

# Windhover

A Short Story  
by  
Jim Michie

## Introduction to the Electronic Version

The original version of this short story is in Microsoft Publisher, which many people do not have on their computer. I have therefore modified the format slightly to suit the more universally acceptable Portable Document Format. Only the page breaks are affected. As you can see from the bottom of this page, the short story is protected by copyright, but feel free to disseminate this story in its printed or electronic form to others as long as it is given freely, which was the spirit in which it was written.

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**Door Into Summer Press**

The steady roar of the wind changed its pitch just enough to be audible as Brian pulled smoothly on the right trim grip and slid his hip harness a few centimeters to the left of center. He moved slowly through the turn, trying at all times to minimize his slip. Altitude was time, and he had just about run out of both.

After more than seventy-four hours Brian Ternak was tired, but he wouldn't be able to sleep with the drugs in his bloodstream even if he set the glider down. He was hungry, but his stomach rebelled every time he tried to drink the concentrate. He was happy, but you couldn't tell it.

And he had every reason to be happy. He had already broken the endurance record for Confederation Cup gliding on Farnholme III, which was set at sixty-five hours, thirty-six minutes, and fourteen point seven five seconds more than six years ago by Jerome Barnaby. Before long now, he would also set a new distance record, but he was still about five hundred kilometers from the end. He didn't come all this way with all this effort just to extend the endurance and distance records. He came to Farnholme III to be the first to make it all the way down the continental chain, and he didn't come alone.

Farnholme III was one of the many Earth-type planets that had been discovered more than sixty years ago out on the galactic rim. It was geologically in its early years, and life so far had restricted itself to Farnholme III's oceans, which meant it was distributed over eighty percent of the globe.

While Farnholme III was pimpled with millions of small, mostly volcanic islands, it had only one continental-size landmass. It was shaped like a long ellipse running north and south with its western side being flattened to a trace of an arc. The first exploration team had named it Turtle, because from orbit it looked like a giant turtle floating on the essentially ocean world. A mountain range ran down the western side of the continent for most of its 4,000 kilometers, with peaks that sometimes rose as high as 7,500 meters right out of the sea. It was named Razorback in obvious deference to the land it sat upon. To the east, the continent sloped gradually up from sea level to over 2,000 meters at mid-continent and to the eastern base of the mountains at 3,500 meters.

The speakers in Brian's helmet startled him. The drugs had him strung out tighter than the ruby filament shrouds holding Windhover together. The clarity of the voice in his ears made it seem like Jack Weatherby was riding right alongside him. "Brian, we have a weathersat update on the region between us."

"Yeah, Jack. What've you got?"

"Looks like the afternoon storm is definitely building faster and at greater altitude than normal. The storm appears to be following cyclonic formation patterns. The weathersat AI's preliminary projection indicates it will be bad and will be ashore before you get here. The storms on this waterball have been unpredictable the whole time we've been here. The AI says a 95 percent probability projection will be available in about an hour. How's everything else?"

Brian smiled to himself but let it leak out in the tone of his voice. "Just like last time. I'm too low and I'm too slow, but I'm still gonna go. More to the point, what's Lindstrom doing?"

"He's still steady about thirty clicks behind you, with maybe a hundred meters more of altitude. Nothing significant. He hasn't made up a kilometer in the last twenty-four hours. I think he's getting tired."

Brian smiled again. If Bjorn Lindstrom isn't tired, he isn't human, which would be all right, since it would eliminate him from the record book. Of course, Brian knew only too well that Lindstrom was human, maybe a little more than human. At least it seemed that way every time they were head-to-head on the gliding circuit. However, the trick was not to think about the competition to the point where you lost your concentration on the flying, which was easy to set up as a Golden Rule, but a bitch to pull off if you were a

real competitor. And if you weren't that big a competitor, the Rule wouldn't apply to you. Paradox. Life. Gliding.

He could feel the weight of his body increasing as he moved into a welcome updraft. Slowly, he released the pressure on the right trim grip and squeezed gently on the left grip to level the glider, his hips moving automatically back to center. This was the skill of endurance gliding. Putting your senses on automatic and feeling your way into the thermals, sensing the slightest change in the G-forces that signaled the thermal's edge, and making the quick but smooth control changes that would extract the most altitude gain before the thermal died.

