

Nightflyer

By Stuart Forster (with Hannah Forster)

Panther Trap

Steve had discovered cycling. Someone at his most recent job had invited him mountain biking and he was hooked, he had bought a bike. Then he thought Nightflyer, his superhero alter ego, could use a bike to patrol parts of the city. He'd soon discovered roads were rarely smooth, straight and empty enough for a bike to travel at over 60 miles per hour. Still, he had crashed, repaired and persisted.

One night, cycling across an intersection, Nightflyer spied activity down the crossing street. In an area lined with stores with, no doubt, an ATM. He passed through the intersection before he could turn, so slowed and turned back. Turning into the cross street he saw that a digger had arrived, confirming his suspicion.

Starting down the road towards the gathering of cars and thieves, Nightflyer's danger sense nagged at him. But, rather unhelpfully, it didn't warn where the danger would come from. Was a sniper hidden in one of the parked cars or on a roof? Who was the figure huddled in the doorway across the street?

He re-checked the roofs, corners and doorways. Across the street the figure huddled in the doorway ignited a bright red light. A laser sight? Did it move around much? It was near his face. A cigarette?

Hidden down an alley, in front of Nightflyer, a van waited for its lookout, crouched in a doorway, to radio it its cue. The radio crackled to life.

'He's here, coming your way,' the lookout reported.

'This going to work Bruce?' asked Ryan, the Panthers' leader.

'Sure it's only maths. If Nick calls the start right and Nate pulls out right; we'll be parked in front of him before he can stop,' Bruce replied.

'Sounds too complicated to me, like it won't work,' Ryan observed, pulling the tarpaulin which up until then had concealed a grid of spikes 'And I really wanted to see if this works.'

'Oh, cool,' chuckled Shane.

'What's that for?' Bruce asked.

'To hold him still,' Ryan shuffled from side to side and hitched up the right side of his long overcoat, which had a tendency to sag. 'He moves around so much.'

'You ok Bruce?' Shane was watching him 'This isn't in your plan is it?'

'Go!' the lookout called through the radio. Nathan put the van into gear and accelerated forward.

Distracted by his feeling of impending doom and the huddled figure holding the red light, he didn't see the van begin to pull-out in front of him. When he finally saw it a second later he couldn't swerve, he was moving so fast the bike would fall and he'd skid into the van's path. He pulled the brakes. Even the heaviest duty brakes he could find were ineffective at the speeds he could travel; the bike barely slowed. The van's open side door rolled in front of him, a dark maw in the night. He thought about jumping, planning trumping instinct too late.

The front wheel buckled against the door sill, and then the forks hit it, crushing it, then they bent like wire coat hangers. The back wheel flipped up, catapulting Nightflyer into the darkness. He struck the opposite side of the van like a clapper in a bell! There was a moment of silence, then, with a burst of manic mirth, the van screeched drunkenly up the road as the bike was kicked aside and someone wrestled to close the door against its brutalised sill with a metallic tearing sound.

Inside the darkened van, chortling youths surged from side to side as the van swayed up the road with the driver striving to get a glimpse of their victim.

Nightflyer lay in darkness, something poking and probing his back dully. Every frustratingly shallow breath was a struggle. Somewhere in the dark, silent back of his mind, something reminded him that this was a bad sign. Presently, his hearing returned to giggles and cursing.

‘... driving in a straight line, stop rubbernecking,’ Ryan told Nate.

‘If I get caught on this fucking rig I’ll put you on it beside him,’ Ryan threatened Nate.

‘Ok, Ok, I want a piece of him too, don’t let him die till I’ve had my piece,’ Nate whined.

‘He’s sooo sick. Heh Heh, I don’t wanna watch,’ Shane smiled.

‘What will we do with him after?’ Bruce requested.

‘When Nate has finished we leave him as a warning to his ... team buddies,’ Ryan planned.

‘You don’t like that idea Brucie, you’re afraid they might have real super-powers.’ Ryan, watching Bruce, challenged him.

‘They seem pretty tight maybe they’ll take it personal. Come after us,’ Bruce replied defensively.

‘Ooh, hunt us down one by one. You still watch those movies?’ Ryan needled Bruce.

‘Look, Bruce, you got your butt kicked by them when they killed Kyle.’ Shane said.

‘Well not exactly. It was this other ...’ Bruce began to explain.

‘He,’ Ryan interrupted and pain stabbed into Nightflyer’s back ‘put Nathan away for a month. And he hasn’t been the same since he gotten out, listen to him.’

‘Anyway I planned in some options, we don’t need to leave the body lying around, we can make like Mafiosi,’ Ryan continued.

Nightflyer lost the thread of the conversation so he lay there listening to sadistic humoured talk about someone hanging around and someone else being spiked, and felt he was the lucky one on a bed of blunt nails.

Sight returned from black through grey to black-and-white stop-motion images of the knees of anonymous people whose feet were stuck to the ceiling. It was strange, something wrong there, he couldn’t put his finger on; maybe because something had pinned his arm. Then his mind was caught by the endless scrolling of paved road visible through the gash under the side door. Breathing became easier, faded colours drained into and out of his vision as the motion of the van alternately soothed and aggravated his pain.

‘Hey, he’s awake!’ Someone shoved him.

The pain, from deep in his flesh grinding against his ribs exploded into his consciousness and shrieked from his mouth in a winded gasp. His captors laughed heartily as his vision narrowed to dark tunnel and his narrow world swung and swerved as the van careered crazily about the road.

‘Jerk, drive! Quit gawping! It’s left here! Here!’

