

Sundance

A Wormholes story by Dave Bryant

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*Speed, which becomes a virtue when it is
found in a horse, by itself has no advantages.*

—El Ghazali

**Pan-Colonial Air Races
Pillars of Allah Desert
The Westmark, Unity
3 September 2149 T-standard**

“Fer Chrissake, Jilly, stand still!” Monty, my pit crew chief, clenched his teeth in annoyance, nearly amputating the cigar that seemed to wander of its own accord across his mouth.

“Sorry, boss. But . . .” I shrugged. He nodded wearily and continued the body mapping. I could tell he wasn’t shamming—he was too tired even to object to being called “boss”. I tried harder to contain my excitement and the shivers and twitches it caused.

The Pan-Colonial. The big time. Only Reno on Earth was bigger, and almost nobody outside Sol system ran in those. I could still hardly believe that my name was on the pilots’ roster, especially after the static we’d gotten from the race officials when they caught wind of what we had in mind.

Still trying to imitate a spread-eagled statue, I glanced out of the corner of my eye at my plane. Yep. Still there. Mirror-bright alloy alternated with jet-black composite on the giant boomerang that lay under the techs’ loving inspection. If this worked. . . . It’d be the biggest sports coup since the Australians grabbed the America’s Cup with their radical new 12-meter design more than one hundred sixty years ago. And it’d do the same thing to air racing that the Aussies’ boat did to sail racing.

If it didn’t work, my chance at a career was shot. If it didn’t work badly enough, my life was shot. I shivered again, from apprehension this time, and earned another scolding.

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We had time for another complete simulation run before they called us out to the flight line. Everything worked like a dream, but still, it was just a sim. Humans’ve used them for well onto a couple of centuries, and I think we still aren’t comfortable with them. I don’t think we ever will be.

Monty and I had the same well-rehearsed argument we always had before any flight. “Dammit, girl, you’ve gotta wear a flight suit.”

“Boss, you know it’s too baggy. Unbalanced drag, loss of speed, loss of agility . . .”

“Road rash. And don’t call me ‘boss’.”

“I wouldn’t get road rash, Monty. I’d be street pizza. There’s no point—”

“Safety regs.”

“All they said was helmet and heat-boots. And I’ll wear the half-gloves too. The suit’s just too hot.”

His tone dropped to a growl. “Exhibitionist.”

I giggled at his unexpected rejoinder, with which he’d obliquely admitted defeat. But there was a grain of truth to it too.

I walked out behind the crew as it wheeled the tarp-shrouded wing out to the official inspection area. They hardly gave me a glance, having watched me fly dozens of times. But the other ground crewmen and pilots, and the VIP spectators and race officials, goggled or tried not to look like they were goggling.

I’m not particularly pretty, just tall and average-looking with a dancer’s flat muscles. Small tits and hips and shoulder-length dirty-blond hair. They could judge it all for

themselves: All I wore, and all I intended to wear, were the things I'd ticked off for Monty. Safety helmet, mostly to streamline my head—it looked more like a bicycle helmet with a face shield—friction gloves, and heat-resistant boots to protect my feet from my plane's jetwash.

The hot, dry desert air crackled with static electricity, fluffing my thin pelt. It was uncomfortable, but more bearable than a sweat-sticky flight suit would be. My button nose pad was assailed by the plastic and metallic smells of the airstrip, and my pointed, mostly human ears rang with the high-decibel whines and rumbles of jet and prop engines. I grumbled to myself. My parents never would tell me just where the semihuman in the woodpile was in my ancestry, but I'd often wished to show either more or fewer animal traits.

Mobile ears, for instance, I could flatten against the noise. On the other hand, even the sparse fur I had could be a real hassle sometimes. I sighed. You just can't win. At least I didn't have a tail.

"Jillian Mendez?" The shout broke into my thoughts, and I realized that I had reached the staging area. One of the officials approached me somewhat awkwardly, obviously unsure how to deal with a nude female pilot. I leaned toward him to hear better, grinning as he cleared his throat nervously.

