

**"FLIGHT OF THE BUMBLEBEE"**

The Sheridan Tapes - Postlude 2

Written by Wray Van Winkle

*CONTENT WARNING: Loud noises, including alarms, explosions, and screams, elements of peril including a plane crash, strong language, implied character death, and grief*

[Rolling waves on a black beach]

[Hushed whispers from the void]

[Waves fade to the wind howling through endless corridors]

[Echoing footsteps approach, then stop]

**Amy Sterling**

The Source. The infinite potential of all worlds. The roiling chaos that is the heart of all existences. The place where all space and time and realities meet and coexist as one. A place that is not a place, in a time that is not a time.

I have wandered far from where I once left Anna -- or will leave her -- or am leaving her. Time waxes strange in this infinity... even stranger than it did before. The shape my eyes give it is different now, too. Sam saw the Source as an endless ocean, crashing upon a shore of blackened sand. Ned saw it as a boundless desert of ever-shifting dunes and mountain crags. Amanita saw it in the endless branchings of the prophet's mycelia... and if she herself ever made a way into the Source, I suspect that's how it would appear. But as for me... it's always changing! When I first fell into its depths, I saw it as the black and oily water at the bottom of that curse'd well, stretching to an unseen horizon! After I first met Sam, it took the shape which he saw. And now... now, I think I see it as myself, for the first time. As a maze.

No. Not a maze. A labyrinth. And Something is drawing me to its center.

[She steps forward, then stops]

The memories here are different than the ones I've touched before. Of a different... quality. Keener. Sharper. More certain.

Held in panes of glass instead of rippling pools, mounted to the endless dark walls of this place. It's hard to say if the memories themselves have changed, or if I have... but they line the way to the heart of this place, as if they've been purposely arranged. Whatever hides at the center of this labyrinth, all these moments in space and time seem to herald its arrival... but they can't! They come from vastly different worlds, and some even seem to contradict one another.

Or perhaps I'm just unused to seeing the Source in this way. Anna has given me new eyes to see... I simply need to learn how to use them.

[She approaches one of the mirrors]

Here, for instance... this memory is most familiar to me. An old friend... one of Anna's oldest and closest, save, perhaps, for me.

[Chuckles]

And... one of his oldest failures. Yet for him, it is still present, and his future is yet uncertain. Come close... and listen.

[The sounds of the source fade away]

[Wind and insects in the desert; daytime]

[Someone snores]

[A radio's beep and static as someone sends a message]

**Marcus Edwards (over radio)**

Spotter one, this is flight control – do you have a visual?

[Spotter wakes with a start as the radio beeps out]

**Marcus Edwards (over radio)**

Spotter One! Do you have a visual?

[Spotter grunts and gathers himself]

**Spotter**

Negative flight – still looking.

[Radio beep]

[A low rumbling roar grows louder and louder]

[Radio beep]

Wait... standby, flight.

[The roar arrives suddenly; a booming aircraft passes over]

[Spotter laughs]

Holy shit... they actually got that thing to fly.

[Radio beep]

(into radio) Flight, confirm visual: the Bumblebee is in the air, repeat, the Bumblebee is in the air.

[Radio beep]

**Marcus Edwards (over radio)**

Copy that – can you confirm ground speed?

[Radio beeps]

**Spotter**

She's hauling ass, sir... nearly knocked me out of my chair.

[Radio beeps]

**Marcus Edwards (over radio)**

Received and noted – keep the aircraft in your sights.

[Radio beep]

**Spotter**

The hell's his problem?

[Spotter switches frequency to chatter from flight control]

[Radio static and beeps occur frequently during messages]

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Mark 4 Actual, this is CAPCOM: Flight requests you throttle back below Mach 1 and continue the diagnostic.

[Susan laughs]

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

She wants to run, Ren - I can feel it.

**Ren Park (over radio)**

As glad as I am to hear that... flight is still requesting you decrease speed.

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

Mark 4 Actual, complying.

[The aircraft zooms through the air, far away]

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Marcus, we really don't have that many subsonic tests left to run.

**Marcus Edwards (over radio)**

We're still going to run them, Park.

**Ren Park (over radio)**

They're not going to tell us anything the drone flights didn't.

**Marcus Edwards (over radio)**

That's a hundred million dollar aircraft she's flying, and I'm not going to risk it. By the book, down the line. Got it?

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Roger, WILCO. FIDO, how we looking?

**Spotter (speaking over FIDO)**

Christ, what an asshole.

**FIDO (over radio)**

Got a little shimmy, but that's expected at these speeds... won't be a problem.

[The Bumblebee roars by the Spotter once more]  
[He whoops and laughs]

**Spotter**

Goddamn!

(into radio) Flight, you'd better authorize her to go  
supersonic... I think she's getting bored up there.

**Marcus Edwards (over radio)**

What do you mean - FIDO, what's her altitude reading?

**FIDO (over radio)**

It's uh... little lower than it should be.

**Marcus Edwards (over radio)**

Ren...

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Mark 4 Actual, ascend to cruising altitude and maintain heading.

[Susan's laugh cuts short]

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

Could you please repeat that, Ren? I don't think I heard you  
right.

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Mark 4 Actual, CAPCOM confirms - Flight is requesting you climb  
and level off for the next phase of testing.

[Susan sighs]

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

You designed this thing, right Park?

