

Cato and Foyle (Chronicle 1)

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Inside the C-130, two men sat on red, mesh-web seats amid the plane's internal rumble.

Outside the C-130, the world one thousand feet below slept, unaware of both the existence and the importance of the mission the men inside the plane were about to jump into.

“Are we getting jump pay for this?” Cato said above the persistent noise inside the plane. “It’s just the two of us.”

“What?” said Foyle, squinting his blue eyes at Cato. They were the sort of eyes that made other kinds of men movie stars. His jaw had the appearance of being what is generally called “square,” meaning it was wide and could take a hell of a punch, if need be.

“Does this count... toward jump status?” said Cato. Cato’s jaw and chin, by contrast, were narrow and looked fragile as glass.

“No clue,” said Foyle, looking intensely at his black-op partner’s eyes. He was trying to determine which part of Cato’s inconsistent personality he was dealing with this time. He couldn’t quite tell, yet. Cato’s eyes were brown, small, and often, as now, in a state of overanxious activity.

“This should count toward jump status,” Cato said. “I’m gonna talk to PAC when we get back. No way this shouldn’t qualify for jump status.”

“Is your name on a manifest somewhere?” Foyle said, his voice full of the kind of sardonic jousting enjoyed by men who spend extreme amounts of time relying on each other to survive.

Cato looked at Foyle with an expression that combined exasperation and indignation—the look of an older brother who wants to slap his kid-brother for juvenile stupidity, but barely contains himself from doing so. “A black-ops... manifest?”

“Besides, that’s the last thing you should care about,” Foyle said. “Once we’re done with this, we can get back home and find some blondes looking for a husband for the night.” He rifled through his “uniform”—UnderArmor T, Camelback, tac vest, *salwar kameez*—to find a smallish picture of a stunning blonde woman in front of a state capital-type building, covered in snow. The woman smiled in a way that made you want to keep her warm. She was holding the end of her red ski-jacket zipper like the tip of a medicine-bottle dropper. “Here, look. Like this P.Y.T. right here.” He jabbed his index finger in the picture-woman’s face. “Eugenia.”

“How many baby-mammas does one pretty-boy creeper need, anyway?” Cato said.

“Or, or, check it out, though,” Foyle said, producing another photograph of a young woman. This one stood in front of a lifeguard tower on a white-sands beach in a red bikini. She wasn’t smiling, but her coy expression made you want to buy her a beer in the futile hope that the alcohol might allow her to reveal some things you’d be at quite an advantage knowing. “Maybe German’s not your thing. Check out Angkul. Remember her?”

“Bangkok smash-and-grab?”

“See, you do remember,” said Foyle. “You’re not as dumb as your mother looks.”

“Wasn’t she was that ladyboy?” said Cato.

“Man, shut up, bitch,” said Foyle. He turned away from Cato, toward the plane’s cockpit. “She even took falsetto voice lessons!”

Cato bent over to tighten the shoelaces on his right—jump-knife-hiding—boot. As he did, he stared at the number stenciled above the rattling, gray pull-down seat to Foyle’s right. “733.” Added up to 13. Bad luck. Although, Cato knew, for some Brazilian communities, 13 was a God-like number. They believe it can save humankind, somehow. “Damn,” Cato said. “Why can’t things ever be separated?”

He took a white bottle of Mini-Thins from the tac vest hidden beneath his black *salwar kameez*, and shook five of the pills into his left palm. The little crosses on the ashy-white pills somehow gave him a childish, giddy comfort. He swallowed them down, wiping the tips of his fingers on his long, shaggy beard and mustache.

“That stuff ain’t gonna help you, man,” Foyle said. “Maybe if you didn’t spend all your money on uppers, you wouldn’t need to worry about getting jump pay and whatnot.”

“They’re not uppers.”

“Oh yeah? Why do truckers use ‘em then? Their mood-altering effects?” said Foyle.

“Cure all,” said Cato. “Cures what ails ya!”

“I’m gonna see that you get help with that crap when we get back.”

“And I’m gonna get you help with your sex addiction when we get back.”

“Yeah,” said Foyle. “That’s gonna be a hella big support group, dude. Hey. Hey, remember seeing this one?” He held out another photo of a smiling woman. “Can you

picture it? Outer Mongolia? Remember those crazy mountains? Remember those purple lights in the streets? Remember Bolormaa? She ain't even blonde. Remember? Man, she couldn't get enough of me."

"Or your money," said Cato.

"Nonetheless. Y'know, you think too much," said Foyle. "*That's* your problem, Cato. You need to give it a rest. Just shut your brain off for a little while. It ain't doing you no favors, dawg."

"You need to shut up. And quit saying 'dawg.' You're from Fort Lick, Indiana."

"As far as you know," said Foyle. He looked at his watch. "One minute, dick-breath."

As the familiar tentacles of fear began to make their way through his body, Cato shook ten more Mini-Thins from the bottle into his palm. He swallowed them down, five at a time, each with a swig of water from his Camelback. He thought, chant-like, "*This body is not my being, if harm comes to this body, no harm comes to me...*"

"Look! I'm not sure we're gonna hit the right IP," Foyle said.

"Why not?" Cato said. He felt as though his breath smelled like the ashy, sour taste of the little pills.

"Just a feeling. Something seems off. We're gonna need to coordinate and make sure we have the correct orientation."

"Why are you telling me this now? I'm gonna be thinking about it too much before we land!"

"Maybe you shouldn't have taken the Minis," Foyle said. "Your mind would be a lot quieter. Regardless of your silly Vedantic chanting. I know that's what you're doing."

“Whatever,” said Cato.

“Thirty seconds!” said Foyle.

“If harm comes to this body, no harm comes to me, this body is not my being, my being is not this body...”

Cato and Foyle stood up, hunching beneath the low ceiling of the noisy, rattling plane.

“This body is...” Cato did his equipment check, including securing his NVGs and clicking them on. *“Is not my being...”* The door opened and the wind made Cato and Foyle’s clothing flutter crazily. *“If harm comes to this body, no harm comes to me...”*

Cato latched his chute’s D-ring to the yellow, trembling static line stretched across the length of the C-130. Turning toward the door, he watched the red light wink off and the green light wink on. He stepped out into the black night. He dropped and flipped around in the intense cross-currents until he felt the jerk of the harness tightening and slamming up into his balls, which, after a numb split-second, sent pain sparking through his body. He straightened out. He looked up. His olive drab, rippling canopy was intact, open and beautiful above his bobbling head. Everything seemed okay.

The night was points of flinty green light on a black velveteen canvas. Cato scanned the ground for the red chem-light marker, but couldn’t find it. “Another bad omen,” he thought.

Cato knew one thing for sure: this one was do or die.