
Taking Flight

FIGARO Castle could go underground, Setzer's father always told him. It could sink under the desert sand and tunnel its way under the mountains, and then pop out again as if nothing had happened. Or it had been able to do that once, or perhaps it would in the future – Setzer had never paid the story much attention. As soon as his father started talking about the legend of the castle that travelled under the sand, his mind always instinctively flipped in the other direction. He thought about the sky, and the stars. He thought about how digging down could only go so far before one would find oneself out at the other side again, back in the ordinary world. But rising up – one could keep going forever.

Setzer wanted to fly. As a child, he tried leaping from one place to another, using his little arms to propel himself, hoping that he could train himself to stay airborne for more than a few seconds, and, eventually, to go up. That day never came,

and as he began to discover the world's injustices, the simple fact that a human could not fly numbered prominently among them. There was a dispute of some kind, he learnt, between the king and the emperor over in the southern continent, and that was why prices were rising and why he and his father had had to move out of their ramshackle smallholding in the countryside and into a tenement in one of the more drab neighbourhoods of South Figaro. The Empire was developing weapons, and some of the trade routes had had to be diverted, and even though Setzer had begun attending a school in the town three days a week, several years too late and without an ounce of the dedication his teachers appeared to expect, none of the girls in his class seemed to want to pay him any attention. And, above all, humans couldn't fly.

As he came to understand more of the world, he began to see that it was his methods that had been at fault, not his goals. Propelling oneself into the air with nothing but the force of one's own body was a lost cause, but using some kind of device – that could be something worth pursuing. People still used chocobos to get around in Figaro, but there were rumours that on the southern continent, the place that people now spoke about with a very definite tone of disapproval, they had stopped using the birds and invented something much more efficient. And, Setzer thought, if the earth could be navigated in that way, why not the skies?

He began to apply himself, selectively, to his schoolwork.

On the day that the schematic of a Gestahlian combat vehicle was leaked to the city states and printed in the Figaro newspaper as a bold two fingers to the Empire, Setzer won himself the gil to buy a copy through a series of elaborate bets with his classmates, and took it home to pore over in his bedroom after his father had returned from his evening shifts and retired, exhausted, to his own bed. To begin with, the markings on the diagram were as cryptic as if they had been written in the language of the moogles, but after months of study and careful questions to his schoolteachers, he had gained the ability not only to reproduce an exact copy from memory, but also to understand a little of what it depicted.

He was soon the best in the school at mathematics and physics, although that prowess was never enough to allow him to succeed in convincing the teachers to modify the curriculum and let them study the new Imperial technologies. Those were dangerous, he was told, and complex, and morally offensive such that even acknowledging their existence in the Figareze education system would be an act of gross disrespect. But, Setzer argued, wouldn't it be useful for the young citizens of Figaro to have some knowledge of what they were up against, in preparation for what was now recognised as an inevitable war? His requests fell on deaf ears, and so he penned a strongly worded letter to the castle – for the attention not of the king, but of a young prince. There were rumours that one of the king's twin sons, within a year of Setzer's own age, was de-

veloping similar interests, and Setzer suspected that the other boy's own education would be subject to no such restrictions.

He never received a reply; it was one of a number of incidents that contributed to Setzer's growing mistrust of authority. The rules that a young citizen of Figaro was expected to follow felt increasingly restrictive, and Setzer longed to escape them – to get away from everything, even if he couldn't yet do that by taking to the air. At the age of fifteen, he settled on a solution to both his problems: he would go to Vector, and train as an engineer. It was a plan that he knew would meet disapproval at home, and so he went quietly, avoiding any opportunity for a sentimental change of mind.

The Imperial forces had previously welcomed anyone who wanted to join their number, although they were now becoming suspicious, fearing coordinated attempts at espionage now that the city-states had some awareness of their controversial plans for expansion. Normally, a person from Figaro would have been turned down straight away, but Setzer's albinism worked in his favour: the Vectrian guards were unable to determine his ethnicity, and he had the foresight to concoct a not wholly believable story about having been raised by wild animals in the foothills of the Crescent Mountain. He was let into the city and delivered to the laboratories for assessment, and the focus of his skills and passions was clear enough to grant him a position in the airship division.

The airship division, he discovered the next morning, con-

sisted of just one young woman, who introduced herself as Darill and then almost immediately informed Setzer, without ceremony, that travelling by air was low on the Empire's list of priorities. Still, they made the best of the few tools and meagre budget they had been allocated, working on a small but fast craft that was to be known as the Falcon. The laboratory's true focus, Setzer learnt, was something called Magitek, which he wasn't sufficiently interested in to understand, despite Darill's repeated attempts to explain it to him.

