

HIGHLANDER CHRONICLES

Occum's Choice

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The aerospace fighter spiraled down in an ever-tightening turn. Blood pooled *up* in a sickening sensation, raising bile that threatened to spew acidic chunks, starting the red-out that would end it all.



Inertia pinned Cameron Baird to the left side of the cockpit. Blood pumped at triple speed, adrenaline smashing his heart into a spasm that seemed to claw at his chest. Demon claws of hot fire pierced his flesh, shattering ribs and throttling his heart, until wet-slicked salt tracked myriad topographical lines across a pain-wracked face.

As though detached from his body, the fingers of Cameron's left hand fought against the viscous gravity, hammered a staccato across the controls interface, while his right hand tried through palms slick with sweat to wrench the yoke into his groin.

He tried to focus, to bring the knowledge they'd been drumming into him back to the forefront of his oxygen overdosed brain, tried to save face.

Lost cause...for the third straight time.

The canopy around him turned inert as his heart. He let go of the controls, breathing heavily as the aftereffects of so much adrenaline and pressure took its toll. His panting sounded too much like the labored breath of the desperate.

Cameron wished it would stay black. A warm cocoon of darkness to shield him from the stabbing eyes of superiority. Finally getting his breathing somewhat under control, he let the red-out recede and gingerly leaned back to center. His ribs creaked. It never ceased to amaze him how painfully realistic the simulators could be. Or how painful the after-brief.

Occum's Razor.

Karlotta loved that term. And the way it fell from her lips, twisted into ugly, sarcastic ruin.

After all, boy, the simplest choice for you. Quit.

But no matter the searing eyes or the jagged words, he couldn't. Never had a choice but to go on.

At times he almost wished for the hazing his older siblings had told him about. The beatings. The physical pain. He was strong, he could've survived such brutality.

But sugary venom? Malice without a name and a point of reference? How could you defend yourself against a façade of camaraderie that never reached their eyes? If you didn't have a target, how could you land a blow in defense?

He tried to breathe deeply. Once, twice; hissed at the hiccup of pain which sat low on his left side. Knew his refuge couldn't last—it never did. Knew he'd never find the answers.

Why they hated.

At least, not in here.

The canopy top hissed with pent up pressure, causing him to wince as his ears popped to the equalization. Blinked away sudden tears at the too bright bank of halogens, which covered the area.

Burning away any ability to hide.

"Well, boy, that is the most sorry ass set of scores it's been my sorry ass pain to witness." The voice of Instructor Jim (in caps, always said in caps) cut with as much severity as the overheads, creating as much heat, as Cameron tried desperately not to flush.

Please, god, don't let me flush.

How often had that tone spurned him to quitting as much as Karlotta's nectared words of death? Reaching out with his left hand, he grasped the outer edge of the flight training simulator and heaved himself up and out onto the small scaffolding, next to the multi-gimbiled machine. A soft whistle sucked through clenched teeth was his only sign of trying to hide the pain.

But if her oratory nightshade couldn't make him quit, Instructor Jim didn't have a chance. Right? He kept believing that.

Cameron drew himself up, took a deep breath, raised his chin and marched off to war. At least, what he imagined intense combat must be like. The whine of numerous gyrostabilizers, as the rest of the class continued their training, drowned out the sound of his steps and rang in his ears like shouts of reprimand.

Dignified. Grace in loss. He hadn't listened much, but his mother managed to hammer that through his thick skull. Along with other baggage.

Coming to a stop at the base of the scaffold, he turned towards Instructor Jim and opened his mouth to respond. But no words would form. He could as soon talk as he would graduate this class.

Instructor Jim loomed before him like a Valloire airship—bloated, overloaded and ready to spew at any moment. It was a running joke among the cadets that the man filled both seats on the side-by-side training fighter and only a heavy fighter had the thrust to get him airborne. Cameron tried to forget the rest of the mean-spirited comments about the offworlder. Never mind the man had been on Northwind for over thirty years. To Karlotta and her brood, if you weren't born here, you'd always be an offworlder.