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Yes, I did... me and my team, but-

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

And you know how it flies?

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Uh... theoretically.

**Marcus Edwards (over radio)**

Ren, what are you doing?

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

And all the tests you did... they were level flights? Nice remote-controlled basics?

[The aircraft is heard distantly zooming]

**Ren Park (over radio)**

That is... that is correct.

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

You shouldn't have bothered then. You already know this thing can fly in a straight line... you want to know what a pilot can do with it. That's the whole point of this project, right?

[Brief pause]

**Ren Park (over radio)**

She isn't wrong, Marcus.

[Brief pause]

**Marcus Edwards (over radio)**

CAPCOM, you have permission to go supersonic – but on your head be it if anything goes wrong.

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Roger that.

(to Susan) Mark 4 Actual, you are clear to punch it.

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

'Bout damn time.

[The engine roars once more, zooming past the Spotter]

**Spotter**

Godspeed, Bumblebee – godspeed.

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

Mach 2... Mach 2.5... Mach 3–

**Marcus Edwards (over radio)**

Propulsion?

**PROP (over radio)**

Engines 4 and 5 firing in [engines fire up] 3... 2... 1... [engines fully fire] we have ignition.

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

Hot damn, this thing can cook.

**Marcus Edwards (over radio)**

Surgeon, what's her status?

**Surgeon (over radio)**

Blood pressure dropping, but still acceptable – she should be good up to 10 g's.

[Susan's voice is strained due to G forces]

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

Mach 4! Mach 4!

**Marcus Edwards (over radio)**

Holy shit – FIDO, what's the status of the aircraft?

**FIDO (over radio)**

She's holding, Flight... all lights are green, and she's still accelerating.

**Marcus Edwards (over radio)**

Dammit – all controllers, we're ending the test. Bring her back in, Ren.

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Sir, she-

**Marcus Edwards (over radio)**

Now!

[Brief pause]

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Mark 4, this is CAPCOM - we're ending the flight a little early. Throttle back and bring her in.

[No reply; after a moment]

Mark 4 Actual, please respond.

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

What? Uh... yeah. Roger that.

[Brief pause]

**FIDO (over radio)**

Uh, Flight? She's not slowing down.

**Marcus Edwards (over radio)**

Ren...

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Mark 4 Actual, this is CAPCOM. Do you copy?

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

Uh - I copy, I copy. Reducing speed and returning to base.

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Roger that Mark 4 - we'll break out the fine china and finger-foods.

[The Bumblebee is heard distantly slowing and turning]

**Spotter**

What the hell was that about?

[Main Theme]

[A quiet, sterile doctor's room]

[A small clock ticks]

**Surgeon**

Look up?

[A small flashlight clicks on]

Yep, they're all still there – [flashlight clicks off] no burst vessels today. Hold out your arm?

[The surgeon unsticks the velcro blood pressure cuff and wraps it around her arm]

[Beeps]

[Mechanical whir of the cuff tightening]

[Beeps]

[Mechanical whir of the cuff loosening]

110 over 80, as usual... though I still don't know how you keep it so low in this job.

[She removes the cuff]

**Susan Hart**

Just good clean living, doc.

[Surgeon laughs]

**Surgeon**

I'm sure. Any lightheadedness? Headaches, spots in your vision?

**Susan Hart**

Actually, uh... nothing now, but – I was seeing some... streaks of light or something when I was up there just now. Any idea what that was?

**Surgeon**

Just streaks, or flashes as well?

**Susan Hart**

No, no, just streaks – they almost looked like something flying alongside the aircraft.

**Surgeon**

And did they disappear once you decelerated?

**Susan Hart**

Soon as I was below Mach 2.

**Surgeon**

Then you should be fine. Chances are, it was pressure on your eyeballs from the g-forces. Just let me know if it gets worse, we may have to run a few more tests.

**Susan Hart**

Yeah... I'll let you know.

[Susan walks out the office and opens the door to the cavernous hanger]

[Welding sparks can be heard]

[Ren approaches]

**Ren Park**

Hell of a first flight, Hart.

[Susan laughs]

**Susan Hart**

Hell of a plane, Park. Where's the fine china?

**Ren Park**

Oh man, [he pretends to feel in his pockets] I must have left it back at Mission Control. Did grab the finger foods, though.

[He produces a couple of plastic bags of chips; hands one to her]

[Susan chuckles and opens it]

**Susan Hart**

Looks like you owe me a drink after all.

**Ren Park**

You know, I wasn't going to say anything, but a couple of the flight controllers were gonna head over to Bowman's for some cheap beers tonight. You want to come?

**Susan Hart**

Is Edwards gonna be there?

**Ren Park**

I mean, he'd probably come if he wasn't so worried about getting his suit dirty. I didn't ask.

[She laughs]

**Susan Hart**

You're on, Park.

[A noisy dive bar; lots of background conversation, the clink of glasses]

[A door creaks open and shut]

[We follow someone's footsteps to the table; they pull out their wooden chair and sit]

[Slowly, the sound of Susan telling a story becomes more clear, the flight controllers laughing around her]

**Susan Hart**

So there I was: stick dead, no rudder control, and some corporate asshole in my ear screaming at me not to eject, or I'd "never work in this industry again" – despite the fact that people don't tend to hire smoking craters either, which is what I'd be if I didn't eject. But I'm like: "Okay Hart... you've gotten out of worse. Think it through." I still had ailerons, but just barely, and every time I turned I could feel the whole fucking plane trying to shake itself apart.