Confederation Cup glider pilots were as close as man could get to being birds. Lying face down, arms outstretched, Brian was really experiencing the flying sensations of childhood dreams. The glider's design as well as the pilot's position reinforced these sensations. The entire tensegrity structure was designed to flex its control and lift surfaces for maneuvering, the titanium tubing and ruby wire taking compression and tension stresses like bones and sinews, polyceram film flexing and stretching like skin and feathers.

The offshore breeze seemed to be falling off, probably an effect of the approaching storm. At his present low altitude and if he were trying to go east of the storm, he would have to gauge an inland course through the mountain passes where there was little margin for error. He had to hold any commitment to a high desert route as long as possible with Lindstrom having a hundred-meter altitude advantage. Lindstrom would convert that altitude advantage to time and distance, if given a chance. Brian knew it, Lindstrom knew it, and Jack knew it too. However, Jack, being the best ground crew chief available anywhere, would never say it while Brian was in the air.

There he went again on Lindstrom. Concentrate. Brian consciously brought his mind back to the neutral state that made him part of the control system. He was flying.

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"Brian, we have that 95 percent projection from the weathersat AI."

"Okay, Jack. Let's hear the good news."

"It's coming in fast Brian, moving just about due east at thirty-five knots; definitely cyclonic with winds near the center just over eighty KPH. She's about a hundred and thirty clicks in diameter and growing slowly. Our plot shows you're going to hit her as head on as if you had planned it that way. The good weather you've got now should begin to disintegrate in about twenty minutes. Looks like you should put her down, Brian. There's a good pass to the high desert about twenty clicks ahead. We can probably make it there before you do."

"Slow down, Jack. I'm not ready to scrub yet. Seems to me I've still got a few options. I could fly through it, maybe even fly over the worst of it. I could run for the high desert and catch enough thermals to fly down the east side of the chain. As a last resort, I could turn around and head north again until the storm has passed or started its usual track south and then follow it."

"None of those options sound reasonable to me, Brian. It's questionable you could find enough thermals over the desert to even stay aloft this time of day, and if you could, you'd spend so much time finding them you wouldn't make any headway. You can't fly over it because it's already above your effective ceiling. And if you do circles until the storm bangs into the Razorback and spins south, the storm's southern motion will be too slow for you to make the end in time. You're already strung out, Brian. You can't spare a day for this storm to beat itself out against the mountains. That only leaves flying through it, and that's dumb because it's too big and too strong. You've already got both records, and you'll add to 'em getting over to the pickup point. It's been a great run, Brian. Put her down."

"Jack, I know we went to great pains not to let Lindstrom's decision to make this into a head-to-head competition change any of our game plan, but we can't just ignore him. He's real, and he's on my ass. Any records I set could last less than an hour, and besides, those records aren't why we came here. What's Lindstrom going to do, Jack? That's what I need to know."

"Well, you know I trained Surtees as a ground hog, and I'd say he's delivering the same message to Lindstrom that I'm giving to you. Put it down." Of course he wouldn't say it to Brian, but he would also bet that Surtees was having at least as much trouble with Lindstrom.

"How long have I got before I'm committed, Jack?"

"Riding the storm edge, I'd guess you're about 15 to 20 minutes from the pass. Once you're into the storm, it won't be possible to change your mind and head for the pass, since the counter-clockwise storm motion will give you nothing but headwinds. So I'd say you have about thirty minutes max to commit."

"Okay, Jack. I'll talk to you again sometime in the next thirty minutes."

Brian Ternak had spent a good part of the last two years preparing for this attempt on Farnholme III. Nobody had ever done it. Sure, it was heady to have broken the endurance and distance records, but holding a record had a way of being transitory. Brian had displaced quite a few of the past's great gliders from the record book, and he had already been displaced seven times himself, by Lindstrom mostly. In the world of statistical records, your name was in the book only as long as your record was the "best", but in conquering a physical barrier it was "first" that always remained in the book. Second and third were never mentioned.

