

Fly Boy

“Heeeeeeey Chester!”

The young bat closed his locker door and tried to pretend that he didn’t hear that. He could smell who it was... and who it *was*, was trouble! He sighed deeply, slinging his backpack over his right shoulder and turning to walk towards the exit. Four o’clock couldn’t have come quick enough.

“Yo, flyboy!”

“Heh heh, yeah... Cheeeeeessster?!”

He clutched the handle of his bag, swept his ears forward and concentrated those large, chalcedony-black eyes on the rest of the corridor and the five-minute walk home; but it was no use. He was soon surrounded by a troublesome duo, the larger of them with a paw around his bony shoulders in faux-friendship.

“Hey, you must not o’ heard us... even with those...” And the guy put his muzzle to Chester’s left ear and literally yelled at the top of his voice, “...HUGE EARS OF YOURS!! Hahahahaha!”

The young bat squeaked with pain, flinching in the grip and trying to push him away, picking up the pace as he clutched his ear.

“Hey, we ain’t through with you yet!”

The lumberin’ wolf and his fox friend jogged to catch-up with him, pushing him against the wall and making the poor bat cower.

“Flying foxes are so fuckin’ groovy man! Ain’t ya, Chester?!”

“Don’t be so hard on ‘im. I heard his ol’ man is out of a job.”

“Awww... heavy!”

“Woah, check out these wings!” One of the pair – a fox with darker red around his eyes and a sickly-sweet scent from a juvenile brush – made to pull Chester’s arms away from his sides to reveal his veiny, leathery wings, “Pffft hahahaha, you’re out o’ sight, man!”

“Get off! Leave... ow, let go! Leave me alone, guys!” He struggled and pulled his right wing away, trying to escape.

“Awww widdle batty-wat gonna’ cwya?!”

“Turkey!”

At that moment, Ashley Freck came padding past, one of Chester’s only friends. She was a young Dalmatian bitch in the same year.

“For paws’ sake, would you leave ‘im alone?!” She pushed past Luke - the older wolf - and made to stand right in his muzzle.

“Why? You got a date with this thing?”

“T’ch yeah, she thinks he’s a stooooone fox!”

Ashley snarled at them, hackles raised and her whippy, black-white tail curling. The pair o’ bullies just padded away, nudging each other and cackling in their usual cubbish manner. Once their cruel aromas were fading to the cool breeze of the city exterior, the young Dalmatian turned.

“Talk to me, Chest’. What’s goin’ on? You’re usually outta’ here so quick. You never bump into these idiots.”

He fiddled with the handle of his backpack, sighing deeply and smelling ever so upset. His orange ruff somehow seemed less vibrant today.

“It’s not them, Ash’. It’s... it’s dad.”

“Well... what’s wrong with him?”

“He lost ‘is job the other week, and he’s just drinkin’ all the time and yellin’ at me n’ mum.”

“Paws alive, I’m sorry, Chester.”

He sniffled sadly, a glassy sheen overcoming his huge, agate eyes.

“Hey, come on...” Ashley nudged him, turning slightly and opening her paws, “...bring it in, silly.”

They hugged in the hallway, the school empty and echoing; but the smell of her fur, having her under his wings... it was very special for the youngster. He was a lonely soul.

Chester Jubatus – to give him his full name - was a teenage flying-fox in year-ten at BlueLine Secondary School, Hatton. He was into all the things that made him less-than-groovy in the eyes and noses of his classmates. He liked planes and trains, and – although it was nineteen-seventy-eight - wouldn’t shirk his love of disco kings the BadGers. It made him an easy target for his peers in a rapidly changing Britain, the country rearing-up with the new punk, anarchic revolution led by The Fox Pistols.

A quiet and unassuming lad, he routinely got picked-on for his wings and his bright orange ruff; but you probably guessed that from the unseemly events earlier! Family life for the bat wasn’t all hunky-dory either.

His father, Terry, had been a mail-bat, one of the last employed to deliver the mail & milk by paw. It was a tradition that had dated-back two centuries but was rapidly losing out to the go-go pace of post-War Britain; and by the seventies, their days were numbered with the proliferation of cheaper, quicker commercial aviation.

