

Name Drop Zone
By Scott Middlemist

A soldier returns to civilian life as an air traffic controller but snaps and causes a horrible crash. He is institutionalized and copes with debilitating nightmares and migraines by using an experimental drug. The drug opens a realm reserved for the dead where he tries to recover the pieces of his shattered soul.

Chapter One

When a bone snaps, you call for help. When your mind breaks, the silence leaves you speechless.

The radio was quiet for a few seconds after I told the 747 to drop napalm on downtown Phoenix.

“Tower, this is Flight 315, please confirm...napalm...on the drop zone, over?”

Cold splash, split-second pause on my end.

“Flight 315, this is Tower, stay on heading two-five-zero, you are clear for landing on runway two, over.”

“Tower, this is 315, Roger last transmission, on approach for runway two, over.”

Unfortunately, the pilot let the incident go. He probably decided I said something about “palm trees” instead of “napalm” and didn’t want to sound like a fool.

Sixteen years as a combat controller finally cracked my reality. Iraq flashbacks were tripping me, but I’d been catching myself. Three weeks later, I fell flat on my face.

The day I killed everyone was an August sauna. The monsoon blowing up from Mexico made everything sticky hot. I arrived at the Sky Harbor control tower harassed by a car fire delay.

The smoky stew of burning plastic, rubber and fuel blew through my AC vents, fried my eyes and triggered the soldier hiding inside.

In the control tower, we rushed to get planes on the ground before a wall of dust rolled over us. I had two BlueCloud flights on approach from the north. The lead plane was close to landing. I sped up the trailing flight, because his low fuel gave no option for redirect if the storm got hairy.

Then the trailing BlueCloud captain said something that let Iraq pour in like unfiltered coffee.

“Tower, this is Flight 88 on approach vector Bravo. Did I just wake-up in the Apocalypse, or is that wall of dust in front of us a mile high?”

In Desert Storm, I routinely tagged Iraqi bunkers for sand muffled, missile strikes. I painted targets with a laser that guided bombs like beads on a string. During the ground invasion of Kuwait, my imagination let me see kill zones clearly, so I kept good guys alive while wiping Iraqis out with precision air support.

It was bloodless, video game combat without close-up kill shots or residual screams ringing in my ears. I went back to the States with nothing nasty stuck in my cobwebs.

Peace time is the military’s whetstone, and the Air Force promoted me rapidly as I honed my combat controller skills. I was razor ready for Operation Iraqi Freedom.

I expected long range combat again but found face-to-face conflict with an enemy camouflaged as civilians.

In a busy market, a woman detonated an explosive vest. The shrapnel hit my buddy in the neck but only imbedded in my body armor. The hot fragments made it hard

for him to scream as blood filled his mouth and lungs. He died in the Humvee minutes later.

Mosul at dawn, and I was advance recon for a mechanized infantry patrol. I crept up on insurgents in a courtyard prepping an IED ambush. They were about to hide when a young boy ran up to the leader. No beard and a high pitched voice—maybe eleven years old. I knew enough Arabic to understand they were father and son.

The man's back was to me and his hands were locked on his hips as he berated the boy. The boy yelled back, slapped a clip in his AK and demanded to fight. The father was silent, and then laughed as he patted the boy's head. The other men welcomed their hero with playful slaps on the back.

I called an AC-130 gunship just before the boy's arrival.

The last thing the Spooky pilot said to me was, "Roger, target fixed. Duck your head, son, 'cuz here comes the Apocalypse."

I went prone to a peephole and watched the Hadjis absorb thousands of Vulcan rounds ripping down around them. The scene was a huge, shaken snow globe peppered red instead of white. The Vulcan guns' "buuuuuurrrrrrrrrrrrrrrp" made the circling plane sound full as a fat man while silencing screams on the ground.

That's when I caught something ugly in my web.

The boy crouched over the smoking remains of his father. With AK in hand, he stood and faced the Spooky. He howled while firing from the hip. The Spooky was departing when a lucky green tracer round plink-sparked off the tail. I could hear the plane bank hard for another sweep.

The burping slugs cut the boy in two. Half crumpled to the ground, but the other side stood for a second. The remaining hand reached for what was missing then collapsed.

Bile filled my throat, so I sat up to stop gagging. With my eyes closed, I heard the infantry company roll safely through the area.

I sipped from my waterpack and replayed his death, sipped water, replayed it, sipped, playback, sipped and played.

The prosecution's headshrinker said in the trial transcript that my "psychotic break from reality" happened as the BlueCloud jets were swallowed by the sand storm.