More than having his name in the record book, Brian wanted to do what he had set out to do, nothing less. He had planned the flight from start to finish in infinite detail, and up to now, he was right on plan. He had, of course, planned on storms. No one went to Farnholme III without planning on storms. He had run thirty-seven storm contingency alternatives in the flight plan program, and the lowest probability of success had been ninety-six percent. Of course the program assumed he would make all the necessary real time decisions on Farnholme III correctly, ninety percent of the time. It also assumed that none of the remaining ten percent would be catastrophically wrong.

And after all the planning, had come Lindstrom. Lindstrom was the rising Confederation Cup star. Ternak was still the best, but already declining in the light of Lindstrom's rising sun. Lindstrom, brawny and brash. Ternak, wiry and wily. Or so the sports media kept telling everyone.

Lindstrom just couldn't leave it alone. All of the Confederation Cup gliders knew about Ternak's assault on the Razorback. After all, he had spent years in project planning, designing and building Windhover, training himself and the ground hogs, and setting up the financing and logistics. It was always a lot tougher to find financing for the one-man assaults, since the federation did not allow real time media coverage for anything other than sanctioned competitions. They reasoned it was too much to ask of the pilot. The knowledge that he was being watched by millions of people could break his concentration or make him push himself too far. Besides, lots of the one-man record attempts ended in no record at all, which made them a poor investment.

Lindstrom, on the other hand, was heir to one of earth's greatest energy cartel fortunes. So big even he couldn't spend it all. With money no object, Lindstrom started his plans only six months ago. He bought one of the junior engineers in the firm Brian had engaged to produce Windhover's plans, hired a staff five times the size of Brian's, and finished all of his preparations before Brian. He even had time to rest for a week on the sunny shores of Haldane on the way to Farnholme III. Of course, all that meant was that he was wealthier than Ternak. No Federation Cup glider pilot was a working man;

he would never be able to break into the sport. It was definitely for the rich and the super rich.

Brian was roused from his reverie or fatigue fugue, whichever it was, by the bumpiness of the air. The storm clouds were closing in fast. The turbulence seemed to be concentrating its forces in Brian's insides, which had been getting more and more unsettled in the last hour, even without the runaway-horse ride.

Brian figured his body was right on its drugged, ragged edge. He shifted his weight awkwardly in an effort to relieve the gas pains roiling through his guts without changing the glider's trim. The hip harness chafed his skin through the thermosuit as he lifted his pelvis off the padded slide. If the shifting had any effect on the glider's trim, it was lost in the turbulence of the looming storm.

He took a few mouthfuls of the sweet, drug-laced liquid being continually proffered by the flex-tube two centimeters from his mouth. His stomach clenched and almost gave it back. Brian swallowed as fast as he could. The last thing he needed was to coat the inside of his helmet with whatever a stomach contains after three days of liquid diet. He swallowed, choked, and coughed, but he held it down.

"Brian, are you okay? We're getting a lot of noise out of the throat mike."

"Just having a little trouble keeping lunch where it belongs. I've got it under control. Any more on the weather and Lindstrom?"

"Yeah, I was just getting ready to raise you. It doesn't sound good. She's still intensifying, and the satellite AI is predicting she'll spawn a rim full of twisters before she hits the mountains. Keep your eyes open for funnels that are forming and we'll keep you updated through the heads-up."

"And Lindstrom?"

"He's still there Brian. Same relative position. Forget him. Look for the funnels."

"I will for about another five minutes. After that, I guess I'll be mostly on the instruments and the computer generated displays. I want to know the instant Lindstrom deviates from his projected course."

"You've only got ten minutes to turn for the canyon. The map is up on the display if you fade it in. Bring her home, Brian. To Hell with Lindstrom."

"I'll take all of my ten minutes, thank you."

Damn it! How many times had he been here before? It was always the same, and he knew all the questions. He knew all the psychological pitfalls, and it never made the answers any easier. Was he about to cross the line from acceptable risk to foolhardy? He could easily build a chain of logic that would convince a rational man that the only prudent thing to do was to stop now, before becoming foolhardy.

He had gone through that exercise many times before, on many different planets, with the same result. After convincing himself he should stop, he would then ask himself whether or not the logic was really rational or was it rationalization? Was it his conscious mind trying to submerge his fears, or had he made an intellectual leap? He could never decide.

