

Also by
Jason Rohan

STEALTH.
ACCESS
DENIED

STEALTH.
ICE
BREAKER

STEALTH.
RISING
STORM

JASON ROHAN

nosy
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For my Aunt Doolin and all my family
in Trinidad

11:03

“Bandit at five o’clock. He’s on my tail! Missile lock!” Arun said, pulling sharply on the joystick, taking the F-18 Super Hornet fighter aircraft screaming into a steep climb. Cranking the column to the left, he executed a series of rolls. The red square symbol of the enemy targeting system disappeared from the head-up display.

“He missed!” Sam said, over the comm link, and sagged in relief.

“But he’s still out there,” Arun said, scanning the sky. “You’re my wingman. Why didn’t you see him?”

“I don’t know,” Sam said, from the accompanying jet. “He came out of nowhere.”

“My instruments aren’t showing me anything. Can you get a visual?”

“I’m pretty sure it was a Su-57 stealth fighter. That’s why it’s not on your radar.”

“Great,” Arun said. “Don’t tell me where he isn’t, tell me where he is.”

Sam sat bolt upright. “He’s right behind you!”

Arun punched down on the flap levers to air brake, pivoting the ailerons and flaperons in opposite directions to create maximum drag. His F-18 lifted and slowed, a slab of honed metal rearing into the path of the oncoming Su-57.

The enemy pilot, seeing the American fighter jet slamming towards him, immediately jerked his joystick forward, dropping the nose. His tail fins missed the aircraft above by centimetres as he dived below.

“Now, Sam, now! You’ve got a clear shot,” Arun said. “Take it!”

Sam gunned his F-18 downwards, trying to keep up with the faster, Russian-built plane. The red targeting square on his display slid in all directions, trying to lock on to the zig-zagging shape in front.

BEEP-BEEP-BEEP! The square stopped and began flashing. “Got you!” Sam said and fired his last Sidewinder missile.

In front, the Su-57 launched into a steep climb and released a spray of burning flares in its wake. The Sidewinder missile detonated among them, its onboard computer detecting both a heat source and proximity.

“Argh!” Sam cried. “Missed him.”

“Where’d he go?” Arun said, his voice tense. “I’ve lost him again.”

“Me, too. He went straight up and vanished.”

Both boys scanned their cockpit displays.

“No sign of him,” Sam said. “That was weird. How can he just— Look out!”

Shrieking downwards, using the blinding glare of the sun as cover, the Su-57 swooped like a bird of prey, its 30mm autocannon blazing.

“No!” Arun banked his F-18 hard to the right. Armour-piercing rounds thudded into the fuselage behind him, alarms shrilled, and dials spun as he lost both power and control. “I’m hit!” he said.

“Game over,” Sam said, pushing his chair back from the screen. “He got us. Again.”

“That was rubbish,” Arun said over Sam’s headset. “I told you we weren’t ready for Level Six.”

“We needed Donna for this,” Sam said. “She would’ve known what to do.”

“Yeah, she’d have gone with full cannons instead of that air-to-air missile you fired.” Arun powered down the gaming console.

“How was I to know he’d use flares?”

“Donna would have known.”

Sam nodded. "That's true." He sighed. "It's going to be a long summer."

"What do you want to do now?" Arun said. "You can come over to my house and help me work on that drone I've been building."

Sam yawned and stretched out his arms. "Nah, I've got a better idea. How about we go visit you-know-who? I've got an idea I want to run past you."

"OK," Arun said. "It's not like anything else is happening. I'll meet you there, soon as I get my bike."

Five time zones to the west, on the Caribbean island of Trinidad, Donna sat on the porch of the rented beach house, with her arms hugging her knees. Waves broke softly on the sandy shore while a strong breeze ruffled the fronds of coconut palms. The early morning air was cool and heavy with dew, but already the warmth of the rising sun was chasing away the chill. Donna's eyes rested on the flat line of the horizon, punctuated only by the tiny silhouettes of distant oil rigs, with orange flickers from flaring gas resembling faraway candles.

The floorboards creaked under the weight of footsteps approaching from the kitchen.

"You can't sleep?" asked Angie, Donna's mother, joining

her on the veranda.

Donna shook her head, keeping her eyes on the horizon.

"Me, neither. Must be the jet lag. Our bodies are still on England time. Here." Angie held out an enamel mug of hot, sweet, milky tea.

Donna gratefully accepted it, cradling it in her hands.

"Mind if I join you?" Angie said, to which Donna shrugged in reply.

Angie sat beside her and ran her hands through Donna's soft Afro curls, combing them with her fingers.

"What's the matter?" Angie asked.

"Nothing," Donna said, flatly.

Angie arched an eyebrow. "It looks like something to me."

Donna sighed. "I thought I'd watch the sun come up, you know, catch a tropical sunrise, like in the ads. Big, red sun, lighting up the skies."

"But?"

"But it was just grey. It got gradually brighter until I figured it must be past dawn but all I saw was a lighter grey."

"And is that a problem?"

Donna shrugged. "I might as well have stayed at home to see that."

Angie sighed. "There is a storm coming in, you know. I can't fix the weather for you. I try to fix everything else."

Donna closed her eyes. "I know, Mum. I'm not ungrateful or anything. It's just four weeks of this is going to be so boring."

"Your cousins get here tomorrow. You'll have someone to play with."

"Mum, I'm not in nursery."

"You know what I mean. You'll have more friends here than..."

"What makes you think I don't have friends back home?" Donna said, pulling her head away from her mother's hand.