[Some laughter]

So all I can do is nose up and hope I've got enough lift to keep from crashing into the San Bernardino foothills, or nose down and just pray for the best. Now... this was all looking pretty

grim, but I hadn't lost an airplane yet, and I'd already decided I wasn't gonna until I was at least five years into this thing, so I still had another six months before I was allowed to crash.

[FIDO laughs]

So I started looking for somewhere, anywhere to land that wasn't someone's front door - [Susan laughs] and low and behold, there's a golf course just off to my right: [group laughter] miles and miles of flat, green, empty turf. I just about manage to get the plane turned around without shearing the wings off, deploy every single flap that was still working, and dive straight for hole 3. I nearly ended up on the green, actually - but I landed in the sand trap. But still, seeing as I was starting from a tee about 10 miles off... I'd say that's a pretty damn good shot.

[Group laughter]

**Ren Park**

And did you ever figure out what happened?

**Susan Hart**

Oh yeah... some jerk at the airfield forgot to reattach the external fuel tank properly. Whole thing tore off and ripped through my stabilizer at Mach .5.

[INCO releases an "oof"]

So don't any of you fuckers think about messing with my aircraft, alright? Because I will know, and I will find you.

[FIDO laughs]

**FIDO**

Don't worry - Edwards is too paranoid to let anyone but the techs in spitting distance of the thing.

[Scattered laughter]

**Susan Hart**

What a dickhead. [ice jangles in a nearly-empty pitcher] Hey – pitcher's looking a little low. Y'all want me to top it off?

**INCO**

I think I've had enough for one night.

**FIDO**

Oh come on, it's only 8 o'clock! We've barely started!

**INCO**

You know we have another test flight tomorrow, right?

**Susan Hart (underneath INCO)**

Booo... ugh, come on.

**INCO**

I'd prefer not to lose my job over a hangover.

**FIDO**

Ah shit, you're right... I'd better slow down—

**Susan Hart**

Oh come on, now – don't tell me that Quentin Aerospace really is as boring as everyone says? We just got the Bumblebee off the ground! It's time to celebrate!

[She stands and grabs the pitcher]

I'm gonna fill this up. Any of you want to help me finish it, you're welcome to.

[She marches to the bar]

Hey Eddie! Fill'r up, would ya?

[The ice jangles as she sets it down]

**Eddie**

Aye aye, captain.

[Eddie grabs the pitcher and starts to fill it]

[Footsteps approach Susan]

**Ren Park**

Here – let me put this one on my tab. You covered the first three before I could stop you.

**Susan Hart**

Oh come on Ren, you know I've got this...

**Ren Park**

Actually, I don't. I know exactly how much QA is paying you, and it's a lot, but... not that much.

**Susan Hart**

It's enough. Eddie, do not take this man's credit card.

**Eddie**

Uh – got it, I'll, uh... I'll just put it on your tab.

[The bartender retreats]

[Cash register dings]

**Ren Park**

Wait... hold up, Susan. What's going on with you?

**Susan Hart**

What are you talking about?

**Ren Park**

You're putting on a good show, but I know something's wrong. You've only been halfway-here ever since you touched down this afternoon. Is there something on your mind?

[Susan sighs]

**Susan Hart**

Look Park – I like you. But you're pushing your luck. I'm fine, alright?

[Brief pause]

**Ren Park**

What happened at the end of the test?

**Susan Hart**

Sorry?

**Ren Park**

You sounded like you... I don't know, like you saw something you didn't expect up there.

[Susan pauses; sighs]

**Susan Hart**

Can you keep a secret?

[She sets the pitcher back down]

**Ren Park**

Well I've signed about two hundred NDAs working for QA alone, so - yeah, I guess.

**Susan Hart**

I'm serious - you can't tell anyone. Ever.

[She sighs]

I did see something up there. Right when I hit Mach 4.

**Ren Park**

What did you see?

**Susan Hart**

Lights. Long, thin streaks of colored light, just outside the cockpit. I think they were blue or... maybe violet? I only saw them in the corner of my eyes and I was starting to get tunnel vision, but... I could have sworn they were following me. Every turn, every maneuver... they were still there. But as soon as I slowed down past Mach 2 and looked away from the controls... they were gone.

**Ren Park**

Why didn't you say anything?

**Susan Hart**

Are you kidding me? You know how many pilots I know who've been laughed out of the business for saying they've seen little green men? Edwards is already gunning for me as it is.

**Ren Park**

There are external cameras on the Mark 4... INCO could have checked them.

**Susan Hart**

I'm not about to risk my career over...

[She stops]

They weren't recording during the flight, were they?

[Ren laughs]

**Ren Park**

You really think QA would let that data go to waste?

[Brief pause; Susan sounds unsteady]

**Susan Hart**

Could we... could you show me?

[Later; in a quiet office]

[A noisy hard drive spins up as Ren types on a keyboard]

**Ren Park**

Alright... I think I found it. Just give it a second, these old hard drives are a bit slow.

[Susan exhales nervously]

**Susan Hart**

You're sure we won't get in trouble for this?