Was fear going to stop him just short of an attainable goal? Was ego going to drive him to attempt the impossible? It had come down to this self-doubt many times now, and Brian knew this was the real fuel of his drive for gliding, but in the end, all this seeming self-awareness amounted to nothing. All the tough decisions he had made gliding on dozens of Federation planets had been made the same way. Whether he had a few seconds or a few hours to consider the situation, the decision always came as a surprise, an electrical signal to which he responded like a servomotor with no thought of the source.

It was always tough making go/no-go decisions, and this time he had Lindstrom breathing down his neck, not just here on Farnholme III, but on the circuit throughout the

Sector. One, two: Ternak and Lindstrom. And lately, too many Lindstrom and Ternaks to suit Brian. God, there must be some way to maintain the edge that being this far ahead, this far down the Razorback should give him. Instead, it looked like the storm was going to let Lindstrom catch up. Could Lindstrom maintain his altitude advantage and ultimately convert it to distance? Did Lindstrom have the physical reserves to wait out the storm? He had to think.

Lindstrom was undoubtedly planning to slow up and let the storm hit the mountains in front of him. That's what Brian would do. So, he had to build on that, make Lindstrom think he was giving up by heading for the desert at the last minute. Once it looked to Lindstrom that Ternak had given up, he might play it safer than he would with Ternak still in the race and hang back even further from the storm edge, waiting for the storm to bounce south.

He would make the fake to the desert at the last second, right in the edge of the storm, so it would look like a last minute desperation dash. Once in the storm rim, he would bounce in and out gaining altitude on the rim thermals while it looked like he was trying hard, but not too successfully, to get to the desert. Then with his altitude problem fixed, he would flip her over a hundred and eighty degrees and run with the winds in the storm rim, out over the water and south. All it would take was a successful fake and perfect flying.

The storm clouds were close now. Their outer edges were being drawn down, curled under, and sucked up again all along the bottom edge of the cloud mass visible to Brian in his display. The bumpiness of a few minutes before had built in intensity to more of a slamming as the glider cut through alternating columns of updrafts and downdrafts. His intestinal turmoil grew proportionately.

Brian continued to roll the decision around in his mind, really pack it in to the desert, or go for the fake. His mind seemed caught in a feedback of glider and digestive track tempo, the whole loop heterodyning, threatening to overwhelm him in a spasm of delirium. He forced himself to concentrate on the holographic display being painted on his retinas by the two tiny lasers in the front of his helmet. He let the endless patterns of the boiling clouds pull the knots loose in his brain. Even the fast moving storm clouds seemed languid in their haste, and he let his mind flow with them and through them as Windhover rolled around them or slashed through them.

He was back in control now, but still on the horns of his dilemma. The storm seemed to be on him sooner than he had expected, and he needed to make his decision now, before he was too far into the storm's edge. That way he could be more selective in using the storm drafts, whether it was to coast for a loss or a stalemate or to run for a win.

Windhover was a great bird, right on the leading edge of technology. He had participated as an integral member of the design team right from the beginning, as he did with all his gliders. Could she take the pounding of a drive around the storm's edge? Brian wasn't sure, but he thought she probably could. Could he take the storm with his body and mind already strung out to their limits? He would like to think he could rise to the occasion, but he wasn't sure.

Brian Ternak played to win, not to lose or even to draw. This time the Good Lady had raised the pot to the limit, and it made winning irrationally desirable, maybe even blindingly desirable. He could call or he could fold. It was too late to change the stakes.

"You still there, Jack?"

"Still here, Brian. We won't break and run for the desert until you're out of the storm's edge."

"Where is he now?"

"Relative to you, he's unchanged."

"Feed me a diagram showing our positions as an overlay on the storm."

"Hold one coming up now."

The laser display showed a diagram on top of the infrared storm picture coming from the weathersat. He could see Lindstrom's position well back behind the storm. He obviously was allowing enough room for the squeeze north when the storm slammed into the Razorback. Brian snapped a voice command to the display's computer interface, "kill the diagram overlay. Give me normal vision with a one-third overlay IR. Flashing alert for rotating motions in the forward ninety degree quadrant."