Terry shoulda' seen it comin' to be honest. He'd been the last of the flying bats employed by Ptero PLC, until they eventually went-under a couple o' weeks prior, superseded by short-haul flights. They were more economic. The planes could carry passengers and freight all at once. The personal if rather slow service that Ptero offered, was pushed aside for; or at least, that was how Chester's dad drunkenly summed it all up!

The flying-fox had even been able to smoke on deliveries; but now his smoking and drinking days were confined to the four walls of his home – unemployed and wallowing in his own pity at the age of forty-four. That was the sight poor Chester had to deal with when he got home from school, nervously creaking the door open; he was never shocked at the dull, stale-beer scent and the dark aroma of Terry's depression.

“Hi sweetheart! You OK?”

“Yeah.” He mumbled, wanting to fly up to his room as quick as he could; but his dad had seen him come up the drive and was now ushering him over in his usual drunken manner.

Terry's ruff was unkempt, his eyes glazed like oil on polluted puddles, and paws above... he stank o' beer!

“Paws abo... above... hic... I'd done it shin... shince I was your age, boy! Four... fourtttheen... fourteen years ol... no, no, no... hic... it must've been thirteen. All those years, and I'm not wanted.”

“I'm... I don't know what you want me to say.”

But that didn't garner a response, Terry turning and putting his clawed paws up on the coffee table. Chester's mum put a paw around his shoulders, turning the pup away from the 'scene'.

“Don't mind ya' dad. He's uh... he's been lubricatin' himself since this mornin'.”

But seeing his father drunk and smelling his scent – a smell of nothing more than sadness, guilt and humiliation – made the youngster yearn to be able to help. He thought he might've been able to cheer his father up by expressing an interest in the new airline industry, but that had worked about as well as a chocolate tail prosthetic.

To nurture his interest – regardless of his father's budding resentment – Chester's mother had got him a year's subscription to *Air-Born* for Christmas. It was an aviation enthusiasts' magazine, which included articles about the latest jet aircraft, sightings of rare aeroplanes, and interviews with flight crew and stewards. He'd avidly read it in his bedroom, hanging upside down – and the constant roar of engines and the smell of kerosene drifting over from Heathrow was never a distraction. It just made it more real.

Living with his family in a small terraced house in the Greater-London borough of Hounslow - but a hop, skip and a paw pad from Britain's largest airport - was even more ideal for his hobby's longevity.

The airport was Chester's 'playground' whenever he had the time off school. The cost of a pup's return ticket between Hounslow West and the relatively new Heathrow Central tube station was fifty new pence – he still remembered his mum using shillings when he was but a pup. He'd use his pocket money to purchase a ticket every Saturday morning. It was when the largest volume of flights came in from over the ocean; great hulks of metal emerging from the morning fog, landing with a whirring roar before taxiing to the gates, all whilst he sipped some warm Ribena from a thermos his mum had prepared.

He wore his dark navy anorak to keep his wings and fur warm, his little film camera slung over his left shoulder like a proper pup... and that *always* came back full! His mum would take it to the local Boots to get it developed. He would've plastered his room with his fueled photos, but again, knew his father wasn't keen. In fact, he coulda' sworn Terry hated it.

He never came with him. He never asked about his little trips.

Whilst at home and certainly at Heathrow, his keen hearing would – now and again – pick-up the transmissions of flights departing, arriving and even ground control...

Vulpic Air three-four-four, clear to cross runway nine-left.

Roger, tower, Vulpic air three-four-four, clear to cross runway nine-left, Vulpic Air three-four-four.

A-W-U five-two, you're next in line. Clear to runway twenty-seven-right and hold. Once airborne, contact departure controller on three-seven-one, decimal zero-two.

Pawprint zero-four-two heavy, turn right heading two-three-zero and intercept localizer.

Lost in listening from his bedroom, the young bat got called down to dinner by his mum, Teri. He used his sharp claws to adjust himself, then turn himself onto his feet before padding downstairs. His memories and hearing were indiscernible accompaniments at the table; but he also brought his magazine down to the dinner table. He was still reading the article about the new freighters.