"Flight 88, this is Hotel 8, increase to 70 knots. Let's get your bird out of the sky before that dust storm drives you into the Tigris."

"Uh...Tower, Roger your instructions to increase approach speed. Please say again concerning 'Tigris', over."

Trailing Flight 88 sped up, while the lead flight maintained its pace just as sand clouds smothered both flights. When they emerged from the dust wave, they were within 300 feet of each other and only 400 feet off the tarmac. The ensuing chaos was displayed for the court by disembodied black box voices:

Captain on trail Flight 88: "Jesus, pull up, PULL UP!"

Captain on lead Flight 93: "Drop gear, prepare for...WHAT THE FU..."

A tourist scrambled to snap shots of the dust wall but captured disaster instead.

Photograph One showed how close 88 was to avoiding contact, but his wing just clipped 93's tail as it landed. Photograph Two showed 88 cart-wheeling down the runway, and in Photograph Three it roll-ripped through 93's fuselage. Photograph Four focused on a billowing fireball, exploding across the tarmac.

Final count: three hundred ninety-eight dead with zero survivors.

Doctors compare my mind to a twisted balloon animal, but don't seem to care if I pop. Hospital food is decent on weekends when Eddie cooks his salsa eggs and hash with jalapenos. The foosball and ping-pong occupy time but nightmares hunt me in daylight. They cause blackout migraines that make me wonder if the rope I stole would hold my body weight on the shower pipes.

One nightmare takes me to skylines all over America.

18-wheelers rumble into cities before dawn. The black, logo-less trucks roll down deserted side streets. The back doors roll-up on silent gliders, and steel ramps slide down without assistance. Whirring weedeater sounds come to life as folded-up, ultra-lights roll down onto streets and lift-off just as the wings pop into place. Ten buzz bees in tight formation, flying fast and synchronized with other swarms across America.

From a rooftop I see both the take-off and approach pattern of the suicide kites. Under each pilot's carriage there is a bundle about the size of a microwave. Chicago's Sears Tower is primary target for tonight's flight.

The ultra-lights open to full, whining throttle and separate themselves in perfect intervals. They strike simultaneously from Tower top to bottom. They explode on impact, fire consumes steel and the structure soon collapses in a blooming inferno.

The other nightmare begins with a HALO jump.

I float for minutes before opening my chute. There is zero illumination, so I let my wristband GPS guide me to the LZ. I expect to land in the open desert of Iraq near a terrorist training area. My mission is to locate, then use F-16s to level everything.

I land on sand, but in a city playground. I bury my chute, check my radio, which is dead, and then walk into town.

The street is dark except for one storefront. On the arch above the door, "BOOKS" in red neon and on the door a sign reads:

MEET THE AUTHOR TODAY!

SATAN

Signing copies of his new book:

"To Know Me, Is To Love Me"

I go in, pick up a copy and get in a line so long I can't see the author. The book was short enough for me to finish during the hours I waited. It was a memoir of the famous selling themselves to the writer.

The last page contains the only lines I remember:

*"Starvation's stranger.
Last tear, last plea, last prayer
used to pick my teeth."*

As I finally approach the table, I'm annoyed by the author. He is no more than 5 feet, wearing, of course, a black suit and black turtleneck. The cliché is topped with a dark red beret. I snort quiet sarcasm at his arrogance.

The fan in front of me is babbling reverence while his book is signed in a puff of smoke. I roll my eyes at the cheesy illusion. I step forward and the author removes the beret, revealing a huge, red and black dragon tattoo. He raises a finger to me, the gesture of "wait one minute," and turns to speak to an underling.

The dragon covers his entire skull. The spiked tail runs down his neck and yellow claws grip his temples. I look down on him; fixated by flexing muscles in the dragon's back. I tell myself tattoos don't move; it must be a scalp spasm.

He turns to face me, and steam wafts from the dragon's nostrils on Satan's forehead. I hand him my book, which he takes while glaring at me.

"You laughed at me?"

"I...I didn't."

"Indeed, you think I'm a clown."

"No sir, it's just...the clothes...beret...seem..."

He pulls me closer with a fishhook finger, "I'm hungry for more than lies."

The dragon's eyes open and fire trickles from the jaw to the floor in a hiss.

His hand is over my face and I'm frozen. Fingertips press to bone. I'm pushed down on my knees. His wide palm blinds, and dragon flamedrops sear my forehead.

"My dragon says your soul tastes like shit, but I'll decide for myself."

Dr. Simon was excited as she told me her news.

“A new drug is ready for trials and you more than qualify. Elimigraine seems to reduce chemical imbalances caused by post traumatic stress. It should temper your nightmares and migraines.”