As thrilled as Setzer was to be finally working on something that might fly one day, he was also beginning to encounter other distractions; chief among them, Darill herself. Setzer had always pursued the girls of his acquaintance, not because of any particular attraction, but because the risk of the chase exhilarated him; the many rebuffs he had received had never been more than glancing blows to his ego. But Darill was unlike any girl he had known before: she was ruthless and striking in ways he would never have expected. Every day with her was a genuine challenge, and he relished it. He prized the rare occasions where he won a small morsel of genuine praise for his work on the ship; but as the months and then years wore on, he found that Darill seemed all too keen to spend her time in his company.

There were other people who worked in the labs nearby: all Vectrians, their loyalty to the Empire was unquestionable. Darill, like Setzer, was an outsider; she had never told him where

she was from, or how she had ended up among the Imperials. But she barely spoke to any of their colleagues, and made her distaste for some of the Empire's activities quite clear.

They grew closer. They spent time together, away from the laboratory; and others began to notice. Setzer, who spoke to his colleagues slightly more often than Darill did, could tell as much from their remarks, and he could never stop himself grinning when he heard them. Working on the project of his dreams, and courting someone as magnificent as Darill – the biggest gamble of his life thus far had paid handsome dividends.

Progress on the Falcon was slow; a few years in, they were still far from being able to sustain it in the air. When the news came that the Emperor wanted to see more financial support for the airship project, it was a welcome surprise. Darill and Setzer took each other out for dinner that night, each jokingly ordering increasingly elaborate food to be paid for by the other, mutually racking up an enormous bill in pretended spite. But in the cold light of morning, they were informed that the new funding brought with it significant restructuring. The focus on a single craft was thought to be too risky; each of them, it was announced, would be in charge of a team that would work on its own vessel. Darill would continue her efforts with the Falcon, and Setzer would build a second ship.

He named it, uninventively, the Eagle; and as he drew up the plans, he decided to make some changes from how the Fal-

con had been designed. He had never quite appreciated Darill's absolute focus on utility over comfort, and her use of a small and modest hull had always seemed unexciting. So Setzer developed a design for the Eagle that indulged all the extravagant ideas that Darill had always cut down, relying on the acquiescence of his team to see that they were implemented. The people who worked under him now had none of the deep understanding of aircraft that he and Darill shared, and certainly nothing of her sharp tongue.

They continued to see each other outside the lab, but it was becoming more difficult to find the time; now that the Emperor was finally interested in his airship division, there were suddenly targets that needed to be hit, and working long hours became the norm. On the rare evenings that Setzer was able to take some time off, Darill usually had to stay at work, and vice versa; there were whole weeks when they barely saw each other.

Setzer threw himself into his work; there was no other solution. Designing and building an airship from scratch was no easy task, especially when they still hadn't hit on exactly how to make it fly; but over the years, the craft took shape. The Falcon, from what he could tell from the garbled reports of his team, was progressing at a similar rate.

On the morning the Eagle was due to be upholstered, the news arrived that the Empire had succeeded in its siege of Tzen. The battle had been going on for some time – the Tzener king

and his people had put up an impressive defence against the far superior Imperial technology – but, inevitably, the city had fallen. It was presented as a moment of great victory for everyone in Vector: they would soon be given a day off from work in celebration, it was declared, and Setzer’s team pursued their duties with triumphant vigour. He himself was somewhat less enthusiastic, but nobody was as disturbed by the news as Darill, who turned up at Setzer’s workshop late that night, when all his workers had already gone home.

“We should talk,” she said, before launching into a diatribe about how the Empire had gone too far this time, and how she knew Setzer, like her, was only in this for the engineering opportunities, and how it was time to make their escape. All he could think about was how brilliant she was, how irresistibly wonderful when she spoke with such passion; in the end, she grabbed him by both shoulders, planted the briefest of kisses on his lips, and then repeated what she had said in increasingly simple terms until it began to sink in. She wanted to leave, he realised: to break free from the Empire at last. She wanted the two of them to take their airships, and fly.

There remained one problem: neither had yet managed to find a way of making their craft work as it was supposed to. So, although the night was drawing in, they compared notes, and combined the progress that each of them had made over the years they had spent apart. Setzer’s innovations had taken the design of his ship in a different direction from Darill’s; by

combining their efforts, they at last managed to work out what each of the two airships was missing.

For weeks more, they collaborated in secret each night; the roadmap was now suddenly, blindingly clear. And so, two months after the fall of Tzen, before anyone else in Vector had yet got out of bed, the exit hatches were opened in the laboratory, and two airships made their way into the sunrise.



They caught up on an island, safely out of reach of Imperial ire; there would be warrants on them both before the day was out, and the news of their escape would be decried in Vector and celebrated elsewhere. With both ships docked, they toasted their freedom, and planned the future: the Eagle would be renamed, Setzer decided, and refurbished, until it had become the ship he had always dreamt of. Perhaps one day too, Darill would consent to marry him; he asked several times that afternoon, in a multitude of ways, and she gave almost every possible answer except a yes. But no number of refusals could ruin his happiness. The gamble of a lifetime had paid off.