His display changed as he was giving the commands. He now had the normal three dimensional display showing what he would be seeing if Windhover had a forward view screen. On top of that, he had a one-third-brightness overlay of a forward-looking infrared image that would help him spot the thermals inside the storm. If there were any circular motions that could be forming funnels in front of him, the display background in those areas would flash red.

Windhover moved through the first tracery of storm clouds like a firefly, its bright orange outline flashing on and off against the deep gray body of the storm. The flickering images of clouds drove their way up Brian's optic nerves adding a new harmonic to the decision/indecision cycling of his mind. Hypnotically, almost epileptically triggering, Windhover and Brian Ternak together blinked in and out of reality while time seemed to freeze, trapping them both in a spiraling surreality. Abruptly, finally, there was only the non-reality of unrelieved gray.

Brian pulled hard on the left trim grip, bringing the trailing edge and the wing flex into play while his right foot pulled up against the toe strap, tightening the ruby wire and flexing the trailing edge of the inverted V rudder. He struggled to breathe against the continuing acceleration of the updraft pulling Windhover toward the top of the storm. At last the glider began to respond and slide slowly to the right, her nose coming down and beginning to regain forward speed. Brian felt for the edge of the updraft where he could slide in and out when he needed to in his fight to gain altitude and lift. Losing wind speed meant losing control, and one moment of lost control in a storm like this one and he would probably not be able to regain it.

As the right wing tip neared the edge of the updraft, Brian could feel the glider slipping that way, as if the right wing had punctured a vacuum that was trying to suck it in. Brian countered with the right grip and Windhover teetered on the edge of the draft, rising fast without getting sucked in.

He was in control, not just of the glider, but of himself as well. The cramps and gas were gone, and the strange mixture of drug hype and fatigue sluggishness had lifted from his nervous system. He was aware of his senses extending through the controls, out along the ruby wires, through the structure, and into the surrounding storm. He was again an integral part of Windhover. He was flying.

"Brian, you're moving too deeply into the storm. You need to come east about eighty degrees to stay on the storm rim."

"I'm just trying to skirt the edge and gain enough altitude to make it safely through the pass."

"Thank God you've come to your senses. The satellite indicates this is a bad one. We'll pack up and start moving as soon as you're through the pass. That ought to put us at touchdown about the same time as you."

"Has Lindstrom shown any signs he'll head for the desert yet?"

"No, but he's about halfway through a big circle. Looks like he's going to delay as long as he can."

"Come on Jack, you know he's not just waiting to set down, he's waiting to make a run for it, if he can push his body far enough."

There was only silence from the ground link.

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Ten minutes had gone by while the ground crew watched the satellite relay of the storm's and Windhover's progress. Right after Brian had entered the rim, the storm's eastern edge had pushed into the mountains, and the body of the storm had begun to drift southward. Windhover had made very slow progress toward the pass.

Thirty minutes after Brian had entered the storm edge, Windhover had only made about three kilometers toward the east, but had drifted about five kilometers southward with the storm. Brian had only one call from the ground crew that alerted him to a funnel cloud about half a kilometer southeast that was already flashing on the edge of his display. Jack had been around long enough to know when to be quiet.

All of Brian was stretched out into the surrounding clouds. Brian/Windhover felt strong.

"Brian, you've got two swirls ahead of you about one kilometer away. You'll need to come east about ten degrees to miss 'em. You'll have to re-correct to get back on course for the desert pass."

"Changing course now. Where's Lindstrom?"

"He's still circling."

"Is he moving clockwise or counter-clockwise?"

"Clockwise, why? Forget him, Brian. Bring it in now. You have more than enough altitude for the pass."

"Where is he on the circle, Jack."

"At the top Brian, almost due north. Don't do it Brian."

"Of course I'm going to do it. Lindstrom was fooled, obviously, but I didn't really hope to fool you. I just made the right noises on the com in case Lindstrom was not following the rules and had a listener and relay station somewhere. I won't have him in a better position, so here goes."

Nothing like something simple for being devious—the old sling shot. Even the ocean sailors use it. Let the spin and drift of the storm work for you. Tough on the crew sometimes, but effective if you don't lose the ship.

