

AMAZONS AND PREDATORS

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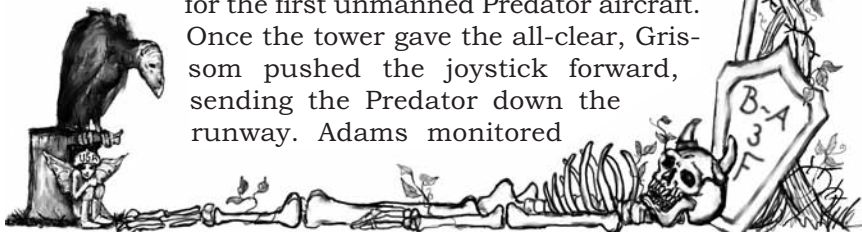
AIRMAN FIRST CLASS TABITHA ADAMS STEPPED INTO one of the MQ-1 Predator control trailers at Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan. She held a cup of coffee in one hand and a clipboard with the day's mission briefing in the other. Captain Frank Grissom was already sitting in the pilot seat of the Predator "cockpit" and sipping coffee as he reviewed the computer screens in front of him.

"Good morning, sir," Adams carefully set down her clipboard and took the sensor operator's chair next to Grissom.

"Must be a big day," the pilot said. "They're having us launch two armed units this morning and we're supposed to send them to the southeast."

Adams's lips turned up in a grim smile. "Sounds like they've located those Taliban insurgents they've been looking for." She sipped her coffee, then set it aside. Her mother had been a passenger on one of the planes hijacked on September 11, 2001 and crashed into the World Trade Center. She had been fifteen at the time. Three years later she enlisted in the Air Force.

Grissom and Adams began the pre-flight checklist for the first unmanned Predator aircraft. Once the tower gave the all-clear, Grissom pushed the joystick forward, sending the Predator down the runway. Adams monitored



the sensors. She watched the view on her computer screens as Grissom turned the aircraft toward the mountains that bordered Afghanistan and Pakistan. Once it was twenty-five miles from base, Grissom spoke into his mic. "Handing control of Predator Foxtrot One Alpha over to you, Mission Control."

"Mission Control, copy." Adams heard the response from Creech Air Force Base in Nevada over her headset. "We have control. Standing by for the next bird to get airborne."

"Bagram Team One, copy." With that, Grissom and Adams reset their displays and began the preflight checklist for the next Predator aircraft they were responsible for launching.



Tzefira sat atop a high peak. Her people, a fae race known as the *Oior-pata*, lived in caves along the slopes of the mountain. Looking to the south, she saw smoke rising from cooking fires that belonged to a group of humans who had settled dangerously near the lands of her people. Although human tribes moved throughout the region, they avoided the peaks immediately around the *Oior-pata* caves. Stories of humans and knowledge of their languages were passed down through the years, but Tzefira had never had the opportunity to observe humans firsthand before. She flew down the slope toward them so she could get a better view.

She could discern two groups of humans in the encampment. One group consisted of bearded men. Another group seemed to be wearing blue or gray sacks that covered their entire bodies from their heads to their feet. She wondered how those humans could do anything. However, the humans in sacks seemed to be preparing food for the less-covered humans.

Looking to the east, Tzefira saw the mountain that was home to the *Gargareans*. She sighed as she thought of one *Gargarean* in particular. He had deep brown eyes and wonderful upswept wings. His name was Aethon. The *Gargareans* were male and lived apart from the all-female *Oior-pata*. Tzefira knew that unlike her people, male and female humans lived together. She suspected that the humans in sacks must be females.

She observed that the humans were about twice again as large as her people. Narrowing her eyes, she evaluated their movements and noted they were clumsy and lumbering. They might be big, but she was fast and could fly. Her mouth turned upward in a wicked grin as blood lust roiled in her veins. She longed for an excuse to test her skills against one of the hu-