

"Thank you," said Rachel, standing and striding purposefully towards the indicated door. She entered and, closing the door behind her, turned to survey the office she now found herself in. An older, professionally dressed woman rose from her chair and extended a hand in greeting.

"Hello Rachel. How have you been?" she said warmly. Rachel accepted the proffered hand and shook it with a slight nod towards the counsellor.

"Great, thanks! Nice to see you again, Samantha."

"Sam's fine. Shall we sit and chat a bit?"

"Sure" said Rachel sitting in one of the modern looking chairs that occupied the room. She took a moment to take in her surroundings, noting the sparse, modern furnishings, with little to indicate the personality of the occupant excepting an antique mechanical clock that dominated the otherwise unremarkable sideboard set against one wall.

Samantha resumed her own seat, quickly scrolled through some notes on the tablet she held in her hands, then looked up at the woman sitting across from her.

“As you know,” began the counsellor, “you, just like all other former members of your unit, are required to have an assessment when leaving service, followed by the occasional check-in with an approved counsellor. That’s why we’re here today, to check in and see how you’ve been adjusting to civilian life.”

“Right. I’m afraid we’d be wasting your time though. I don’t have any complaints, really.”

“Not at all? In my experience everyone has something in their lives to complain about.”

“I don’t like to complain. I’m more of a ‘Let’s do something about this’ kind of person.”

“OK,” said Samantha glancing at her tablet, “then let’s talk about what you’ve been doing. Last time we talked you were planning on starting to raise a family with your spouse, Kim. How’s that coming along?”

Rachel shifted uncomfortably in her chair. “That’s on hold right now. It didn’t feel like the right time.”

“Why not?”

“After years in service, I wanted to enjoy my free time for a while. Not leap right into motherhood, you know?”

“There’s nothing wrong with that. We all need time for ourselves.”

“Right? I mean, what’s the rush? Plenty of time to change diapers later.”

“So how did you spend your time?”

“At first I spent time catching up on movies and books and that, stuff I hadn’t had a chance to get to before. A bit of travel. Cycling. That sort of thing. But after a while I was done with all of that.”

“You were ready to start your family?”

“No! I mean, it still didn’t feel right. I felt like something was missing, but it wasn’t a child. It’s weird, right? All this time I thought I wanted...”

“Yes?”

She shook her head slightly. “Anyway, I couldn’t figure it out. And then one morning I’m sitting out back with my coffee and it dawned on me: I hadn’t flown in ages. I don’t think I’d even touched a drone rig since I left. I went out and bought one that afternoon.”

“You bought your own drone?”

“Yep. And it was great! I flew it until the battery wore down. Just what I needed. That night I slept the best I had in months.”

“You’ve been having trouble sleeping.”

Rachel sat silent and tight lipped for a minute or two. Then she shook her head with a half-smile on her face.

“I wasn’t going to say anything about that.”

“Why ever not? Rachel, this kind of thing is important.”

“I told you, I’m not one to complain.”

“I’d write ‘stubborn’ on your file if I hadn’t already. I may need to underline it. At least your sleep issues cleared up after you started flying your drone?”

“Well, not exactly.”

* * *

Rachel settled back in her patio chair on her back deck and lowered the electrode array onto her head, adjusting the straps to comfortably position the headphones and eye-shield. Her mouth had gone dry; she pursed and licked her lips to summon what moisture she could. Taking a minute to go through the relaxation process that she’d been trained in, she willed her heart to slow down and quiet the blood thudding through her temples. A minute or two of this was all she could handle before she impatiently jabbed the launch key.

The system flared to life and Rachel felt the now familiar moment of bilocation confusion as her mind adjusted to two sets of bodily input. This was becoming increasingly annoying. She’d had no idea how different the consumer model rigs were from the military grade ones that she had grown used to during her service, but she’d found out soon enough. She cursed the money she’d spent on this new supposedly high-end model rig that felt only marginally better than the last. Kim wouldn’t be pleased when the bill arrived.