Right about now, however, the man filled Cameron with the desire to spew. Though equal to his height, the man's mass gave him the ability to loom, something Jim did with relish.

More significantly, regardless of disparaging talk in the barracks, the man could out-fly just about anyone Cameron could think of. Even his mother. *That* admission always hurt.

And that look of scorn. Pity. Pity! Made him sick. Though he'd managed it coming down the ladder, Instructor Jim's look turned his cursed white skin into a traitor once again. Jim's look only deepened, increasing Cameron's flush—he'd be the color of the snake's flag if this went on much longer.

"The fighter won't do what I want it to," Cameron finally managed.

"That, my boy, is the problem." Jim swept his arm forward as though giving orders to the entire class and moved back over to the instructor's computer console. Plopping into the chair with a noxious fart (for just a moment, the squeal of the chair made Cameron wonder if it would finally give up the ghost after so many horrendous assaults of mass), he reached forward and tapped the screen. As though that explained everything.

Moving over to read the screen (while carefully staying as far distant as possible), Cameron saw once again that it might as well have been snake-speak or even Sanskrit. The jumbled lines of color created a fluorescent, random-appearing series of waves, which cascaded across the screen in a language Cameron didn't speak.

A language he had slowly come to realize he'd never speak. At each such admission, his stomach clenched.

All his mother had ever wanted for him. *Push, son. Push. Don't quit.*

Cameron twisted off the spigot for such thoughts. He waited patiently, peering intently at the screen, hoping Instructor Jim would get on with it.

"A fighter's like a woman boy," the odious man finally began, leaning back in his chair and defying gravity all in one ungraceful move. "You don't tell her what to do, or she'll bite off your hand. You help her see what you want done, is what *she* wants done. You wrangle your machine like it's a 'Mech!" Cameron glanced momentarily at Instructor Jim, the sarcasm came ladled thickly even for him.

Looking into the pudgy eyes, surrounded by a halo of florid flesh, Cameron once again went blank.

The man squinted as though viewing something he didn't wish to touch. "Boy, why you taking this class?"

Cameron straightened up quickly (ignored the slight rib-jab again), and tried to keep the shock from his face. Had he actually heard a tone of compassion? Couldn't be. He struggled to speak.

"I—I want to be an aerospace pilot."

"Oh?"

The man leaned a little farther back, spread arms the size of Cameron's thighs wide in a stretch that looked to unhinge bones and actually belched and farted at the same moment. He didn't even have the grace to look embarrassed.

Cameron almost smiled (*just* kept himself from the instructor's wrath) as the rank odor of the man's interior reminded him of his sister's haggis. The strange humor, regardless of the disgusting source, nevertheless managed to unhinge his tongue more than usual.

"Yes. Yes, I do." A long ago summer day with mother momentarily eclipsed his vision, her dream for him a reality she'd thought dashed for so long.

"No, you don't."

The frank statement rocked him back to the here and now and he stared, incredulous. He'd never liked the man, but such words, coming after the hell he'd gone through to clean himself up (the markers his mother had called in!), brought on hate he thought he'd only reserved for snakes.

And Karlotta.

Maybe he's a snake-lover at heart. Fury finished what the brief hilarity of a moment before began; he actually managed to raise his voice slightly.

"What do you know? You know nothing about it. I want to be an aerospace pilot. That's why I'm here. Why I'm living through this—" He bit down on his tongue, almost drew blood.

Quicker than he believed possible, Jim rocked forward, face flushed with an emotion Cameron couldn't pin down. "What? This hell?"

The other man laughed uproariously, only driving the stake deeper.

"I have to take it from my classmates," Cameron said, amazed he'd not yelled—perhaps he truly had cleaned it out of his system. "But I don't have to take it—"

"The hell you don't, boy," he cut back. "I tell you to jab yourself with a pen and by-god that's what you're going to do. But I'm not stupid, boy. What would that get me but a mess I'd have to clean up and paperwork to file? I'm also not blind—Miss Karlotta is some fine looking ass, but she comes with fangs in all sorts of places. Course, being a Senn could do that to anyone; they have a way of thinking about themselves." The man actually looked at him companionably, and for once, in his entire stay at the academy, past the bulging face and pudgy eyes, such companionship reached deep. For just a moment, before The Instructor returned.