"Your, ah, plane is rather, well, irregular." The poor guy was taking refuge behind his impersonal authority-figure role.

"What's irregular about it? It's under two hundred kilos with me on it and it can land in less than a hundred meters. Those're the rules for delimited ultralights, right?" I knew they were, but I'd entered the ritualized world of the bureaucrat, where everything has to be said out loud.

"But it's jet-powered. And it has no seat or safety straps. Where do you propose to sit?" He'd taken to shaking his clipboard at me.

I batted at it when it prodded a little too close to one breast. "It has straps. They're on recessed retractor-reels. And I'll be lying down on it—I've got handgrips and footwells. As for the jet . . . the rules don't specify power plant, do they?"

He blinked and tried another tack. "I didn't see any control stick or pedals."

I rolled my eyes in exasperation, then turned my head, sweeping back the hair from my ear. "I'll be controlling it directly." I pointed at the small female plug that gleamed between the guard hairs on my neck behind the corner of my jaw. Cyberjacks aren't exactly universal, but I expected better than the walleyed look he gave me.

"You're from Camelot, aren't you? I should've known from the fur." Sooner or later, it seems, *everybody* says that. I counted monkeys in my head.

"No. I am not from Camelot. I was born and raised on Unity, all right? This small talk is all very pleasant, thank you very much, but can we get on with it?" My temper was getting the better of me. Not good.

He sighed, aggrieved. "Oh, very well. I don't mind telling you, though, Ms. Mendez, that your vehicle is only

in this event because no regulation could be found that would prevent its entry. The same goes for your state of undress."

"I love you too, dear." I blew him a kiss as I strolled toward my still-covered pony, which by now had been weighed, tested, measured, and scrutinized twice as hard as any of the other entrants. It was last in line, its low silhouette contrasting sharply with the ungainly-looking fabric-and-tubing conventional high-performance ultralights whose pilots threw uneasy glances at the strange intruder lurking in their midst.

Being last suited me fine. It'd be more dramatic that way. One way or the other.

One by one, the others rolled down the tarmac, hopping into the air like a series of drunken silkwings. The ultralight competition was a little different from its larger-scale relatives. One of my sponsors had commented, rather unkindly I thought, that it reminded him of the difference between miniature golf and the real thing. (He only gave us the money because it was a much smaller investment than "the real thing".)

The track consisted of several obstacle courses designed to test the planes' maneuverability and the pilots' reflexes. They were separated by long, straight speed runs. You couldn't just be fast, and you couldn't just be agile. The trophy went to the pilot who clocked the fastest time while accurately following the twists and slaloms.

Finally, my number was up. The ground men pulled the quick releases, which simultaneously whipped the tarp off and tripped the ignitions. I leaped onto the wing's broad back as the fans spooled up, then buckled the safety harness around my waist. Lying flat on my belly against the warm rubberized mat that passed for a pilot's position, I popped the black-and-blaze-orange access door ahead and to starboard of my right hand. The coil-cable underneath came readily to hand, and I felt the crackle of mental static as the cool metal plug came to life inside my neck when I plugged it in. *Sundance* came to life.

I flexed and rotated the 3-d main exhausts under the swallowtail, finally vectoring them and all the auxiliary vents for a vertical lift. It drank fuel at a breathtaking rate, but we were interested in speed, not endurance, for a relatively short run like this. I shot into the sky in a high arc, hollering with delight as I did every time.

My horizon grew as I climbed, and I could pick out the course pylons and the buzzing insects of the other contestants. The buttes and mesas of the Pillars of Allah towered over them, forming natural barriers around which the planners had plotted a fiendish racecourse. My mind's eye, assisted by the on-board robot brain, superimposed a highlighted and captioned graphic image of my planned course and speed through the entire event. "Follow the yellow brick road," I muttered to myself as the sleek delta wing free-fell into forward flight.