The van swung viciously round a corner, tyres squealing. Nightflyer’s body shifted and slithered. His head hit the ceiling, followed by his body. It was surprisingly comfortable floating amongst the feet whose owners laughed at some joke he couldn’t understand. Nightflyer’s left arm waved about in front of his face.

‘Lie still.’ Someone kicked him.

Nightflyer bumped the emergency stud on the communication bangle against his nose. And someone chuckled as his exhausted hand dropped to the van floor again.

The van bumped and rattled across rough ground. Nightflyer’s world turned over sickeningly as his head was rattled on the floor. An eternity later the van stopped, the side door was wrenched open noisily, and the other passengers left discussing concrete. Somewhere a door opened and closed; Nightflyer lay lost in peace, hypnotised by an array of glistening spikes fastened to the side of the van opposite the side door. He was roused by a metallic scraping terminated by a giggle followed swiftly by the certainty that he was in danger. By the time a shadow slid through the open door, Nightflyer had dragged himself to a corner and crouched there.

The shadow looked around 'You're not getting away from me.'

Again the shadow looked around before catching sight of his quarry and approaching him; a knife glinted. Nightflyer launched himself before his opponent was within reach, using speed and timing to deliver a normally powerful blow. Pain exploded through his battered body as his blow landed making him involuntarily pull his punch; but both collapsed to the van floor.

'Hey! Nate!' someone shouted. 'What you doin?'

'What the fuck ... cool. Can I try it?'

'What's that for?'

'It's my insurance. You want me to show what it does? ... Then shut up.'

Nightflyer rolled out of the door and back under the van before he stopped to recover his breath. Above, his opponent was quiet for a few seconds before he started moaning then moving.

'Nate!' someone concerned called from the darkness.

Gritting his teeth, Nightflyer rolled away from the voices to the far side of the van.

'He hit me!' was the indignant reply from inside the van.

Slowly and painfully, Nightflyer stood up behind the rear wheel. His vision dimmed and he rested his head against the side of the van, listening while Nate was instructed to find him and not take any chances. Slowly his vision cleared, while those in the darkness argued, confusingly, about someone's insurance.

A nearby voice roused him. 'He's here behind the van.'

The figure with the knife, Nate?, stood by the driver's door.

'Where?'

'By the back wheel.'

'Don't move.'

Nightflyer's danger sense screamed at him. He crouched down and toppled face first into the dirt. A burst of machine gun fire ripped at the side of the van above the wheel. He rolled over.

'Ha, you missed,' Nate called, stepping into Nightflyer's view, raising his knife.

A second, longer, burst of machine gun fire stitched a row of holes between the van's rear wheel and its cab. Nate staggered, gurgled and collapsed.

'Did I get him Nate? Nate!'

An argument broke out on the other side of the van, rapidly escalating to violence.

'Teleport now,' Nightflyer hissed into the communication bangle, while forcing himself to his feet.

'Ten metres north west,' the bangle said. Nightflyer looked around and there away from the side of the van was a welcome pool of light.

Nightflyer started toward the light. With each step his foot was a weight he struggled to lift; the light seemed to get no closer. His head felt heavy and something pressed on his chest; each laborious breath brought no relief from a creeping lethargy. In the light of the teleport something flickered into sight, Nightflyer had to lift his head and look up. A red-headed girl in green and white had appeared and gasped. As she approached him she seemed impossibly tall. How had he ended up on the ground?

'Steve, what happened?' She crouched.

'What are you doing here Alison?' Steve demanded hoarsely. 'Where's Electron?'

'Major Democracy needed assistance. You couldn't be contacted, neither could anyone else,' Alison explained.

'He said it was a quiet night, went to help the Major. Left me on watch,' She continued sarcastically. 'The Computer could take care of everything, apparently.'

'Chew, he shouldn't have.'

'Let's get you back to the beam.' Alison reached out and put an arm under Steve's arms to help him to his feet.

'Uh, you're wet. What is it?' she asked.

'Blood I expect.'

‘Much?’

‘No, I’ve lost most of it.’

Alison became aware of a shadow looming over them both.

‘Do you need a hand ma’am?’ the shadow enquired, looming some more.

‘I don’t need your hand. If it comes near me I’ll burn it off,’ she hissed. He was so wide.

The shadow rocked back as if struck. Alison heaved Steve to his feet; he groaned, pushing himself upright. She drew Steve toward the light and the shadow shuffled after them. With each step Steve seemed to become heavier, the blood helping him slip from her grip. The shadow, well, shadowed them, no longer menacing, but poised.

Finally, light fell across Alison and she stepped into the beam. Then she turned to the shadow. He was now dimly lit by the beam and to her utter surprise she realised she had seen him before! He knew her! She had even once said to him: ‘I don’t need your hand ...’.

‘Oh, shit,’ she muttered. Raised her free hand to point at him, and to her horror he shrank back into the darkness, and then the teleport snatched him away.

On the Watchstation, Steve’s body was lifted from her by the station’s aid drones and carried away.

‘I need your help treating Nightflyer,’ the Computer said quietly.

‘I don’t know anything about medicine,’ Alison replied baffled.

‘The medical subsystem will handle the medical procedures. I am not allowed to interfere in their operation, but Nightflyer’s body can only be helped so far before it resists the treatment. It must be left to heal itself; the medical subsystem does not understand that, it will continue until its treatment is complete. You can command it to stop. I will tell you when. But you must be in sickbay,’ the Computer explained. ‘I will collect Electron when he calls.’

Alison followed Steve to sickbay, smeared with his blood.