

METAWARS

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METAWARS

BATTLE OF THE IMMORTAL

J E F F N O R T O N



ORCHARD

For Jack and Patrick – who soared to High Flight

'High Flight'

The poem 'High Flight' was written by John Gillespie Magee Jr., an American poet and aviator who joined the Royal Canadian Air Force in World War II to fly in European combat before the United States had entered the war. He died in 1941 in a midair collision over Lincolnshire.

It is the official poem of both the Royal Air Force and the Canadian Royal Air Force.

Jason Delacroix used to recite it to his young son, Jonah.

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Jonah leaned on the bow as the boat hurtled through Times Square.

Sam revved the outboard electrical engine of the black, Kevlar-clad dinghy, pointing them across the flooded streets of Manhattan towards Hell's Kitchen. Jonah squinted as the late-afternoon sun tried to blind him. His eyes closed for only a moment, he visualised finally getting his dad back. After two months of incarceration, Jonah was going to bust his father out of his prison.

The flashing neon signs of Times Square took no notice of the floodwater below, and Jonah almost laughed at the strangeness of billboards boasting of luxury goods and exotic metacations while the streets below drowned under a metre of water.

But he didn't.

He knew that when the Guardians flooded Manhattan, the water was trapped inside the city by the same defensive dykes the island nation used to keep out the rising sea levels. Not only would the city face irreparable damage, but he was betraying Manhattan's young president, Lori Weisberg, as well.

He was betraying a friend.

‘Jason had better be ready!’ shouted Sam, knocking whatever guilt Jonah was wrestling with out of his head and focusing him back on the jailbreak, and his father.

Technically, Jonah’s dad was dead. But since Jason had copied his avatar before his death, and Jonah had Uploaded it to the Metasphere, Jonah’s father had been able to usurp the mind of Manhattan resident, and celebrity games designer, Lucky Luke Wexler, and had been reborn in his real-world body. But Jason was under house arrest for body theft, and for the past two months, while the Guardians extracted the Metasphere servers of the Western Corner from the old subway tunnels beneath the city, Jonah had been allowed limited visitation rights with his father.

‘He will be ready!’ called Jonah, hoping it was true. ‘It’s not safe for him here any more.’

The Uploaded, and therefore Jonah’s dad, were under threat from the living. People were angry and afraid, scared to go online for fear of being usurped and outraged with the dead who had stolen the bodies of the living. Jason’s prison had protected him from the lynch mobs but it was just a matter of time before the Manhattan residents would force the Co-op Board that ran the island republic to make an example of Jason, attempting an extraction which, if done improperly, could kill both the Uploaded usurper and the host body. So while the Guardians removed the

servers of the Western Corner from their secret location, Jonah, Sam and her father, Axel, hatched a daring plot to break Jason out of his building, and all of them out of Manhattan, for good.

Sam rounded the corner onto 11th Avenue, spun the dinghy to face south, her shoulder-length red hair whipping in the wind, and held her position outside the eight-storey brick building.

‘Here we go,’ said Jonah, fastening a bright orange life vest around his chest and waist. Sam inspected the buckles and pulled them tight.

‘Ow,’ said Jonah. ‘I need to breathe.’

‘There’s one more buckle,’ she said, nodding at the strap dangling between Jonah’s legs. ‘But I’ll let you do that one.’

Jonah reached down and grabbed the safety strap through his legs, and clipped it up into the triple buckle at his waist.

‘Now you won’t slip out when it inflates,’ Sam said, tossing Jonah an extra life vest as he hoisted himself onto the black iron fire escape.

Jonah clambered up the steep, ladder-like steps. As he rose, he caught a glimpse of 11th Avenue, flooded all the way to downtown. It reminded Jonah of Venice, a city he’d learned about in history class, which had long ago collapsed and succumbed to the sea. When Jonah reached the top floor he crouched down at Jason’s window and tapped six times: three

quick taps, then two, then just one.

The window opened and the head of Luke Wexler, the world's top video-game designer, leaned out with a smile. But behind the smile, Jonah saw his father.

'Nice of you to drop in, son,' Jason said in Luke's Texan drawl.

'We're *both* going to do the dropping,' said Jonah, handing his father the life vest. Jason stepped out onto the fire escape and buckled up the vest like a pro.

Suddenly, the glass in the window exploded and Jason threw Jonah's head down so hard he tasted the iron grating. He heard the rapid roll of machine-gunfire as he was showered by shards of glass.

'Get down!' called Jason.

Jonah slipped down the fire escape to the seventh floor and Jason followed. The black railing lit up like a sparkler as bullets ricocheted off the iron.

'Come on, Dad!' yelled Jonah, rounding the corner and throwing himself down the next flight of stairs, landing with a painful thump against the railing. Jason followed quickly, sliding down elegantly. The bricks beside Jonah's head burst into red dust. *That was too close*, thought Jonah. It was time to jump.

He motioned to his father to jump into the water below.

As Jonah climbed onto the outer railing, his mind flashed back to one terrible moment, over four months ago, when he had stood at the edge of a much taller

building, readying himself to jump into midair, at the same time leaving his mother to perish.

‘Pull and jump?’ asked Jason, shaking Jonah out of that awful memory.

‘No, jump *then* pull,’ shouted Jonah as he flung himself into the air and pulled the toggle on the life vest. The vest inflated around him into a bright orange globe, slamming him in the face. He thought he might suffocate as the inflated rubber pressed against his mouth and nose, but before he could fight for another breath, he hit the water hard.

He bounced and rolled, his head submerging into the cold sea water. Jonah struggled with his left arm to pull the deflate cord, but then a bullet penetrated the orange rubber, nullifying his attempts. As the rubber deflated, he saw his father bobbing beside him and swam over to pull his ripcord. Jason soon emerged from his orange ball and the father and son swam to the waiting getaway boat.

Jonah reached up for Sam’s hand. It was warm and welcome, pulling Jonah up and over the black military-grade rubber hull. Once he was aboard, both he and Sam hoisted Jason into the dinghy. The water still bubbled with bullets, but Sam gunned the engine urgently and sped them around the corner and back onto 45th Street, out of the line of fire.

It was only then that Jonah took his first full breath of air.