The Devil and I would meet again, but Elimigraine sent away Satan and the Buzz Bomber dreams. What really saved my life was the drug’s special side-effect, which arrived on my birthday no less.

I’d been in the hospital for thirteen months and was “celebrating” thirty-six years with fellow inmates. We were allowed to indulge ourselves with fabulous dry, plain chocolate cake, as frosting would tweak our blood sugar, and some delicious watered down lemonade.

Being so stimulated, I couldn’t fall asleep. It didn’t help that they tucked us in at 7:30, and the summer sun was still shining through the window.

I closed my eyes and breathed slowly. I was in the middle of exhaling when rotor blades began vibrating the building. My escape-proof window was too high to show anything but sunset colors.

The helicopter sounded like it landed on the roof, and my room hummed to the whump-whump of chopper blades. I banged on my door, hoping the guard could clue me in.

The safety window on the door opened, “What do you need?”

“Tom, what the hell is a helicopter doing on the roof?”

Tom raised his eyebrows and produced the small smile that said, “Glad I ain’t you, Freakshow.”

“Tom, are you seriously telling me you can’t hear that!” I was yelling over the rattleshake.

“Now, settle down, and stop shouting, or we’ll have to bind and medicate. Do you understand?”

I nodded and he closed the window with the same smile on his face. I had been restrained and sedated after my nightmares and the claustrophobia made me vomit.

So I stood in the middle of the room and stared at the sound above me. A three by three ceiling tile pulled away over my head and a ladder slid down to the floor, followed by an old man in an olive green jump suit.

He handed me a flight suit and boots that matched his. “Put this gear on, son, your nutbin jammies ain’t goin’ to cut it.”

I opened my mouth to protest, to question, to do something but he cut me off.

“I know you want to get out of here and back to your family, but this place can’t do what needs to be done for you.” He put his wrinkled hands on my shoulders, “If you don’t come with me tonight, you’ll be here forever. So get dressed.”

He stood patiently while I did.

My brain bounced in time as I climbed the ladder to a helicopter perched under spinning rotors.

The old man jogged past yelling, “Hurry, hurry now!” as he hopped in the chopper.

My mind slid sideways but feet kept moving me to the black, metal bird. By the time my focus returned, jumping out was no longer an option. We were a hundred feet up and flying west into the red sun.

He gave me a helmet with microphone, so we could talk in the rotor wash.

“This fine limo is a special-ops Pave Hawk. We’re gonna hit 190 knots, so sit down and buckle up.”

“But, where are we...”

“Son, folks only ride with me after their dead, so you must be special. Once we get to altitude, we’ll talk.”

I was pinned in my seat and dazed as I looked out the side doors, which were frames of fading blue and black as we banked through a series of turns.

When we finally slowed, I took a deep breath and noticed there was no pilot. I must have whimpered into the mike.

“I fly her with my mind. Relax, I know what I’m doing.”

That calmed me like a cattle prod, so he made small talk to help.

“Name’s George, but friends call me Georgie.”

He took his helmet off and rubbed the wispy, white hairs on his pink scalp, as questions machine gunned their way to my mouth.

“I’m your transportation,” said George, “but I can’t help much beyond that. Rules are rules, I’m afraid.”

“What are you talking about, George?”

As we descended into a heavily wooded area, he pointed to a black, rectangular box lashed to the bulkhead. It looked like a coffin.

He handed me a compass while he spoke, “Son, you’re broken, and you gotta find all your pieces. Once you get ‘em all in that box, you’re gonna feel a whole lot better.”

My lower jaw had broken hinges.

“Son, you’re loaded with questions that I don’t have answers for.” He said while checking a map as we landed.

“Now, your objective is on a magnetic azimuth of 93 degrees—distance unknown, Roger that?”

“What is my objective?”

“It’s hard to explain, but I promise you’ll know when you see it.” George said as he pushed me gently to get out.

“How will you find me later, George?”

“Again, not an easy answer. When you find the item, I’ll get a kind of signal and I’ll come running. Now go. Time can be funny here, so we don’t waste any.”

I stepped out after staring at him for a second. He flashed a thumbs up as he lifted off, and I flipped him a stiff, middle finger.

I picked up a rock and started to throw it at the helicopter then dropped it.

“What the fuck?” I said softly while watching him fly away. I scrunched my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. I opened them, sighed, scanned the tree line and saw a rough path on my azimuth.

I echoed George to the trees, “You gotta find your pieces, son. Terrific. Call me Mr. Jigsaw.”

I tied a loose boot lace, checked the compass, checked my options and started walking the magnetic line through the pines.