Pushing those thoughts and her annoyance to one side, Rachel focused on her drone form and began powering up her systems and preparing for flight. The time spent tuning up and adjusting her drone earlier had at least borne some fruit. The response time from the Osprey, as she dubbed it, was much improved, she could tell just from her warm-up circling the yard. After getting the feel of the adjusted set-up and how it gelled with the new rig she gunned the engine and was up and away in no time.

She began by following what she thought of as her regular patrol route around the neighbourhood and engaging in some increasingly acrobatic maneuvering as she warmed up, swooping into yards as closely as she could while deftly avoiding setting off her neighbours’ motion detectors and other home security measures. Somehow, though, it didn’t seem to be doing much for her tonight. She wasn’t feeling it. It was almost becoming too rote, too regular. She decided that something a little different was required tonight. After briefly considering her options, Rachel changed course and headed away from the suburban landscape and out toward the edge of town and Hambone Johnston’s place.

Hambone (probably not what his mom called him) was a bit of a nutcase who owned a small junkyard and had a well-developed paranoia towards trespassers or “interlopers” as he called them. He was convinced that there were hordes of people whose only goal in life was to break into his property and make off with his precious bounty of old car parts and obsolete Blu-ray players. To preserve the sanctity of his treasure trove, he had set up a number of automatic gun turrets loaded with rock salt. Strictly non-lethal, at least for humans – a few unlucky birds had fallen victim to his ordinance before word got around the avian community that there were less dangerous places to find a meal.

Rachel approached the junkyard warily. A hit from one of the turrets may not destroy her drone, but there was a good chance that it could disable it and give Hambone a valuable new addition to his collection. Her drone’s sensor arrays were nowhere near what she was used to as an operative, but she

had added a few custom enhancements to the Osprey to bridge the gap. This became more immediately relevant with the sudden flare of warning orange from her enhanced motion detectors. A fast evasive dive barely avoided the volley of rock salt that came hurling her way and she could hear it rattling against the fiberglass shell of the derelict minivan she sought cover behind. There was no time to catch her breath as another volley was launched at her from the opposite direction. Rachel found herself forced into some deft maneuvering, weaving and spinning in the tight spaces between piles of defunct technology. She dodged around and through valleys of metal and silicon in a tight dance choreographed by sprays of flying salt crystals, barely aware of the sweat trickling down her skin of her dormant body back home. With a final burst of speed she was able to clear the range of all the turrets and pull up and away from the junkyard. Once clear, she sent the auto-return sequence to the drone, quickly shut down the neural link, and removed the drone rig from her head, breathing in the cool night air. She sat there for a long time, motionless in the dark with the 'trode set resting in her lap, listening to the sounds of the city at night while the sweat cooled on her skin and her pulse slowed to resting.

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"A hobby is one thing, Rachel, but this... this is something else." said Samantha flatly.

Rachel shrugged. "I don't see the problem."

"You're breaking the law now and you don't see a problem?"

"Oh come on!" she said, throwing her hands up in exasperation, "Don't you think that's stretching it a little? It's just some harmless fun. No-one's getting hurt here except a few old minivans." Rachel sat forward and locked eyes with the counsellor, "Look, I think I've figured it out now. I just need a bit of an adrenaline rush now and then and everything's fine. That's all." She sat back and stared out the window seemingly at nothing. "When you've been flying drone missions as long as I have, you can't just stop dead, you know? That was my mistake, I think. I thought I could give up the life cold turkey. Dump the drones, switch to mommy mode and that would be that. I was tired of it all. Especially after... well, some bad times."

"By 'bad times' I assume you mean?"

"Yeah. Grand Rapids."

"That's when you first thought of leaving."

"Everything had hit the fan so fast. And with what happened at Calder Plaza." She shuddered with the memory, reached for her glass and seemed momentarily surprised to see it only filled with water.

"It's okay. We don't have to talk about that incident again if you don't want to."

"Good. I've done all the talking I want to about that shitstorm. Sorry. Language."

"That's fine. We're out of time today, but I'm going to schedule a follow up appointment for a couple weeks' time."

"I don't think..."