With a shudder, the fans spun from idle to full in an eyeblink, and the old flying wing shot like an artillery shell down the first straight. Two gees, my internal HUD told me. No problem. I keyed on the music.

The plane I flew was half again as old as I, having been built for the Camelotian Army's Expeditionary Force as a reconnaissance robot. It survived the Colonial War and was seconded to Hatikvah's *Zahal*. They weren't exactly sure what to do with it, since it had been designed to serve with a military force built from the ground up to take maximum advantage of cyber-technology. So after pulling all the pure military hardware, they finally sold it and all the others they had to companies and agencies who wanted an obsolete but still usable reconbot.

That was how I got mine. I don't know exactly where I got the idea, except for a dim childhood memory of a scene from an old pre-colonial cel-animated video. A girl riding on a flying wing. It seemed like the closest thing to the freedom of real flying, with the wind rushing through my fur. And that was the real reason I wouldn't wear a flight suit.

The music came up, pulsing through my blood, telling me the wing was flying fine, all green. It changed slightly to match my mood, but stayed steady and upbeat. If anything went wrong, the music would turn urgent and more menacing. It was like a soundtrack for real life. I loved it. Monty hated it.

I passed the rearmost contestants like a meteor, heading into the first set of pylons. More than just the music sang in my head. I felt complete as my mind controlled the sleek airfoil under me just the way I'd move my own arms and legs. The robot brain gathered data from its internal and external sensors, processed it, and fed it to me as kinaesthetic, visual, and audio impressions. After months of practice, reacting to the steady stream of sensory information had become almost instinctive.

I stood *Sundance* on a wingtip and flung out the airbrakes, rotating the exhausts to reverse thrust. The robot jerked to a four-g near-stop in midair, then pirouetted around the first pylon. I negotiated the rest of the first set at two hundred clicks an hour, twice the speed of most of the other planes. As I hit the second straight, I barrel-rolled in sheer joy. It had worked perfectly.

As the course went on, seconds seemed like minutes, and my initial elation settled into a comfortable glow. I was out in front, and nobody could touch me.

I'd just made the hairpin turn at the far end of the course and was screaming back in for the next obstacle run when the dreaded call came. "*Loose bird! Loose bird!*"

Somewhere in the restricted airspace of the race site was an unauthorized flight—an accident waiting to happen. Instantly, a babble broke out over the race channels. A hard, clipped voice came on the air, telling everyone to shut up and ground *right now*, wherever they could. Military birds were on their way in, and he didn't want any bystanders hurt.

I thought rapidly. Fighters? What the hell was going on that they were calling fighters in? Being the dummy I am, I asked.

"An international incident, you airheaded idiot. Now get down, dammit!" Nice guy. Probably a spook.

I bled altitude, but not speed. Something was badly wrong, and I wanted to know what before I committed

myself to landing. I scanned ahead as my thoughts raced as fast as my wing.

The music crashed in an urgent crescendo. A flashing red pointer and screaming capital letters announced that a large airborne anomaly was closing at entirely too high a speed. I goosed the fans, jumping like a flea to get above it. A sudden, nasty inspiration flashed through my mind, and I flipped *Sundance* over, letting it drop through a lazy half-loop.

With only a few seconds to steal a glance, I craned my neck to look at the now-retreating anomaly. It was hard to see, looking like nothing so much as a moving blot of the sort of interference that sometimes distorts a video picture. Concentrating, I queried the robot's demilitarized, but still formidable, sensor suite. Suddenly, a sequence of bizarre images flitted through my mind, finally settling on the artificially razor-sharp computer animation of a show plane. The outline matched a rather crudely painted one I'd noticed earlier that day offering rides to the kiddies. Once I'd seen it, I told the computer to back it off to just a wire-frame place-holder image.

I settled in behind it, and kicked in full afterburners. I'd never needed them before, and the robot only had them at all to allow it a reserve of emergency power in case of trouble on the battlefield. The three-g surge blurred my vision momentarily, and the music pounded with the warning that if I kept this up, I'd melt the engines—if I could stay conscious at the breath-robbing speeds I was getting into.