Tea tonight was fruit casserole and white rice mixed with sultanas. It was one of his mum's specialties; but the food wasn't the topic of discussion. Terry had noticed what his young son was reading and pretty much took it all personally... again!

"Chester, I've told you not to bring that stuff to the table."

"But Dad, I'm just finishin' up readin' abo..."

"I said no, boy! No means no! Now... go put it on the sofa and come back and finish ya' tea."

Chest' reluctantly did as he was told, before slumping with a huff in front of his dinner plate and scowling at his father.

“I don’t know why you got ‘im that stuff.” Terry sighed with a mawful of his food, the passive-aggressiveness directed at his mate.

“You know precisely why.” She replied, sipping a glass of barley water, “Chester really loves the modern flight stuff, Terry.”

He just snorted in derision, folding a fork through the rice, almost disinterested in this and everything else around him; he was still part drunk.

“Yeah I... I just want to fly, dad. I would love to be able to go on one of these huge pl...”

“You have wings for that, boy! Attached to your paws-damned arms!” His snout rippled to a snarl as he abruptly cut-off his pup, eyes glaring like unfeeling snooker balls – seven-balls that never found the pocket. They just sat in his skull...sozzled, angry and totally tactless.

There was a pause - heartbreaking and awkward. Chester could hear his father’s heartbeat and smell his scent, and he sure as shoot had heard his disappointment; and he was so upset, he got up from the table and flew up to his room, leaving his parents in silence pierced by the scrape of fork on plate and the rush of cars on the street outside.

Teri didn’t react, just getting up and taking her plate to the draining board, her ears sad and her snout numb. Her husband was clearly not himself.

“I think you should take him to the airport, Terry.” She murmured firmly, not bothering to turn to face him as she stood washing the dishes at the sink.

“What? Why?”

“Well, Chester’s said that ‘e’d love to go and spend a day watchin’ the planes take-off. That’s all ‘e’s asked for.”

“You still haven’t answered my question, woman. *Why* would he want to do that? Is ‘e tryin’ to make me feel more paws-damned guilty or somethin’?!”

“Oh, come on, Terry! It’s his birthday coming up for paws’ sake!” It was then that she turned cos’ she couldn’t stand his thick-tailedness any longer, wandering back to the table and leaning over to stare him in the muzzle, “Sunday? Remember? Or did you forget that too when you got smashed outta’ ya’ wings?! You know, the lad’s gonna’ be fifteen and...”

She sighed, her clawed paws about her coffee mug.

“Well, he needs a role model.”

“*I’m* his role model!”

“Are you? Are you really? Sat here, drunk and jobless all day, making him cry when all he does is ask you a simple question?”

When he couldn't answer, his ears pinning in reverence, she huffed in frustration.

“I'm going to bed.”

“Oh for... come on, darlin', I'm sorry I...”

“You're hangin' from the loungeroom ceiling tonight, Terry. Don't even dare to fly up to the bedroom.”

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Per his mate's ultimatum, Terry accompanied his young pup to the airport that weekend. They caught the seven-a.m. tube train to Heathrow, sitting together silently and interrupted only by the end of the short journey.

As Chester sat there reading his magazine, camera about his shoulder, Terry just didn't know what to do with his paws or where to look. It felt awkward, uncomfortable, and – quite frankly – pointless. He held no allusions to what he'd see or smell today; but he wanted to try, no matter if his mate had issued him that 'order' earlier that morning or not... cos' she *had*, oh boy had she?!

“So, uh... what you hopin' to see today?” Terry tried to make the best of the situation, turning to his son with a vague smile.

“You don't care.”

“No really, I...” He sighed and slumped his shoulders, “Please, Chester. Please give me a chance... please?”

His son didn't respond, just concentrating on his notebook and reading material.

