

MAKER OF FLIGHT

By Richard Thomas

ISAAC, L1

Moist air clung to his skin as he hunched over the workbench, goggles tight. Isaac held the little bird down with his gnarled hands, the incessant chirping pinging his ears.

“Schit schtill, wouldja,” he said, as his mouth clenched shut, rotten gums pressed together tightly where teeth used to be. “Thish ish for your own good.”

A flurry of blue wings batted at his knuckles, panic stretching the tiny bird’s eyes wide, as Isaac poked around its backside with the silver screwdriver. Finding the latch, he inserted the tip into the screw and the cavity flew open, spilling sprockets and gears onto the scarred wooden surface. Quiet filled the room as he placed the still bird down. Wiping his brow and the top of his bald head, the candlelight bounced off the walls. Silence. Stretching his back, shoulders raised, he took a deep breath. Hacking out a deep, rattling cough he spat into a dirty handkerchief and stuffed it into his pocket. His dusty dungarees were more stain than fabric. The floor was lined with metal parts lurking in the shadows. Sheet metal and iron beams, mesh wire and rebar. Rust and mold drifted to his flat, wide nose, his sinuses raw from the turpentine and ether.

He reached across the desk, a hulking presence in the claustrophobic room. Grasping the tin cup, he swallowed the orange juice in one massive gulp, squinting his eyes shut for a moment of humanity. He’d paid a lot for this forbidden fruit. Scarce, yes. Gone? No. So many lies and rumors these days. But the sweet crank that was his only friend, nectar to the godless, she was his only reward for a job well done.

Dirt walls vibrated around him as another pod rambled up the shaft nearby. Soil spilled down on his glistening skull. His broad shoulders slumped over the bird to protect it. The tiniest fleck of earth dropped into its innards and he’d spend all day cleaning it out. So easy to jam up these fickle machines.

“4:21 ish a wittle earlwe today.”

A gust of foul air eased across the room, and Isaac blinked, wrinkling his nose. The lone vent in his cell was of little help, content to belch rancid gas. A window, he thought. What I would give for a window. Blinking his eyes, the sunlight would probably blind him.

Standing up, he walked over to the house of cards that was his shelves. Small glass jars littered the planks, cups and bowls of dented brass and tarnished tin. Screws,

pins, springs. Gears, sprockets, filament, and rubber bands. His hand floated above the fourth shelf, faulty memory hunting down a replacement part for his little blue baby. They were all his children. Hundreds of them. Mostly bluebirds, because that was what Diedre liked. But now and then he'd make a Cardinal anyway. Try to run it past his supervisor, his guard.

His only friend. Besides the juice. And the odd bits of moss that floated his way.

The moths were way beyond him.

"I'm coming darling, don't you fret," he muttered, glancing at the lifeless bird, tipped over on its side, guts spilled out in a pile of metal. Its vacant eyes still in shock, faded yellow beak open as if waiting for a worm.

"Ah, here it is," he said, his grubby fingers picking up a minuscule box and lens.

Back over to the desk, he plopped down again, his hands a blur of efficiency, as he shoved one part inside another, screwed them in tight, every puzzle piece in the right place, every gear lined up, a latch set, and the compartment to its belly shut with a nearly inaudible click. Immediately the bird flapped its wings, scattering the dirty bolts and washers all over the floor. It chirped and chirped, flying in a circle, round and round, faster and faster. Isaac watched, a grin on his face. Eyes never leaving the bird he reached over and picked up a small box, entered a seven-digit code, and punched the button. The bluebird fell from the air into his outstretched hand.

"It's OK. You'll be free schoon, darling."

On the far wall by the barely visible arc of a door sat a wicker basket. Shuffling over to it, he gently placed the bird inside, atop its inanimate brothers and sisters. Fifty-two birds in all. One dull red cardinal buried in the mix. Daphne was her name, blue number fifty-two. They were all letter "D" today. Helped him keep his head straight. Daphne, Danube, Dominic, Delilah, Desiree, Davide.

"Not much room to schpare today," he said. But two over quota.

Standing next to the wood beam door, a pounding on the other side shook him out of his spell.

"Isaac, I'm coming in, sir," the voice squeaked.

He stepped back and eased into his chair, placing both hands on his meaty thighs, hands crossed as if waiting for a cup of tea, goggles misting as he freed his brood once again.

"Enter."

A tall thin boy poked his head in, dressed in rags, a dirty knit hat pulled tight over his head.

“Everything OK today, Isaac?”

“Just peachy. Fifty-two.”

“Excellent,” the boy said, smiling as a muscle tic caused his left eye to flinch. Blinking. Blinking.

“Go ahead,” Isaac said. “I’m ready.”

The boy glanced down at the pile of birds, waiting to be taken. His eyes moved back to Isaac and in he crept. He grabbed the basket and stood up, arms full, that one moment of vulnerability that he dreaded each day.

“I’m going now, Isaac.”

“Be well, my friend,” Isaac whispered, as the child disappeared behind the door. It pulled shut with a deep latching noise, locks turned and fastened, bolts passed and shut.

Looking down into his hand, Isaac stared at the tiny video camera, turning it over and over in awe.

“Wonder if da schky is schtill blue.”