**Ren Park**

Nah... Edwards likes to talk like he's in control, but he's just a mouthpiece. The board put him in charge because they thought I needed someone older and wiser to keep me in line.

**Susan Hart**

"Wiser?"

**Ren Park**

Maybe just older. But give him some credit – he's been doing this a long time. He knows his stuff. [a few keyboard taps] He's just too stuck in the mud to do anything useful with it.

Alright – looks like it's loaded. Pull up a seat, Captain Hart.

[Susan sits]

**Marcus Edwards (on recording)**

Alright everyone – let's keep this nice and simple, I want a good clean baseline here. / Controllers, give me a go, no-go for launch. PROP?

**Susan Hart (over recording)**

Yeah, yeah, I got all this. Can you skip to the end?

**Ren Park**

Uh... yeah, sure, let me just scrub forward here...

**PROP (on recording)**

Go flight.

**Marcus Edwards (on recording)**

Systems?

**SYSTEMS (on recording)**

Go flight.

[Ren speeds up the recording]

[He slows it after a few seconds]

**Susan Hart (on recording)**

Hot damn, this thing can cook.

**Marcus Edwards (on recording)**

Surgeon, what's her status?

**Surgeon (on recording)**

Blood pressure dropping, but still acceptable – she should be good up to 10 g's.

**Susan Hart (on recording)**

Mach 4! Mach 4!

**Marcus Edwards (on recording)**

Holy shit – FIDO, what's the status of the aircraft?

**FIDO (on recording)**

She's holding, Flight... all lights are green, and she's still accelerating.

**Marcus Edwards (on recording)**

Dammit – [he sighs] all controllers, we're ending the test. Bring her back in–

**Susan Hart**

There. Stop it there.

[He pauses the recording]

**Ren Park**

What the hell?

**Susan Hart**

Scroll back a bit, see if it clears up.

[He quietly rewinds it, then presses play again]

[The same background dialogue plays out]

**Susan Hart**

Again. Slower.

**Ren Park**

Susan–

**Susan Hart**

Just do it, Ren.

[Ren pauses, rewinds, plays it at half-speed]

[He stops the tape]

**Ren Park**

Nothing.

**Susan Hart**

Shit.

[The computer's hard drive winds down]

**Ren Park**

Looks like the footage got corrupted on the way in. I can hand it off to IT and see if they can clear it up a bit—

**Susan Hart**

No. I'm sorry, but... no. I can't risk anyone else knowing.

**Ren Park**

I mean, even if they do clear it up, there's no way to say they'll know what they're looking at—

**Susan Hart**

I said "No" Park, and I meant it. I just...

[She stands]

If I'm seeing things up there, I don't want anyone else to know. I need to keep this quiet.

**Ren Park**

Alright. I mean... even if it is "little green men," they don't seem like they're a danger to the aircraft. We should be able to continue testing just fine.

[Susan doesn't respond]

Susan? Susan?

[Sounds of the next scene begin to intercut over Ren; the engines working hard outside the cockpit]

[Ren's voice comes through a radio]

[Static as radio messages are sent back and forth; continuously]

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Susan? Mark 4 Actual, do you copy?

**Susan Hart (through mic)**

CAPCOM, this is Mark 4 Actual, reading you loud and clear.

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Copy that.

**Marcus Edwards (over radio)**

What the hell is she playing at?

**Susan Hart (through mic)**

CAPCOM, please advise Flight that his mic is connected to the outgoing channel.

**Marcus Edwards (over radio)**

Who the hell – INCO, why am I–

[The radio crackles]

[Susan chuckles]

**Susan Hart (through mic)**

Still maintaining Mach 1.1 and level flight.

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Roger that, Mark 4 Actual – maintain speed and heading for another three minutes, we're nearly finished.

[Susan sighs; she raspberries her lips, groaning]

[She notices something]

**Susan Hart (through mic)**

CAPCOM, are there any other aircraft in the area?

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Negative Mark 4, your airspace is clear. Why?

**Susan Hart (through mic)**

Requesting permission to begin high-altitude testing.

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Uh... standby on that request, Mark 4.

[Shuffling; Ren forgets to cut his mic]

**Marcus Edwards (over radio)**

I thought you said you talked to her about this?

**Ren Park (over radio)**

I did, but she's... it's not that simple!

**Marcus Edwards (over radio)**

Well I'll make it simple – tell her to get in line, or you're both fired. This is not flight school. I've had enough of you two with your fucking-[unintelligible]-what does it take to run this...

**Susan Hart (through mic)**

Oh, fuck this.

[Susan pulls back on the stick; her engines roar as the Bumblebee climbs]

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Susan – Mark 4 Actual, reduce speed and return to level flight.

**Susan Hart (through mic)**

You sure? I thought my three minutes were up... isn't this the next test on the schedule?

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Mark 4, Flight advises you that you're, uh... please just complete the high altitude tests as directed.

**Susan Hart (through mic)**

Roger WILCO, CAPCOM. Ready to push.

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Copy that, Mark 4 Actual - secondary ignition in 5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - Ignition.

[Conventional rockets fire, pushing Susan into her seat with a grunt]

**Susan Hart (through mic)**

Mach 3... Mach 3.5... Mach 3.7...

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Mark 4 Actual, check your angle - you're a little steep.

**Susan Hart (through mic)**

Affirmative - leveling off...