Once there, they spent an hour or two in the viewing-area inside the airport, looking out over the two massive runways as cargo and commercial flights came and went. At about ten they decided it was time for a coffee break. The café owner had seen Chester so often – the young bat would order a small orange juice and a blueberry muffin with his one-pound coin – that he was ready with some spotters' advice as soon as he brought their snacks over. Terry went with the black coffee. Needed to dispel that beer-y aftertaste.

“Say, youngster... I hear there's a really cool DC-ten cargo plane due in in like thirty minutes. You should be able to get a good view of it outside.”

“Ooo thanks, Jon.”

All Terry could do was watch, knowing that this stranger, this mere café owner, seemed to know his own pup better than him. To distract himself from the heartbreaking realization of all the things in his son’s life that he’d been missing out on, Terry caught sight of a ‘help wanted’ sign; and now, with his teenage pup at his side and a clear mind, ears and pelt for the first time in a long time, he had a sudden burst of confidence... *sober* confidence at that. He excused himself and returned to the table a minute later.

“What’s that?” Chester murmured, finishing off his muffin with glee.

“Oh uh... it’s a job application.”

He couldn’t remember ever being so proud of his father. His scent swelled with sweet relief.

They retired from their comfy table about twenty minutes later and took to the grassy hill near the runway. They were lucky it wasn’t raining. The sun was warm and stuffy, the smells of kerosene, cold concrete and rubber wafting into keen nostrils. There were other cubs and their fathers on the hill too. Some of the other spotters had radios to hone in on the communications – but Chester just needed his ears. The incoming cargo plane was the first to catch the youngsters’ attentions – a bespectacled pilot at the controls, an Alsatian with a keen eyesight on the runway as he touched-down perfectly, bringing the four-hundred-thousand pounds of plane to a halt.

Next was the holiday flight Chester’d longed to see... a brand-new jumbo, fresh from the U.S of A.

“He’s going out to Florida.” Chester murmured, eyes and ears trained on the huge four engine jet rolling towards them, its red and orange livery gleaming in the afternoon sun, “Ooo, I haven’t seen this one before.”

It was then that the young bat started to eagerly write down the tail number. Once properly recorded, he looked up and waved to the pilots.

“That’s... that’s a flying-fox.” Terry was amazed, squinting his keen eyesight into the cockpit, noticing that distinct orange ruff and triangular ears, the latter cuddled into headphones.

“Yep. There are loads of bats who are captains and stewards and stewardesses, dad.”

Mind... blown! Terry’s whole perception was instantly changed. In his mix of guilt and ignorance, he just didn’t have the time to respond... cos’ his pup was ear-to-the-ground and listening-in.

Batania zero-niner-one, clear for take-off, runway two-seven-right.

Roger that, Batania zero-niner-one, runway two-seven-right, clear for take-off.

“Oh cool, here we go!” Chest’ was eager to watch every second of the take-off.

The engines started to spool, and Chester was bouncing as he saw the crew in the cockpit, their ears and tails at the ready before their images became silhouettes chasing along the runway at a hundred miles an hour.

“Faaaarrrr out!” He yelled with glee as he saw the huge jet dash away before it climbed-out into the air.

Such an experience; and his father couldn’t help but finally crack a smile.

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It was about three o’clock in the afternoon when they decided to head back. Chester had had a very productive day, filling his little notebook with lots more new tail numbers and having taken plenty of photos too. His mum would have to go into town to get not one, not two... but three reels developed.

“You know what?” Terry was sat alongside his pup in a relatively quiet tube carriage, “I really enjoyed being here with you today.”

Chester smiled.

“Thank you.” He murmured shyly.

“For what, mate?”

“My birthday present. I... I know it wasn’t exactly what you wanted to do but...”

“Oh hey, this is all about you, sunshine. Just ignore this batty ol’ bat! I’m... I’m sorry I said the stuff I did.”

Terry had clutched the café job application in his clawed paw, looking down at it with a mix of happiness and hope.

“So...” He started, slinking a paw about Chester’s shoulders, “...you think *you* might want to work there one day? Heathrow, I mean.”

“Nah.”

“Oh... why not?”

“Cos’ I wanna’ fly.”

Terry smiled and ruffled his son’s headfur.

“That’s my boy!”