"But I do," interrupted Samantha, "Look, Rachel. I'm trying to look out for you here. It's my job as your counsellor, and as your friend. I'm seeing hints of something with you here that concerns me."

“Sam, I’m fine. Really.”

“You’re probably right. But in any case it won’t do any harm to come talk to me again. Thursday’s are good for you?”

* * *

Rachel was once again in her now accustomed spot, her “launch pad” as she had taken to calling it. It was a spare bedroom that they’d had plans of making into an office at one point, but it had been overrun by the trappings of Rachel’s new obsession. Pieces of hardware covered every available surface including the workbench that dominated one end of the room; a comfortable vinyl-covered recliner, adorned with her drone control rig, sat expectantly on the opposite side. Kim as usual had retired to their bedroom in the other end of the house and, being a deep sleeper, there was little chance of Rachel being disturbed.

Rachel unplugged the Osprey from its charger, giving it a last once over to make sure that all was ready for tonight’s venture. She opened the patio doors that led outside, inhaling the crisp, cool air that drifted in. Gently lifting the drone, she placed it on the wooden deck outside and firmly closed the doors. She wasn’t going to be a snack for mosquitos a second time. She walked to the recliner and settled into it, the vinyl creaking as she adjusted her position and lowered the control rig onto her head. After running a quick diagnostic routine, she was up and away over her neighbours’ rooftops and thrilling to the familiar sensation of flight.

At a command from its pilot, the drone rose higher and gained speed, soon leaving the suburbs behind and heading for the city proper. Rachel had taken to haunting the more urban areas, as the quiet neighbourhood she lived in had become uninspiring after a time. Even Hambone’s junkyard had become less of a challenge once she had determined how to outwit the limited minds of the auto-turrets. No, she sought more rewarding adversaries and she was heading to a place where she could do just that: the old industrial zone.

She had discovered a short while ago, quite by accident, that the mostly abandoned former hub of the local economy was now the center of an underground community of competitive drone combat, a kind of arena for remote dogfighting. She’d soon installed shockers, the choice weapons of the combatants, onto her drone and joined in the mock battles under an assumed name, quickly gaining a solid reputation as worthy opponent in the arena. She didn’t think that she’d be mentioning this at her next counselling session.

Rachel was almost at the location for tonight’s engagement near the power plant when she spotted him, the strolling man. For some reason, his presence struck her as strange, though she couldn’t pinpoint exactly why. Normally, the area would be deserted at this time of night, but it wasn’t unheard of to see the odd passerby or night shifter. But something twiggged in her brain about him, deep down in what she thought of as the lizard part, a part that she’d learned to pay attention to. So she slowed down, entered stealth mode, and watched him for a while.

It turned out that watching him was pretty dull. He was a pretty average-looking guy with dark hair who looked to be in his thirties and dressed on the boring side of conservative. He casually inhaled from a vaporator as he walked and didn’t appear to be in a hurry to be anywhere. Rachel was on the verge of leaving and berating herself for being paranoid when the sound of an approaching vehicle gave her

pause. A moment later a beat-up utility van pulled up in front of the walking man. He stepped up to the driver's side like he was expecting its arrival and said a few words to the woman at the wheel. Stepping back once more he headed to the rear of the vehicle which disgorged its three passengers onto the darkened street. The vehicle was quickly and methodically unloaded by the team of four people, an assortment of equipment and baggage being slung over backs and shoulders. Rachel felt a knife of ice slide down her spine. She recognized some of the containers being unloaded as the type used for transporting explosives. The unloading finished, the crew began hauling their cargo towards the gateway leading to the power plant.