I patched into the transmitter again. At least, with the implant translating my thoughts into conventional radio signals, I didn't have to try to talk. "Control, this is racer Mendez. I have the loose bird in sight. Would somebody please tell me what's going on?"

As I expected, the hard-ass came back on the line. "I told you to set down. Wait—you said you have him *in sight?*"

"Yep. I'm following him now. But I can't for much longer. So make it quick."

There was a pause of dead air. Probably kicking it upstairs. Then, "What are you flying?"

"A modified ex-Camelotian Army Eagle-Eye tactical robot. Is that why I can see him and nobody else can?"

"Guess so. How . . . never mind. Wait one." There was a click-pop. "Don't speak unless spoken to. Answer questions with a 'yes' or 'no'."

Great. Spy stuff. Here I am, shooting over the desert floor at less than fifty meters, doing a cool five hundred clicks and accelerating, with my engines threatening to catch fire . . . and he wants to play games. "*Go!*"

"Plane is *probably* not armed. Two occupants: pilot and kidnap victim. Victim is male Deserite, about thirteen T-years old. Good enough?"

I clicked off and cussed. When I had it out of my system, I shot back, "Yeah."

"Can you get him?"

So there it was. My chance to play hero. I took as deep a breath as the slipstream would let me and replied silently, "I'll try." I said I was stupid.

I was losing ground to the more powerful and streamlined plane. Since I was already at full 'burner, I couldn't get any more thrust. My only alternative was to lighten the load. I hit the fuel jettison, letting liters of precious liquid stream into vapor behind me. I reconfigured the cyber-display hastily, posting a range-to-target readout near the wire-frame and telling the fuel jettison to stop at "two minutes of cruise remaining". If I couldn't get him by then, I never would. I overrode the music, putting on an appropriate piece of pre-colonial new age jazz I'd loved for years, and for which I'd named my plane. The g-meter climbed slowly in tandem with the airspeed indicator.

It worked. The wire-frame expanded gradually until I was a few dozen meters away. I wondered why the pilot hadn't done anything about me—surely, if they had the bucks to coat that plane with video paint, they could afford to put in a few warning sensors. I switched back to the full animation image, asking for maximum resolution. I wanted to know where every seam was.

That was a mistake. The robot lit up its active sensors, painting the target. He sure as hell detected that, because suddenly he was all over the sky. At first, I tried to keep up, bruising my ribs with a couple of the more violent maneuvers.

Then I realized that, no matter how fast he was, he couldn't possibly match my dinky *Sundance* in the turns, and all his jinking was just slowing him down. He probably thought some army tiltrotor was trying to peg him. So I started to cut the corners on his curves, turning inside him and hanging on for dear life.

Finally, he must have figured that the danger was past, because he settled back into level flight. I didn't have much time, because he had more raw horsepower than I did. And it looked like he was going to use it.

By this time, I'd planted myself just behind and above him. I inched over to one side of his stabilizer and noticed that the canopy was still visible, floating in the middle of the riot of smeared colors that the video paint put out. Two seats, all right. The kid was probably in the front one; it had the better view for the paying customer.

Now what? I dropped back into a blind spot and thought some more. I wasn't armed, and anything I could throw out of one of the equipment lockers I had aboard would disappear aft instantly in the rushing slipstream. The only thing I really had was the Eagle-Eye itself.

I looked down at the hull immediately under my body. Military vehicles were always overengineered, especially Cam stuff. And one of the selling points when I'd bought the thing was the ruggedness of the hull. I gritted my teeth. *This'll hurt me a lot more'n it'll hurt you.*

I tossed the wing into a spinning climb, closing my own eyes and relying on the robot's rock-steady image enhancement to keep me oriented. The other pilot slewed his head around, trying to figure out what was going on. Sure enough, he jerked the stick slightly to one side in reflex. Not much, but just enough; he dropped a few clicks of speed. I brought *Sundance* back down, still rolling. The reinforced tiptail with its faired-in wheel plowed into the

other plane's stabilizer at 150 kph. I flinched, and he did a whole lot more.