[G-forces increase, her voice straining]

Mach 4... 4.1... 4.2...

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Alright Susan, that's target altitude - go ahead and level off.

[brief pause]

**Susan Hart (through mic)**

CAPCOM, what's the X-15's record?

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Uh... airspeed record for crewed flight is Mach 6.7.

**Susan Hart (through mic)**

You know when that was set?

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Uh... 1967, I think.

**Susan Hart (through mic)**

I think 50 years is enough to let that record stand, don't you?

[Susan slams the throttle down, the rockets scream and the plane begins to shake]

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Mark 4 Actual, Flight is - standby for wing retraction.

[The Bumblebee's wings retract with a dull whir and thud]

[The plane stabilizes]

**Susan Hart (through mic)**

CAPCOM, we are tucked in and knocking on Mach 5.

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Mark 4 Actual, Flight is still requesting that you reduce speed and resume the test.

**Susan Hart (through mic)**

You can tell him, to go fu-

[She cuts off with a gasp]

[A high, faint ringing can be heard; the noise of the engines fading away]

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Please repeat Mark 4 - I didn't get that. Mark 4 Actual, please respond.

[silence]

Susan? Susan, can you hear me?

**Susan Hart (through mic)**

They're... beautiful...

[A bang; the cockpit shakes as an engine fails]

[A frantic alarm beeps around her]

[She cries out in pain, alarm, and surprise as the plane jerks out of control]

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Hart! Talk to me Hart – Mark 4 Actual, respond!

**Susan Hart (through mic)**

She's spinning, Ren – Engine 5... failure!

**Ren Park (over radio)**

PROP, cut power the number 4, now! Surgeon, status.

**Marcus Edwards (over radio)**

Park, return to your station and let me–

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Edwards, I'm relieving you of duty and saving my pilot. Susan, your thrust should be equalized... can you reduce spin?

**Susan Hart (through mic)**

I – I'm trying – Lateral G's are – I'm not...

[She trails off as she passes out]

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Mark 4 Actual, respond – surgeon, is she–

**Surgeon (over radio)**

She's under nearly 20 g's, Ren – she's passed out.

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Shit – FIDO, can we take over remote control?

**FIDO (over radio)**

We can try, but the signal's patchy – I don't know if I can pull her out of this dive.

**Ren Park (over radio)**

We have to try – INCO, standby for remote takeover and prepare for emergency maneuver Lambda 9–

[Susan gasps, coughing as she comes back to consciousness]

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Susan? Susan, can you hear me?

**Susan Hart (through mic)**

[yelling] I... I hear you, Ren.

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Susan, you need to slow the ship down and stop it spinning – we can't extend the wings or use the parachutes at this speed. Can you do that?

**Susan Hart (through mic)**

I... I can. Standby on that parachute, I'm gonna need it if I black out again.

**Ren Park (over radio)**

What?

[With a grunt, Susan forces the yoke down, pushing the craft into a steep dive]

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Susan, pull up! You're going to run out of air at that speed!

[Susan screams, a desperate cry to survive]

[She pulls back on the stick, arresting her fall]

**FIDO (over radio)**

She's pulling out of the spin, Flight! She pulling up!

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Standby to extend wings as soon as she's subsonic. Susan, are you still with us?

**Susan Hart (through mic)**

I don't have any yaw control and the elevators are busted... I'm gonna land where I'm gonna land, Ren.

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Copy that, rescue crews are already... [he notices something]  
What? What are you doing? Who are you?

**Marcus Edwards (over radio)**

These gentlemen are with the Air Force, Ren. You know, the people we're contracted to? They have some questions they want to ask you about why you subverted the chain of command during a routine test flight.

**Ren Park (over radio)**

Marcus, this is no time to make a power play, not with Susan's life on the line...

**Marcus Edwards (over radio)**

Don't worry - I'll make sure the aircraft makes it safely to the ground. FIDO, take remote control and bring her down before she does any more damage.

**FIDO (over radio)**

Sir, I'm not confident I can-

**Marcus Edwards (over radio)**

Do it!

[A frantic alarm begins to beep]

**Susan Hart (through mic)**

I hate to say it Edwards, but this conversation is about to be-

[Floomf; the parachutes trigger automatically]

[Susan cries out as she's thrown around]

[A crunching, scraping sound as the Bumblebee comes down hard on the salt flat below]

[Susan breathes hard and undoes her oxygen mask; we hear her voice clearly now]

**Susan Hart**

Goddammit.

[she groans in pain]

Ah shit, my neck...

[The distant sound of approaching sirens]  
[It fades out into the surgeon's office once more]  
[Small flashlight clicks]  
[Wall clock ticks in background]

**Surgeon**

Pupillary response seems normal... look up?

Hmmm... capillaries [flashlight click] are a little swollen, but thankfully they're all intact. Should be good as new once the inflammation goes away.

[Marcus speaks up from the corner of the room]

**Marcus Edwards**

I wish I could say the same for the Mark 4.

**Surgeon**

Director Edwards, I must again request that you leave the room until I'm finished. This is a civilian operation, and Susan still has a right to patient doctor confidentiality under medical law.

**Marcus Edwards**

For now.

[Edwards turns and swaggers out the door into the hanger]  
[Welding is heard beyond before the door is closed]  
[The surgeon sighs in relief]

**Surgeon**

Alright, [she unwraps the blood pressure cuff] let's take your blood pressure and-

**Susan Hart**

No more tests, Doctor. There's no point. He's never going to let me fly again.

