

## The Loft

*This chapter was in the original Spikez. It gives some insight and backstory about PIG30N and her life before she became one of Windar's cyborgs. I loved writing this chapter as I was able to explore the dangers faced by Racing Homer pigeons, however because the chapter was quite long and near the climax of the book it has been moved online. I hope you enjoy!*

**P**rickles did nothing – it was pointless trying to escape from his reinforced cell. His only stimulation was the sound of soldiers preparing for the clean-up operation, the grating noise of test alarms, and the distant hum of military helicopters circling above the base. Visions of Rosie and his mum filled his mind. He was angry that the Kraken-200 had captured him so easily before he could savour the physical contact he had craved for so long. Instead he replayed the memories, those brief moments, and dwelled on the disappointment and fear he had seen within his parents' eyes.

The hedgehog desperately wanted to talk to someone, but it was a waste of time trying to make conversation with PIG30N, who roosted in her cage above him. He missed Trakz, imagining what terrible things his friend was being subjected to outside the comfort and security of the lab. Prickles kicked the bar of his cage in frustration, believing that he would never taste freedom again.

PIG30N was in a deep slumber. Her wings flapped intermittently, and her feet flicked ever so slightly, as her conscience became fully immersed in the beginning of her dream:

*It was racing day. Delicate wisps of stratus clouds framed the sapphire skies as PIG30N travelled in the back of an old lorry, along with hundreds of other pigeons, towards the foothills of South Wales.*

*There was a buzz of excitement amongst the birds, not just about the big race that lay ahead of them, but at the opportunity to meet new birds and mingle. PIG30N had already attracted the attention of several handsome males and blushed at their amorous calls towards her.*

*The truck juddered to a halt. They could hear humans, talking and laughing aloud. She recognised the voice of her keeper, hard not to since she was the only woman there. Anne Beaumont was the keeper to beat. Many of her male colleagues would sidle up to her - just to discover tips about how she bred such good natured, successful Racing Homer pigeons.*

*PIG30N, known then as Echo, was one of Anne's most successful racers. She would always finish within the top ten, along with her racing partner Hammond. He shuffled excitedly in the cage next to her as they waited for final race preparations. Hammond was a fine-looking bird who attracted as much attention from the other females as she did from the males. And there was always gossip about how Echo and Hammond would make such a nice couple, but she was always too bashful to talk about the possibility.*

*Anne walked over to the truck and spoke to them all. PIG30N didn't understand what she said, but she sensed that it was upbeat, motivational and, most importantly, said with love.*

*In the distance, dark clouds bubbled on the horizon.*

*A man dressed in thick green khakis and heavy, mud stained boots paced near the truck on his phone, looking in the direction of the approaching storm. He looked agitated, as though he were being advised not to continue with the event, but eventually he gave the keepers a hand signal they'd been waiting for: go ahead.*

*PIG30N braced herself; Hammond was primed next to her. A harmony of excited coos followed as the rest of the flock scratched eagerly. Hammond turned to her and said his final words of comfort: "See you back home."*

*The cages fell open, startling the whole pack of birds. A volley of beating wings, and the sound of hundreds of eager lungs emptying, culminated into a magnificent cloud of activity. PIG30N beat her wings as hard as she could, ascending high into the sky so that she could find her bearings and catch a thermal. Above her, she watched as Hammond thundered past several other birds, angling heavily towards the East. She did the same, swooping in an arc as she caught a wave of warm air.*

*Slowly the birds separated, dividing into groups, smaller and smaller until there were just a few of them heading directly at the thickening mass of dark clouds.*

*PIG30N thought about the many advantages of being a racing pigeon: a keeper who feeds you and looks after you, prestige amongst other birds, and a great social life; but there were also many drawbacks: a great deal of stamina is required to get you back home, you fly over unfamiliar territory, and there is always a possibility that you might not make it back.*

*Thirty minutes had passed and the cobalt skies had been tarnished black. Heavy droplets of rain tumbled down, switching to hail at times; icy-sharp stones peppered across PIG30N's wings as she beat them, trying to steady herself against the fierce wind. She was on her own now, following a route back home, but she could sense electrical disturbances above. The bellies of storm clouds flashed as lightning was digested within them. A crash of thunder rumbled seconds later. Ahead, PIG30N saw the outline of some dense forest.*

*PIG30N landed on a sparse branch of a mighty oak, beyond the fringe of the woodland. Her attention was held by the sinking clouds. She was unaware of the watchful pairs of eyes that studied her, formulating a surprise attack.*

*A blinding flash of lightning ignited the sky and for a moment PIG30N thought she saw the outline of four feathered shapes perched a couple of trees away. Perhaps it was a group of other racing pigeons seeking shelter?*

*Thunder clapped directly above. As the rain cascaded downwards, she glanced back at the trees to try and identify the other birds, but a momentary flicker of lightning revealed empty branches. The forest went silent. Suddenly a pair of claws swiped across her back. PIG30N fell forward and dropped downwards. She did not see her attackers, only heard their menacing call.*

*Instinctively PIG30N tried to fly again, only to be hit a second time from the side. This time she caught a glimpse of the black and white feathers beating above her. She hit the forest floor stunned, hearing the rattling call of magpies as they rallied together, encircling her.*

*Chatak-chataka-chatak!*

*Menacingly, one by one, they struck the forest floor and heckled her, cawing that she had 'landed in the wrong part of the woods'. The most aggressive of the pack was a young female, flapping angrily at her from the side. PIG30N did her best to parry the pecks, but was clipped above her right eye. She could hear the others laughing as the physical torment escalated.*

*Another female landed on top of her, pinning her to the floor. It was fight or flight time. With a hard crack of her wings, PIG30N got to her feet and launched herself into the air, towards the only bleak opening she could see. The magpies fired after her like arrows, but they did not have any chance of catching one of the country's fastest racing pigeons.*

*Seconds turned into minutes and PIG30N knew that she had made a lucky escape as the chattering blended in with the swooshing of branches. Faster and further she flew, snapping her wings together, blue sky in the distance and the faint outline of other birds – racing pigeons! This would be a story to tell Hammond back at the loft as they snuggled up together. This would be her most infamous race yet. The thoughts buzzed frantically like the electricity in the clouds, when a shooting pain shot down her spine.*

*PIG30N had no time to react: talons had her firmly gripped. The tips of the raptor's claws were like pins, piercing her flesh as the clouds and fields tumbled into one, then they let go of her and PIG30N saw the blazing yellow eyes of a Peregrine Falcon watching as she hurtled back to earth.*

*The patio slabs, though doused in rain water and sandy in colour, were as solid as you would expect from such a fall from such a height. PIG30N's neck cracked in two as it struck the cold stone and she writhed momentarily. Droplets of rain smeared her view, but she did not want to watch the falcon approach. Her attacker landed beside her, mantled his wings and tightened his grasp on her.*

*As his beak fixed round PIG30N's neck, all she could think of was Hammond's warming coo with a gentle twinkle in his eye as he said, over and over again, 'see you back home.'*

*The falcon began his meal, hastily stripping away feathers and ripping out her eye. It was only when the patio doors opened and a figure stepped out into the rain that the falcon squawked and held out its bloody tongue, hissing at the intruder. But even his sleek wingspan could not repel the two marching brown shoes, complete with odd coloured socks.*

PIG30N awoke in the solitude of the lab. She could hear Prickles clambering about in his cage, restless. She searched the room for signs of Windar, but in her heart she knew that he would not be back. She stared at the small strip of glass at the top of the room and cooed in frustration.