Torn metal and composite rained away, and the robot brain went berserk. Amber icons flashed on, indicating bent control surfaces and missing platelets. The landing gear was gone entirely. But then, I noted when I was able to look again, so was the top of his rudder. What was left was jammed in place at a sickening angle. Good. That'd slow him down and limit his options without crashing him.

He was a quick thinker once he got the idea, though. I watched his airbrakes open like flowers. I whipped past, tumbling, and picked up one of those shockingly clear mental snapshots people get at times like this. The kid was indeed strapped into the front seat, obviously terrified out of his wits.

I didn't want to find out if the other plane was armed, so I straightened out and slid into another diving loop. I kept the robot's eye on the thing while I concentrated on my next move. He clearly wasn't too interested in playing around—he just wanted out of here.

I brought my injured baby around and up under him. I'd figured out what I would do, and I'd get just one chance to do it; the fuel icon had just turned amber, too. Working quickly but carefully, I released the cover to the emergency tool box, crying out loud as it swung free on its hinge, battering my hand when I reached inside. I felt around, found the right tool, and pulled back, letting the cover slam shut again. Then I twiddled with it, carefully loosening the head.

I rose up just ahead of his wing, glancing over my shoulder as I came level with his canopy. He saw me and gave me the bird. His other hand started to pull back on the stick. I matched his climb, hyperventilating with the tension, and released some of the flight control to the robot, telling it to keep formation with the other plane. Being a literal-minded idiot, it would do its best to maintain its position relative to its "leader".

Then I rolled slightly, bringing my outstretched arm closer to the clear Lexan of my target. I pointed the power driver I'd pulled from the toolkit at the join between canopy frame and fuselage and triggered it.

The loosened bit shot free, punching into the softer metal of the other plane's skin. The plane's computer, detecting a sudden fatal compromise in the canopy's integrity, debated for a moment, unsure what to do about this strange, uncertain hazard. Finally, it gave up and decided to eject one occupant, but not the other.

That wasn't exactly what I had in mind; I'd hoped to pull the canopy manually without activating the ejection seat. So both the other pilot and I gaped as the canopy blew, showering me with 100-kph shards of safety plastic. Then the seat rocketed away, scorching what little fur wasn't reddened with blood from hundreds of tiny cuts.

"*Jeezus Christ on a pogo stick,*" I swore. Canceling the formation order, I broke away from the fugitive plane, looking for the 'chute. It opened right on schedule, and I lost interest in the other guy. The feeling was mutual, I guess, because he didn't try to screw with my rescue.

I hared off after the bright orange parachute, my heart pounding. The fuel icon had just turned red. I shut down the afterburners and throttled back to idle; the icon flicked back to amber. No problem now—I'd just follow the kid down and land next to him when he hit the ground. Then I looked down and noticed that we were in the badlands. Even if we survived touchdown in that rock-strewn nastiness, it might be a while before we were rescued. I couldn't risk that; I didn't know how bad the boy might be hurt, and while they weren't major, I did have wounds that needed tending.

When I caught up with him, he hung limp in the harness, unconscious. I circled, looking for obvious injuries. I didn't see any, but then I was no doctor. Finally, I backed off, then turned and dropped all the speed I could. At 80 kph, the wing sprouted all sorts of lift-assistance devices. The damaged, partially inoperative sections gave *Sundance* an alarmingly drunken feel. At 60 kph, I felt the nozzles swiveling to vertical and throttling up. The fuel icon went back to red. I overrode the nozzles, holding the speed at sixty and gently falling toward the kid.

I slowly and painfully pulled myself to my knees, bracing as best I could against the heavy wind. The taut safety straps sang, and I spread my arms to catch the limp form as I flew into him.