**Surgeon**

We don't know that yet. And besides, I need to make sure you're okay before I let you-

**Susan Hart**

We do know that. Ren's probably sitting in some military police cell right now awaiting a court martial, and he's the only one who—

[A knock at the door]

[Surgeon walks to the door]

**Surgeon**

Goddamnit, what does Marcus want now...?

[The door is opened then closed]

**Ren Park**

Hell of a flight, Hart.

**Susan Hart**

Ren? You're — how?

**Ren Park**

Turns out Marcus... misrepresented the situation to our friends with the Air Force. A few calls to the board made it clear they sided with me on the matter, not him.

[Susan tries to move]

**Susan Hart**

But what did they — ow.

**Surgeon**

Sit down Susan, you're going to hurt yourself.

**Ren Park**

Listen to her, Susan. You need to take it easy if you're going to be ready for the next test.

**Susan Hart**

The next... but I... but I crashed the plane.

**Ren Park**

Eh, the line between crashing and landing has always been a bit... fuzzy, in my books. [He walks closer] And it turns out most of the damage came from a faulty aerospike [He drags a stool over and sits down] on number 5, not the crash itself. Should be fairly easy to repair with the parts we have in the shed.

**Susan Hart**

But... There's no way Marcus is going to let me fly the next test after what I did-

**Ren Park**

Can you tell me what I said this project was all about, Susan? When we first met?

**Susan Hart**

Putting the pilot in control again. Making spaceflight human-centric.

**Ren Park**

You know what the first rockets were? An explosion, with a person on top. An ICBM, with a chair. Things have gotten a little better since the Apollo days, but it's still the same principle: a tiny capsule on a pillar of fuel, with nothing for the pilot to do but hang on for dear life until they reach orbit. The engineering demanded it. But now... we're trying to put the pilot back in control of how and when they get to space... making space somewhere you can fly to on your own power. And that means taking risks on the pilots we believe in.

[Brief pause]

**Susan Hart**

Doc, could you give us a minute here?

**Surgeon**

Uh... sure. But I still want to finish those tests before you leave, understood?

[The surgeon retreats into the hanger; opening and closing the door]

[Susan and Ren sit in silence; she sighs]

**Susan Hart**

Ren... I don't know if you should be taking these risks. Not on me.

**Ren Park**

Why not? The crash wasn't your fault, it was a mechanical failure you couldn't have predicted—

**Susan Hart**

No, Ren, I'm not — I'm not talking about the crash.

**Ren Park**

What then?

[Brief pause]

**Susan Hart**

Just before the engine failed... just before I passed out... I saw the lights again. Just outside the cockpit, just like the first time. Except they were closer. I could see them more clearly this time. I turned to look at them, and... they were there. It wasn't g-pressure, it wasn't an optical illusion... they were... there were lights flying outside my cockpit, keeping up with me at Mach 4. I don't know how, but... it looked like they were barely breaking a sweat. Like... like going that fast was easy for them.

They were the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

**Ren Park**

O-kay...

**Susan Hart**

And then the plane was spinning. I started to black out, and I knew I probably wasn't going to wake up again. But when I lost consciousness... I could still see the lights. Except they weren't outside the cockpit now, they were... I don't know where. It was dark, but I could hear the sound of wind howling and... I think I saw other lights, but they were hidden by... I guess they were clouds? But I could see the lights hovering in front of me,

clear as day. Except they weren't just streaks now, they were people – human figures made of light, sparking and buzzing in the dark. And they spoke to me.

**Ren Park**

What did they... what did they say?

**Susan Hart**

It wasn't... it wasn't words exactly. More like... emotions. Feelings. It felt like they knew me though... like they'd been watching us for a long time now. Not just the Bumblebee project, but – humanity itself. That they'd been testing us, trying to see if we were a danger to them. And this project, it... it worried them. I don't know why, but... [she sniffs absentmindedly] I don't think they want space travel getting any easier for us.

**Ren Park**

And do you think you... actually saw these aliens? Or are you worried it was some kind of... hallucination?

**Susan Hart**

I don't know. I thought... I hoped that it was – either way, I don't know what to do. If I'm crazy, then I don't... I don't know if I should keep trying to–

**Ren Park**

Hey, hey... listen to me. You're not crazy. I don't know what else is going on, but I know that much. If that's what you think you saw, I believe you.

**Susan Hart**

You do?

**Ren Park**

But I think you were right: you can't tell anyone what happened. If Edwards hears about this – we're both sunk.

**Susan Hart**

Ah... O... Okay.

**Ren Park**

I'm serious... you can't tell anyone: friends, family, partners... you need to keep this from them. All of them.

[Susan scoffs]

**Susan Hart**

Oh trust me... that won't be a problem.

**Ren Park**

Why not?

[Later; Susan shuts the door on her quiet apartment]

**Susan Hart**

Honey... I'm home.

[She walks across the room, throws down her coat]

[She turns on the sink and splashes water on her face]

[She sighs then winces, rubbing her neck]

Shit, I really pulled something, didn't I?

[She turns off the sink]

[She exhales, crossing the room]

[She opens her fridge, retrieves a beer, opens it, takes a swig, then rummages through the contents of her fridge]

Let's see... ready-meal, ready-meal, MRE, takeout... when was that from?

