

# ACROSS

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*You fill your cup with whatever bitter brew you're drinkin', and you spend your life just thinkin' on how to get away.*

Found on a scrap of paper in the year 2383

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Stranded. Alone. Breakdowns. Blowouts. All the same to Joan, the same as it had been for days. In the blistering heat, she aches for any crackling reply to her transmissions since the crash. Any distant voice, even a demon mind, would do. She lowered her thoughts, stood up, and scanned the thin line between land and sky, straining her squint for something different, anything but yellow sand and hovering blue.

“Hello,” came a static-pushed message.

Joan keyed her mic. “Where are you?”

“Here, east. Where are you?”

The voice was faint, a peculiar accent she didn't recognize. She glanced toward the morning sun for the hundredth time today. “I'm here... in this... place.” No better description for a two-tone wasteland with no name.

The dusty speaker of her unit vibrated, "I wasn't aware here can be separated by such a distance."

Old circuits analyzed, bits and bytes chewed at both ends, colored quarks spun, some up, some down.

"Walk toward the sunrise," said the other. "Meet me there."

Joan stood, tightened her pack straps, leaving the shade under the plane's broken wing, carrying three water bottles, two in her pack, one on her belt. Three hours, she decided. If she didn't find the talker, she'd turn back, not wanting to face dying of wasteland thirst. Thick and dry, the sallow sand squeaked under her boots. No motion out here, no lizards, no insects, no side-winder tracks in the dunes. A bad sign if those couldn't survive here. She slogged on, hoping to meet those she came to find.

In the distance, a dark line. An irregular one, not man-made. The wind picked up as happened every morning she'd been here, pumping dust from the southwest. Joan pulled up her filter, covered her mouth and sunburned nose, wished for a pair of dark goggles. Her only pair shattered in the crash.

As she approached, the dark boundary widened and swelled to a broad crevasse, stretching as far as she could

see north and south. Far below, green spoke of water. On the other side stretched more desert. She sat on the edge and dragged a scrap of ragged tarp over her head for shade and dust cover. Cracked lips sipped. The sun rose two degrees in the cloudless sky while she waited. By her estimation, she had two weeks of water remaining in the cobbled-together plane's tanks if she rationed well. The preserved food would last longer.

Across the chasm, in the void beyond, movement along a dune top, making a slight eclipse, a vehicle, or a large animal, a silhouette, a dust trail. The thing stopped, fingernail small on the other side, a blocky thing, dark, angular. A figure rose, dismounted, a rider or driver separating from the bigger something, waved an appendage. She squinted through the haze of heat and against the light.

"Human," she decided. Hopeful, Joan spoke to her mic, "How do I get to the other side?" She waited. The only activity out here on the ground, something she could feel. A tortured something.

Heartbeats, clock ticks. "You're already on the other side," came the reply. A disconnecting click. LOS - Loss of Signal light flashed. The rider mounted, turned the beast-machine, and moved further away into the here place, becoming a dot on the horizon. Gone.

## Six months before

“Do you think this heap will fly?” asked Joan.

“Undeniable, my dear, absolutely,” said her uncle Anderson. “I’ve made study from the old books.” He pinched his bushy eyebrows together, leaving a dark smudge.

“Parts?”

Anderson strained to tighten the last bolt on the tail assembly. Dropping the wrench into a rusty toolbox, he pointed to a metal pile at the back of the hanger. “Scavenged. Some we made. Should take you four hundred miles and back if the oil boys can refine enough fuel. Dicken’s of a time finding the right mix. Octane, they called it in the books. Not sure what that means.”

“Should? You said, should, Andy. I meant, are there any parts you still need.”

He shrugged, took the offered shop rag from his niece, “And I meant the fuel problem.” He slapped the tail wing’s leading edge. “The plane is sound, solid as oak. Have you been through all the piloting books? You need to go over those until you’ve got them memorized.”

“I read them so much they’re in my dreams. Enough for you?”

Anderson stretched his back and gave his stubbled head a rub. “No. Will never be enough,” he sighed. “Nothing will ever be enough.”

“Where’s Fen and Gadder? They’re supposed to be helping you.”

“Danny grabbed them for rendering. Making candles and soap today, I suspect.” Anderson mopped his brow. “Glad they moved that stinkpot. I couldn’t hold down food when they were boiling.”

Joan heard Anderson’s knees pop when he stood, worried the old man would pass before the project was finished.

“All I need them for is heavy lifting. Let’s get up in the cockpit. New things to show you.”

“Why do you call it that? You know it pisses me off.

“Terminology, my dear. The correct words are important. We can’t afford to lose them. Can’t afford to slide back any further. Sometimes, I don’t understand the children when they talk to each other.”

Joan followed him up the ladder to the fuselage door and stepped inside the metal ribbed interior. She noticed

it was in better shape than last time. Anderson led the way forward and took the co-pilot seat.

“When was the last time this heap flew?” she asked, settling into the left seat.

“Which part?”

“Why do I ask?” she moaned.

“The books from the museum say planes like this flew about two hundred and eighty-seven years ago.” Andy paused, counting. “Ten years before the crunch, before the dying.”

Joan craned her head out the cockpit’s left window and imagined propellers spinning in a blur. She slid her feet into the rudder pedals, pushed right, then left. “The left cables are still sticking, dammit. If I find a kink, you’re gonna replace it before Hector and I test this thing on the ground.”

It’ll be okay. “Needs some grease. Let’s go over the checklist. You see that empty slot?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s for the radio. Max got four working now, so you need to get with him. Hand crank batteries. Fixed up a few handheld ones too.” Anderson fell silent and steadied his hands on the armrest.