Brian shifted the control pressures gently, feeling for a smooth exit off the draft's edge, which would bring him around further west. He could feel his right wing moving into a downdraft. He trimmed for it and continued the turn.

He was heading a little north now, but mostly he was riding the spin of the storm west, heading for the coast and the ocean, where the western edge of the storm still resided. He had a couple more hours to go before the storm's track and spin combined to bring him to his goal—the end of the Razorback. It was the long way around, but riding the storm edge was fast enough to make up for the extra distance.

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Brian had been skirting the storm's edge for at least a century, and the fatigue was coming back. He felt himself snap in and out of wakefulness. The left wing was a feeler for his position on the edge of the updraft he had been riding for the last ten minutes, and when his attention drifted, the wing bit more deeply into the draft, tilting him up on his side. He had flown out of the friendly updraft and into the edge of a downdraft. His fatigue-clouded mind hadn't even seen it coming on the IR display overlay.

Brian squeezed the trim grips and shifted his toe positions for the rudder. There was not much response by Windhover, which continued to roll even more onto her side. He corrected more until the controls were all hard over.

Up on his side, controls against the stops, he lost it. Windhover slipped completely into the downdraft like she had been struck by a hammer. The retaining web bit into Brian's back as Windhover accelerated toward the speed of the downdraft. Even over the scream of the storm, Brian could hear the ruby wires straining, their keening pitch climbing higher and higher. He could feel the wings flexing his arms. Worst of all, the controls were slackening, almost dead under his hands and feet. He had to have forward speed, get some air traveling over the control surfaces, and he had to do it now, before he lost all control and sloughed into a flat spin.

Brian strained against the controls, driving his body weight as far forward as he could. Slowly, ever so slowly, Windhover began to dip her nose. As the air drove over his wing and rudder surfaces, the controls began to tighten up. He was flying again. With the surfeit of adrenaline in his bloodstream, he seemed to fuse with Windhover. He relaxed his taut muscles a little and could feel himself pulling smoothly out of the dive—much too smoothly. He could feel the wind begin to pick up, folding smoothly over the sides of his face, fluttering the ends of his hair flatly against the smooth polyceram sides of his fuselage. He soared.

In his reverie, he had looked right through the myriad readouts of the display. In particular, he had failed to watch the windspeed indicator. With the speed gained in the dive, Windhover responded much more quickly than he had anticipated, leveling out and cutting cleanly and quickly through the wall of the downdraft, into the shear created by an adjacent updraft.

The wire fitting weld in the titanium tube that served as the main compression member of the right wing was almost perfect. Almost. There was a small bubble that had somehow escaped the multiple inspections. When the fitting failed, the ruby tension wires went suddenly slack. The shock on the connecting compression tube fittings was too much. They failed next. The four-centimeter tube in his right wing snapped all the way through the polyceram—a compound fracture open to the streaming air. As his right wing flapped helplessly at right and greater angles, even back against the cabin bubble, his left wing was driving him into an accelerating twist. Two revolutions and the torque was too much for the starboard rudder/fuselage connector forging. Brian felt its grating failure as if his ankle had gone from a chuckhole in a sprint.

To Brian, the whole sequence was almost instantaneous. Windhover seemed to disintegrate around him in one convulsive shudder, but he didn't feel panic as he tumbled groundward—he was roaring mad. It was a stupid sequence of judgment errors, even if they were brought on by the fatigue. They were little errors that piggybacked into a catastrophe. Damn it, even at this point he couldn't say cleanly that he had screwed up. No single action or inaction on his part could justify the extreme he was experiencing. He had made a clever move, and Lindstrom had been fooled. God, it wasn't fair.

From below the red haze of anger surging through his mind was the decision he thought he had made, or had it made him? Had he made an ego driven, foolhardy decision, or was he caught on the wrong side of the odds?

It was ignominious. He had never had to do it in all his years of Federation Cup gliding. He had gloated about it over many a drink at glider competitions, but while he looked danger in the teeth every time he climbed into the glider, he certainly had no death wish. He unclenched his right hand from the dead control grip, pulled his arm down the extension tube to his chest, thumbed the safety off, twisted the red knob to the "armed" position, and jammed it with the palm of his hand.