[She pulls the container out and sniffs it]

[She hesitates then makes an "EH" sound]

[She places it in the microwave and starts it]

[She sighs as she turns to her mail, leafing through it]

Bill, bill, ad, bill... letter from Mom...

[She sighs, tossing it in the trash]

Another bill, another-

[She cuts off, silent, staring at the next piece of mail]  
[The microwave dings behind her, she doesn't move]  
[She nervously tears open the envelope and unfolds the letter]  
[The sound of a heavy heartbeat and a high-pitched ringing]  
[She silently reads]  
[All noise cuts out; she throws her beer across the room, and it shatters against the wall]

Shit!

[Beer drips from where the bottle exploded]  
[Sound unfolds to the next day; an echoey mission control room]

**Marcus Edwards (over intercom)**

All flight controllers to Mission Control, all flight controllers, report to Mission Control.

[Electronics and fluorescent lights buzz in the background]  
[Someone enters through the door]

**Marcus Edwards**

Park.

**Ren Park**

Edwards.

**Marcus Edwards**

Better late than never.

**Ren Park**

I thought that was the point of your little stunt during the last test.

[Ren logs into his computer]

**Marcus Edwards**

My point was to save the aircraft. Nothing more.

**Ren Park**

Save your career, more like.

**Marcus Edwards**

Don't pretend like you disobeyed orders because you care about Captain Hart so much. You have just as much riding on this as I do. Forgive me if I'm a little more honest about it.

[Ren pauses]

[He puts on his headset]

**Ren Park**

Mark 4 Actual, this is CAPCOM. Are you receiving?

[Static back and forth as messages are transmitted to Susan]

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

10-4 CAPCOM, receiving loud and clear.

**Marcus Edwards**

Alright everyone – listen up. No surprises this time. No unauthorized maneuvers, no airspeed record attempts, no tomfoolery. We will get the Mark 4 to 90 kilometers, complete the high-altitude testing, and return the Mark 4 safely to the ground. Anything else will result in the immediate termination of any ground crew found to be culpable. Flight controllers, give me a go/no-go for launch. PROP?

**PROP**

Go flight.

**Marcus Edwards**

Systems?

**SYSTEMS**

Go flight.

**Marcus Edwards**

FIDO?

**FIDO**

We're a go.

**Marcus Edwards**

INCO.

**INCO**

Go!

**Marcus Edwards**

Surgeon.

**Surgeon**

Go flight.

**Marcus Edwards**

CAPCOM.

**Ren Park**

All systems go.

**Marcus Edwards (continuing over flight controllers)**

On my mark - 10... 9... 8... 7... 6... 5...

[A high-pitched whir starts up on the radio]

**SYSTEMS**

Primary induction spooling.

**PROP**

Turbines to speed.

**Marcus Edwards (continuing)**

4... 3... 2... 1... Launch sequence.

**FIDO**

Launch sequence initiated.

[On the monitors and over the speakers, the Bumblebee's primary scramjet roars and the aircraft propels forward]

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

Pulling up...

[The Bumblebee makes it to open air]

**FIDO**

Up and away, flight!

**Ren Park**

Nice launch, Mark 4... ascend to cruising altitude and standby for secondary ignition.

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

Roger WILCO, CAPCOM.

**Marcus Edwards**

She's being unusually... compliant.

**Ren Park**

Maybe she's nervous about the test, after what happened last time—

**Marcus Edwards**

Did I ask you something, CAPCOM?

**Ren Park**

Negative, flight.

**FIDO**

She's reached altitude threshold 1.

**PROP**

Engines 4 and 5, standing by.

**Ren Park**

Alright everyone — let's get it right this time. CAPCOM?

**Ren Park**

(muttered) Now he asks me something...

(into radio) Mark 4 Actual, we are standing by for secondary ignition. You ready?

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

(subdued) Ready as I'll ever be.

**Marcus Edwards**

Propulsion – on my mark. 5... 4... 3... 2... 1... Ignition.

[Propulsion throws the switch; nothing happens]

[He tries it a couple more times]

**PROP**

Uh... standby flight, [he taps on his keyboard, trying to find an answer] there seems to be an, er – some kind of problem.

**Marcus Edwards**

INCO, is this a network issue?

**INCO**

Negative, flight... she's still receiving.

**Marcus Edwards**

Then why the hell isn't she–

[PROP stops typing as Susan speaks]

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

So... I'm sure you've noticed that the engines didn't fire just then. Don't worry... nothing's wrong on your end. I've just disabled the remote control module on mine.

**Marcus Edwards**

CAPCOM, patch me through to her, now.

[Tapping on keyboard]

**Ren Park**

Uh... copy, flight.

**Marcus Edwards**

Captain Hart, you are in direct violation of your contract with Quentin Aerospace and the United States Air Force. You will return to base and surrender yourself and the aircraft immediately.

[Susan laughs faintly]

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

Will I? Because as far as I can see, I'm all alone up here. This is my aircraft.

**Marcus Edwards**

If... you... attempt to leave Mojave airspace, I will have no choice but to have the nearest AFB scramble fighters and shoot you down.

[She scoffs]

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

I'm sure you will. But in the meantime... the pilot is in control of her own destiny. And I'm not giving that up for the likes of you.