Rachel tried to slow her racing pulse and think of what to do next. These people, whoever they were, must be intending to blow up the power plant. They didn't appear to be armed, but that didn't mean much in this age of miniaturization and implants. She reviewed her options: her drone was equipped with shockers, which weren't powerful enough to kill anyone, but should put them out of commission for a time, hopefully long enough for the authorities to arrive. She steeled herself and began to maneuver towards the entrance, where one of the team lagged behind to close the gate behind him. It was the first man she saw, the casual stroller. She advanced as stealthily as she could, keeping her rotors slow and quiet, hoping that she could get close enough for a clear shot. She was so focused on her target that she was startled by the proximity alert from her motion detector array. She spun around in time to see another drone bearing down on her. Stupid! She should have been watching for this. She began to take evasive action, when, out of the periphery of her vision, she noticed the man she had been tailing pointing a strange device towards her. It went off with a bright flare before she could do anything more and struck her with white hot fire which enveloped her entire being. She felt her body violently seizing up in the recliner back home and unintelligible noises coming from between her lips. And then she felt nothing at all.

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Waking up in the hospital was bad enough, her head had trouble deciding which way was up and her nerves felt like stripped wires. But waking up in a secure government hospital was worse. The armed soldiers guarding her room were a bad sign. It really didn't help that her speech centers were affected by the biofeedback that knocked her out cold. When she tried earlier to explain herself to the nurse who came to check on her, she looked at Rachel like she was crazy, which was a fair assessment considering the stream of nonsense that came out of her mouth. After that, she didn't try to talk to anyone. No one seemed immediately interested in talking to her anyway. That was, until a familiar figure strode through the door.

"Commander Rose?" said Rachel incredulously, attempting to rise out of bed and being hit with a fresh wave of nausea.

"Easy there, Varley," said the Commander indicating with a gesture that she should remain in bed, "don't get up on my account." He pulled a plain metal chair painted an institutional green over to the side of the bed and sat down. He looked at her appraisingly for a moment.

"You look surprisingly well all things considered," he said, "Especially considering the amount of trouble you're in."

“Sir,” began Rachel, swallowing hard, “I swear to you by all that is holy that I am not involved with blowing up the power plant.”

“Of course you aren’t. Any fool could see that. But you did interfere with an anti-terror investigation.”

“What!?”

“What the hell did you think you were doing going after bombers yourself with just your.. your.. soapbox racer?” said the commander in a quiet, level voice, “Why didn’t you call it in for crying out loud? We trained you better than that, Rachel.”

“I.. I didn’t think of that.”

“No, you didn’t. It’s a damn good thing that we spotted your drone before you zapped our undercover agent. As it was he barely had a chance to take you out without causing a fuss.”

“Undercover agent? Oh Christ. I could have blown the whole operation,” said Rachel in stunned tones. She looked at the commander with sudden fear, “I didn’t, did I?”

“No, you didn’t,” he admitted, “It went fine: we stopped the attack and nabbed our targets regardless,” He shook his head and leaned back in his chair, “Thankfully that was probably due to the shoddy quality of your hardware. Speaking of which, what the hell are you doing? Aren’t you supposed to be retired and making with the happy family?”

“I guess I found it a lot harder than I thought it would be.”

“I can see that.”

They sat there in silence for a moment. Rachel felt miserable. Now not only was she a failure as a homemaker, she almost ruined everything for her old squad. She had no idea how she was going to make this right again.

“You know,” said the commander slowly and deliberately, “I might be able to help this whole screw-up blow over and take the hit for this myself. That is, if it turned out that you happened to be under my command...” He looked at her from under a slightly raised eyebrow.

“What? Are you kidding, sir? After all this, you’d want me to rejoin the team?”

“I’m just trying to think of what’s safest for the public. I read Sam’s report on you.”

“Oh no,” she groaned.

“Turns out you’re a regular menace,” He said with a grin, “At least to national junkyard security. This way we could monitor you 24-7. Make sure you weren’t up to anything against the public good. Besides,” he continued, “It sounds like you’re not quite ready to settle down after all.”

Rachel looked at the smiling face of her commander and started to grin herself. It was then that she realized what it was that she’d been waiting for: the next mission, the next flight into danger. Suddenly, for the first time in as long as she could remember, she felt like she could breathe again.

“I don’t know, Commander. My bird was pretty fried, last I checked.”

“I guess we’ll just have to get you another one. But you’ll have to promise not to use it in the arena. It wouldn’t be fair to the civilian competition.”

“Commander, you’ve got yourself a deal.”