Brian felt the explosive bolts go on the sixteen points of structural contact between the life support capsule and what was left of the glider's frame. A three second delay and the small drogue chute jerked him out of his tumbling free fall, steadying the

capsule with his feet down, about thirty-five degrees from the horizontal. Five more seconds while the debris that was Windhover fell away from the capsule, accelerating toward Farnholme III. A second of belly flutter that signals free fall as the drogue detached itself, then the deceleration as the parawing both opened and inflated itself from the high-pressure helium bottle.

Brian reached up and out to the sides of the capsule for the unfamiliar handgrips that controlled the sprawling parawing. Without manually spoiling the huge parawing's lift, Brian's rate of descent would not exceed five meters per second in calm air—a safety feature in case he were to lose consciousness on the way down. In fact, had he lost consciousness during Windhover's disintegration, or for any other reason, his biosensor would have handled the entire abort sequence automatically. But the oblivion of unconsciousness was denied him. He had the long ride down to contemplate the details of his stupidity.

"Brian, we got the abort signal. What's happening? Are you all right?"

"Hold it down, Jack. I obviously lost Windhover, although I'm not sure why. The parawing is fully deployed, and I've got everything under control. That is, everything except my stomach and Lindstrom. This storm is beating me to death, and visions of a smiling Swede are haunting me already." As Brian was talking, the buffeting of the capsule had increased so much that he was being slammed back and forth on his hip slide from one restraint to the other.

And then he was in an updraft even stronger than the previous ones. He could feel the acceleration, unrelenting, five, twenty, thirty seconds. He could hear the pitch of the wind through the ruby wire shrouds climbing higher and higher as they strained to pull the capsule aloft with the parawing. Finally, he topped out. Snatches of blue sky flickered above and around him momentarily until he had descended again into the main body of the storm.

He was flying again! By God, he was flying! "Jack, what's my position relative to abort? Which way am I drifting?"

"Hold on Brian, I'm checking. Got it. You're about half a kilometer south of the abort. You seem to be moving on the rim of the storm with the counter-clockwise winds."

"Where's Lindstrom?"

"Still moving out over the ocean, he's about fifty clicks around the storm's rim from your position.

"What's the storm itself doing?"

"It's drifting south...about five KPH and increasing."

"That's what I thought, the normal storm pattern. Give me a fix every ten minutes, and let me know the instant you detect anything different in Lindstrom's course. Otherwise, keep it quiet so I can concentrate on steering this lumbering beast into the maximum number of thermals. I'm not through yet!"

Brian pulled and hauled on the shroud grips until he thought his wrist, elbow, and shoulder sockets were filled with white hot sand. But he was still aloft, still finding updrafts along the outer rim of the storm, and he was almost home. In fact, he was beginning to get the taste of victory, and it was especially sweet this time. After all, the Federation rules were explicit. Distance and time were measured from the point of takeoff rocket ignition to the point of touchdown, as long as you used regulation gear in between, and he had. In fact, there was already clear precedence for measuring distance from the point of emergency capsule landing location.

"Okay Brian, you can start spoiling her down now. You've passed the mark. Even at that, you'll be seven or eight clicks southeast of us, so it will take us a while to get to you. The storm will sweep over you a few minutes after you set down, so detach

the parawing as soon as you touch—and stay buttoned up. Lindstrom is only six clicks behind you. I didn't tell you because it wouldn't have helped, and you had enough to think about. When he or his crew figured out what was happening, he dove into the storm like a wild man. He's a hell of a good pilot Brian."

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The capsule came down lightly, but it bumped and banged for about fifty meters before Brian could hit the shroud release. He was on his back, smiling, quiet, still full of adrenaline, but somehow relaxed. He reached up and opened the hatch, settled back, smiled again, and blinked patiently against the rain that was just starting to fall.

What seemed like only a few minutes later, Lindstrom, down on the deck, with a very prim wiggle of the wings, flashed overhead. Brian could hear the glider as it slid to a stop. Well, there went the time and distance records for Farnholme III, but Brian had what he wanted most. First is first, and second doesn't even make the record books.