**Ren Park**

Susan, please... it's not too late. If you come back now, I can convince the board to keep this under wraps. Just... please... come back.

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

No. It was always too late. I was just buying time.

**Ren Park**

Susan, please... don't do this.

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

I really think I'm going to miss you, Ren.

**Ren Park**

You... what?

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

Attention all flight controllers and QA personnel – this is Captain Susan Hart of the BBE Mark 4 prototype single-stage vehicle. This will be my final flight. You might not be able to see them, but I do believe our esteemed observers are in attendance... and I intend to put on a show.

**Marcus Edwards**

What is she talking about?

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

Secondary ignition, on my mark - now.

[The rockets scream]

["The Flight of the Bumblebee" unexpectedly begins to play through the speakers]

[Susan grunts under the G-forces]

Mach 3... Mach 4... Mach 5...

**FIDO**

She's climbing, flight... 80 kilometers... 90... 100...

**Marcus Edwards**

Dammit, stop her, Park!

**Ren Park**

How?

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

Mach 6... point... 5 - point... 6 - point... 7.

**PROP**

Holy shit - that's the record.

**Ren Park**

Susan, you just broke the X-15's record. You did it. Just come back.

[Alarm begins to beep]

**FIDO**

She's heating up, flight... atmospheric drag is reaching critical levels.

**Ren Park**

Susan, please - you're going to break up-

[The cockpit can be heard shaking through the speakers]

[The music continues to build]

[Brief pause]

**Susan Hart (over radio)**

My god... it's true. It's all true...

[The signal cuts to noisy, dead static]

**Ren Park**

Susan? Susan, do you copy, over?

[Static drags on]

[INCO cuts the connection; silence]

**INCO**

We've lost her signal, Flight. Noting LOS at 1134:22.

[The room is silent for a long moment]

[Later; in a quiet office]

[Ren begins speaking in a digital recorder]

**Ren Park**

Doctor Ren Park, personal note. October 10th, 2015. It's official... the QA board just voted. I'm out. Effective immediately. The BBE project is being mothballed, with all designs and experimental data being handed over to the US Air Force. It's over. We lost.

There's no sign of Susan. Military and civil aviation agencies ran a thorough search, but no one was able to find any trace of the Mark 4's wreckage, much less a body. The current theory, based on her altitude and her last known trajectory, is that the Mark 4's wings failed to retract. The combined aerodynamic stress and atmospheric drag caused the plane to break up in the upper atmosphere, and the debris was vaporized at hypersonic speeds. If they're right – then there's nothing left to find. Ash in the wind.

But I have a different theory... one I've kept to myself for fear of being laughed out of a job I've already lost. That Susan was right. That something was watching our tests, and finally decided that the Mark 4 was too dangerous to leave in human hands. That they took it – and its pilot – away. It would explain her final transmission... a transmission that Marcus is only using to push the theory that Susan lost her mind. Stress and rejection... it's a potent combination.

He found the letter on the first day of their investigation, when they searched her apartment – a letter from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's astronaut training program. A rejection letter... her fifth in as many years.

She wanted to see the stars... and I think in the end, she did. Wherever she is... whatever happens to her... I think she's earned her wings.

[Ren goes silent]

[Before he can speak again, his phone buzzes]

What the...

[With a beep, he answers the call]

Hello? Doctor Ren Park of Que... [sighing, continuing] Park here.

**Daniella Caldwell (on phone)**

Hello Doctor Park. This is Doctor Daniella Caldwell of the Institute for Stellar Propulsion, Heuristics, and Aeronautics. Is this a good time?

**Ren Park**

Uh... Doctor Caldwell, hello. Yes, yes, this is a good time.

**Daniella Caldwell (on phone)**

Excellent. It's come to my attention that your employment with Quentin Aerospace was recently terminated. Is that correct?

**Ren Park**

Unfortunately, yes.

**Daniella Caldwell (on phone)**

I wouldn't call it unfortunate.

**Ren Park**

No? Why not?

**Daniella Caldwell (on phone)**

Because it frees you up to work for ISPHA. There's a vacancy in our Experimental Projects Division in Ventura... do you have a moment to discuss the position?

**Ren Park**

Do I... yes, yes, of course! One second, just let me turn off my recorder-

[Click]

[Sounds of the room fade away]

[The wind howling through endless corridors]

[Amy Sterling takes a step back]

**Amy Sterling**

Ren has always held his mistakes closer than most, believing they defined him. And as he grew in authority, he came to believe they defined the future, too. Though the worlds -- even one world -- are far too complex for that to be true... perhaps he wasn't far off. After all, this was not the first day the human race crossed paths with those luminous emissaries of time and thought, nor would it be the last... but it is the first and only time a human ran willingly into their arms. Whether or not Captain Hart survived her final flight, this memory does not tell... but in either case, it seems that encounter had a far greater impact on her world than Ren could ever dream. If it didn't... I somehow know that it would not be here, in this place. And that knowledge chills the blood that no longer flows in my veins, even if I do not know why.

[The wind picks up, growing louder]

[A sound that might just be the wind, but sounds like a word]

There is something waiting for me at the center of this maze, at the heart of the roiling chaos that is the source of all existence. I am Amy Sterling, and if my courage can hold me fast to the end of this journey... I will find it.

[End theme and credits]