The impact nearly knocked me flat on my back, sending lancing agony through both knees as they bent double. Without attempting to move any further, I banged at the harness release knob with a fist. Once, twice, again. The third time, it popped free and the potentially deadly drag of the parachute whipped away, nearly tearing my helmet off as a harness strap caromed off my faceplate.

I manhandled the rag doll I'd suddenly acquired onto the rubber matting, then lay down over him, shielding his unprotected face as best I could. After what had seemed like an eternity, I breathed a hearty sigh and returned my attention to the problems of flight. The fuel icon had gone red again while I'd been distracted. I swore.

I dropped down to just a couple of meters off the deck, keeping my speed as low as I could safely manage, and tried to use ground effect to help conserve fuel. It was a pretty vain attempt, because the ground was so broken that I couldn't consistently stay low enough and when I could, the angled rocks blew the air bubble all over the place.

I radioed my position, using the robot's inertial navigator. They promised that a rescue tiltrotor was already on its way. "I hope to God so," I muttered after I signed off. All I could do at this point was cruise for as long as I could, then hope I could find a decent place to set down.

I looked down at the cause of the whole mess. Charming looking kid. Probably a real hellion if he looked that angelic in his sleep. Suddenly he stirred against me and mumbled something unintelligible.

Abruptly his eyes flew open as he realized just what the warm softness covering him was. He blushed bright red, his expression the most amazing mix of furtive enjoyment and thorough embarrassment I'd ever seen. I distracted him with, "How do you feel? Are you hurt anywhere?"

He shook his head. I opened my mouth to continue, but the fuel icon started blinking. I hissed, "Hold on," and swept the area just ahead for a good spot. Not much, just as I figured. I picked the best of a bad lot, vectored for it, then swung the vents down for a vertical landing. The fans choked off just a few meters short, and *Sundance* lunged into a very brief free fall, pancaked onto a large turtle-backed boulder, then skidded down the far slope. I closed my eyes as the ground came up. That didn't help, since I could still see through the robot's eyes. I felt a massive yank, then the sensation of being snuffed like a candle.

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I lay against the cool concrete wall of a hangar, swathed with bandages that already prickled my fur. At least he hadn't been hurt; I'd made a wonderful shock absorber. But *Sundance* was badly beat up and needed thousands of dollars of work that we couldn't afford. The race had been called when the first "loose bird" call had gone out. To add insult to injury—literally—the brat's father had chewed me out thoroughly. Not only had my antics endangered his son, but my scandalous lack of morals had probably corrupted the kid to boot. I felt wretched, physically and mentally.

I felt a hand on my shoulder, and looked up to see a woman who I'd figured to be the mother. She'd stood quietly by, saying nothing and checking her son over the way any mother does, doctor's assurances or no, as her husband raked me over the coals.

"I apologize for my husband's behavior. He's . . . very devout, and has a position in the community to uphold. It was his fear for our son speaking." I nodded. Mormons, of course—Deseret was colonized by them. I could see how being indebted to a naked furry woman pilot wouldn't sit too well with the more conservative ones.

"I'm deeply grateful for our son's life. I can't begin to express my thanks, but perhaps this will help. I understand that your airplane was very badly damaged."

"Yeah. Y'got that right." I was too tired and sore to be more polite. I looked away and hung my head between my upraised knees.

An envelope appeared at the edge of my vision. "Here." I looked over without much interest and took the crisp white paper. She repeated, "Thank you. And keep flying." Then she walked away, back around the corner of the hangar.

I slit the envelope open with a fingernail and held it open to look inside. Then I snatched out the contents and examined it more closely in disbelief. No, I was right the first time. The check did say \$10,000. And it was signed by her, not him. The paper fell into my lap and I stared across the still-busy field.

Monty finally came looking for me. He looked more dejected than I'd ever seen him. "It's shot, honey. Nobody'll put up enough to fix it after this fiasco." The expression on his face when I held up the check almost made it all worthwhile.

Almost.