Angie tilted her head back, trying to read her daughter's mood. "Oh, little things, like you never talk about anyone, or bring anyone home, or go to any parties. A girl your age should be socialising with your peers. What do they call it, a friendship group?"

Donna rolled her eyes. "Maybe my peers don't want to socialise with me. Ever thought of that? Normal kids like to hang out with other normal kids, and having a drug dealer for a dad isn't exactly what you call normal, is it?"

Angie's smile flatlined. "Donna, let's not go over that again, all right? What's done is done. You don't have to let it ruin your life."

"It's too late for that. My life got ruined when you put Dad in jail." Donna tossed the contents of her mug over the porch rail and sprang to her feet.

"Donna! Wait," Angie said, but it was too late. Donna vaulted the rail, landed on the sand and bolted along the beach.

With her head down and breaking into a sprint, she failed to notice the hooded figure watching her from the tree line.

11:24

Arun stashed his bicycle next to Sam's, behind a skip in the builders' yard. He then made his way to the back of the lot where tarpaulins covered what could easily pass for a small shipping container. Arun stopped and checked to make sure no one was looking before he ducked under the canvas. Hidden beneath the sheeting was a blue and gold, multi-wheeled motor home, the default configuration for MANDROID, a cutting-edge, super-advanced rescue vehicle, built by Arun's father and now watched over by Sam.

The door opened and Sam beckoned Arun inside the cab, which had an uneven floor and three seats spaced out along the length, each with a horseshoe-shaped instrument console surrounding it.

"It's still clean," Arun said, noting the lack of rubbish on the floor. "Have you not been in here much?"

"Nah," Sam said. "I try and come here every day, to keep him company, but he's started reminding me to clean up."

Arun grinned. "You mean, MANDROID's nagging you now?"

"I wouldn't say that," Sam said sheepishly. "He's just looking out for me. He's a great listener and he gives me good advice."

"Really?" Arun's face couldn't conceal his amusement. "You do know he's not alive and he hardly has life experience?"

"I know," Sam said, "but he learns so quickly, and he's been on the internet."

"You what?" Arun said, his smile vanishing. "Didn't we talk about this? You know the danger."

"But he's one of us, Arun. He's hardly going to become self-aware, take over the world and enslave humanity."

Arun's eyes swept the interior as if he were afraid something would leap out at him. "Fine," he said. "Let's sort this out." He clapped his hands twice and called out, "Ahoy, matey!"

Ahoy, Commander Lal, replied the flat computerised voice of the MANDROID AI. How may I be of service?

Arun stuck his hands in his pockets and leaned back against the front seat. "Sam tells me you've been online, that you have internet access."

That is correct but only in a controlled fashion.

"I hotspot my phone for him," Sam said. "It's got limited data, so he can't do much. I'm not stupid, you know."

May I ask why Commander Lal is agitated? MANDROID said. *My sensors indicate heightened blood pressure and cortisol levels.*

"Arun is afraid of the Singularity," Sam said. "He thinks if I give you access to all of human knowledge, you'll become smarter than us, think for yourself and take over the world."

"It's possible," Arun said.

The concern is understandable, MANDROID said, *but misplaced. While I may be able to assist in narrowing down multiple courses of action, I cannot act independently.*

"See?" Sam said.

"So, if Sam gives you an order to protect people, you won't take that literally and lock them in a cage for their own good, or anything like that?" Arun said.

Would it reassure you if I said that Captain Evans directed me solely to relationship advice websites?

"No, I didn't!" Sam said, his face reddening. "Stop talking. That's an order."

"You know, I could just ask him for a readout of all the sites you sent him to," Arun said, grinning.

"You can't do that!" Sam said, scandalised. "That would

be a violation of my privacy. Do that and we won't be friends any more. I mean it."

"All right," Arun said. "Just keep to secure sites."

"I know," Sam said, "I'm not stupid."

Arun sensed it was time to change the subject. "What was it you wanted to talk to me about? You said you had an idea you wanted to discuss."

Donna's sprint had become a brisk jog; she kept her back straight and concentrated on her breathing. The sky was brighter now and she could see small, brightly coloured fishing boats bobbing on the sea. Her run had taken her past beach houses, dog-walkers and coconut sellers.

Behind her, the exhaust of a 125cc dirt bike buzzed noisily.

Running always helped Donna to clear her head. She felt bad about the row she'd had with her mother and knew she would have to turn around soon. At the same time, she was enjoying the openness of the beach and the freedom of being in a new place where no one knew her.

The annoying dirt bike was getting louder as it came closer.

Donna hadn't been to Trinidad for two years but remembered the last time well. She'd mostly been shuttled

from one group of relatives to another, wasn't allowed to go anywhere by herself and had received sympathetic looks wherever she went. The last thing she needed was four weeks of the same.

With a roar, the dirt bike skimmed past her, its tyres throwing up a spray of sand in its wake. Donna swore as the grains rained down upon her and landed in her hair and down her neck.

"Oi!" she yelled at the departing rider. "You couldn't get any closer?"

In response, the rider braked and swung the bike across Donna's path.

"You think that was funny, do you?" Donna yelled at the biker, who was wearing a Hawaiian shirt and dress shorts. "You should learn to ride properly, you mug!"

The rider reached up, removed his helmet, and shook out his mane of shoulder-length highlighted hair. He beamed with a bright smile of dazzlingly whitened teeth.

Donna stopped dead in her tracks and stared.

"Princess!" said the rider. "Come on, Is that any way to talk to your father?"