"What way?" Cameron said. He grasped onto the tossed lifeline.

Jim looked at him like he'd lost his mind. Then his features abruptly reminded him of the time his cousin Jimmy ran head-long into the tree during the Highlander games. "Damn, boy. Your

mother could fly a paper airplane better than any skirt-wearing Highlander. In a fighter, well, she was damn near unbeatable."

"You knew...my mother," he said softly. Too many hurt memories.

"Damn straight, boy. Knew her during her academy days. More importantly, knew she had the same problem you do, though how the hell you both grow up so ignorant, with it all around you, I'll never know. Should start calling you 'oblivious boy.'"

"What're you talking about?"

"The reason they hate you?"

"Uh?" For a moment Cameron wondered if he'd started speaking 'aerospace.'

"Damn boy, I know you're not stupid, but wake up. Take a look around. You're hated cause your bloodline joined the Highlanders late. Way late. While Miss Fangs, well, the Senns are part of those few families can trace their lineage back to Founding. The Founding, boy. Seven hundred years will give anyone the feeling they can't sling their ass into pants any smaller than a DropShip's cargo hold."

Cameron stood within a stream of knowledge, buffeted by the events of so many years tumbling past in white water rapids. He wanted to deny it as stupidity, but whether it emerged from the mouth of this blustering fool or not, it rang too clear. Too true. Even Karlotta's cuts against offworlders.

The stabbing eyes—it all made a terrible sense.

Push, son. Never quit. Always push.

Cameron didn't know how long he must have stood there before a slapping hand almost knocked him down. In hindsight, the instructor probably thought it a companionable gesture.

"But that still don't answer the issue, does it, boy? You still don't want to be an aerospace pilot, no matter what your mommy dear may have poured in you."

He tried to find some ire within at such an affront, but couldn't find the energy. He felt the disappointment any child feels, no matter his age, at the failure of a parent.

"You want to 'Mechjock; got the instincts for it. Stupid, clumsy handed instincts," Instructor Jim said with a disparaging, yet light

chuckle. "A 'Mech you yank around by the joysticks and it does what you want. A 'Mech's a man, boy and that's what you want." He laughed even harder at his own joke.

As laughter finally petered out, silence filled the entire room. Cameron knew the other cadets were unlimbering from their pods. Would be moving this way. Would once again see him long outside the cockpit simulator, in front of the instructor for a dress down. Could hear the snickers from here.

Never quit.

However, for the first time in long weeks, the ridicule didn't cut. Or perhaps to say it did, but in a way they might not understand.

Not Occum's Razor. Occum's Choice. It wasn't enough to see the simplest answer. Deep down he'd known it for some time, but could not accept the failure. Could not accept what it would do to his mother. But even not making a choice was a choice itself, albeit a worthless one.

No, regardless of Karlotta's biting words, she'd been correct all along. He'd tried to pull on the ill-fitting call of a pilot, tried to live the dream again for his mother. Yet a 'Mech had always called to him.

Cameron glanced at the instructor and actually managed to peer past the disgusting, cantankerous façade to see the good man underneath, and saluted smartly. He heard a round of soft, snide chuckles.

Some would call it quitting—all the hate-eyed cadets. Perhaps even his mother. But you pushed forward and never quit, even if that meant serving the Highlanders in your own way.

Turning about, he moved with alacrity, only pausing for a moment to meet the flashing blue-eyed, towheaded beauty of Karlotta. "You were right all along, Karlotta. Can't thank you enough." He almost laughed out loud at the stunned look that washed her features, before he walked toward the far door, the pain of his rib forgotten.

You had to make a choice. And that would have to be good enough.

For mother.

For himself.