Joan understood the old man and knew he wanted to be the one making the flight, but poor eyesight and the jimmy shakes were disqualifying.

The project wasn't an old man's fantasy. The effort was imperative. A step toward survival for the Holston tribe and possibly humanity. New people needed to be found. The shrinking population and low birth rates were bells that needed to be answered.

Joan fought bouts of guilt, felt pampered as she trained and studied for her mission. Others worked the fields, tended animals, worked the community laundry, and taught the diminishing number of children from precious copies of books salvaged from dead places. Men made hazardous treks in horse-drawn wagons to scavenge. Childbearing-age women stayed close to the community's core, too valuable to put at risk. After years of trying, Joan was childless, and her husband dead from the fever. At thirty-five, she'd come to terms with her failure.

Like leaders of generations before, the Holston chiefs said, someday we'll weave cloth, make windmills to grind grain, and water wheels to drive machines. Joan knew someday was more a wish than a promise. Someday never comes.

Joan looked at her hands, smooth from the absence of any recent manual labor. Before being chosen as the pilot, she'd worked in demolishing old buildings, gathering the shreds to make new ones for a defensible town. Skag gangs from the north were trickling down again. They, and others like them, weren't suited for communal living. Skags feasted on dead technology's corpses, enslaved the living.

Old timers, beyond hard work years, passed down mutating stories. Their dead ancestors had talked about the collapse, the paradise of being human, about a life of abundance and joy, not toil and premature death. Few cared for the why of before. Today and the next were enough for their concerns.

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Last bottle, Joan warned herself on the way back to the crash site. Make it last. She'd done her best after the first engine failed, seized up. When she banked for a turnaround, the other sputtered and died. Here on the other side of the mountains, a desert stretched to the horizon. The old books had been wrong.

The landing gear dug into soft sand during the unpowered touchdown, tilting the plane forward, breaking wings, and bending propeller blades. In the

violent stop, the water tank on the starboard side broke free and smashed into the co-pilot's seat, killing Hector on its way through the front of the plane.

*Smoke.*

Joan sighted smoke ahead, knew there was one likely source. Another hour brought her to the dune above her campsite to see the blackened char.

*Skags. Must be Skags in the area.*

The barbarians burnt everything echoing of the old things, the old ways. A religion for them. Joan turned, checked behind, back over her path. She would wait for nightfall before going down for water. If the tanks were empty, she'd be dead in three days.

Blessed coolness came after sundown when Joan threw back the tarp she'd laid under. Starlight and a quarter moon were enough to find her way downslope. Every hour she'd stood looking for movement, looking for marauders. Saw none but thought it best to wait.

*Safe enough now.*

Closer in, she found the fire damage limited to one side of the plane, giving her hope something withstood the flames. Rounding the tail section, she spotted scattered lumps in the sand. Sleeping Skags? No. Too small. When she reached the first, she vomited. The

Skags had dug up Hector's body, hacked off his arms and legs, severed his head, split open his guts, ate his legs raw.

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One of four water tanks survived. The one that killed Hector.

Joan leaned forward into the harness of the makeshift sand sled, thin plating from the fuselage door. Three steps at a time, she plotted her path. Three more, three more, on and on.

One place offered sanctuary, one place in this desolation. Eight water bottles, five food rations, and lengths of cables cut from the wreck were all she could manage without killing herself in an attempt to reach the chasm. Skirting the taller dunes took two days of night travel to find the edge. She cranked the handset at each stop, charging capacitors, sending out a message, asking for help. Whoever lived on the other side wasn't Skags.

Joan hefted the hatchet in her hand. The tool was two hundred years older than her but still took a sharp edge. Using the blunt end, she drove the first stake deep in the sand into fragile rock. She tested the cable loop, pulled, jerked, and checked for slippage. Another wire binding gave her satisfaction of a tight hold. With a deep breath,

she snaked the cable over the steep side, her pack at the bitter end, bouncing against the near-vertical cliff face. She walked over to the empty sled and kicked it before dropping the food sack over the edge.

My turn, she said to herself. Once at the bottom, she'd be trapped, unable to make a hand-over-hand ascent.

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Desert rat, cooked over a mesquite fire, was a feast for Joan. Yesterday, dinner was half a snake, the rest sun-dried for protein chews taken during the night trudge. Daily progress was erratic, navigating around boulders and thick scrub. Finding a sandy stretch was a relief. The deep spot in the creek was a godsend.

Joan took off her clothes at the water's edge.

*I'm too thin*, she noted.

Lack of fat in her slim diet wasted away reserves. Naked, her ribs were an easy count.

*How much longer can I keep this up? Till the end*, she answered, *until the end*.

A wash in the creek helped. The water soothed aching muscles, settled her fragmented mind. Leaving

the water, she relished the sun and heat on her body for a few minutes before hating it again.

Piling her clothes in the shade of a rock overhang, Joan gutted three fish she'd scooped up in a wire net, eating them raw to extract the fat, not wanting it to drip away over coals. Liver, kidney, and eyeballs, nothing went to waste.

At the close of the ninth day, after sunset, she continued south, hoping the stream would remain steady. Though the canyon widened and cliffs lowered, the climb out was still too hazardous, and to no point, since above, the desert waited, wanting to bleach her bones. Day after day, her mantra became *one more mile*.

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Darrell squatted a few feet from the dead thing, not wanting to get closer. A woman, lying face up, burnt red and gas bloated. "Recent. Two, three days, I'd say."

"I'll get the shovel from the truck. Don't want her polluting the river downstream," said Cassidy.

"Check my pack. I got a filter mask."

His eyes were drawn to embroidered wings stitched above the woman's left breast pocket and a name. Joan Earhart.