

Big Skies

A Short Story

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Ian pairs the drone with his iPad so he can record the mayhem.

Norfolk's skies are huge, and ten miles east of the city the light pollution is virtually zero. He's lived here most of his life and never tires of looking up.

He's counted shooting stars, tracked the International Space Station, picked out the Lagoon Nebula, *oohed* over Jupiter and Mars, and *ahhed* over Tycho, one of the moon's larger craters. And with nothing more than a pair of Celestron SkyMaster binoculars. The heavens in his hands for less than a hundred quid. What's not to like?

He was the first of his mates to get an iPad. But only so he could download an interactive astronomy app that blew his mind for three pounds.

Some say he's a gadget geek but they're missing the point. An early adopter, certainly, but it's never been about the tech per se. It's about what he can see with it.

Today's different though. Today he's looking down. The Holy Stone quadcopter boasts wi-fi camera, live video, and GPS-assisted flight. The battery life is awesome, and the wide-angle lens offers amazing real-time viewing at a distance of up to 500 metres.

He thinks about his mum, how she's always loved birdwatching. Now, he can see what the

birds see. And that's the thing about drones. It's not what's available in the viewfinder as much as the *perspective*.

Yesterday evening, he'd driven over to his bestie's place a couple of villages away. They'd parked up by the graveyard next to the busted-up old church and set the Holy Stone among the holy stones. It hummed to life and rose into the air, then moved forwards across the adjoining field.

Ian held the drone hawk-like, and whooped as he watched his mate's Lab hare off in pursuit of a Muntjac. A Fenton moment followed, his friend shrieking commands at a hound driven delirious by the scent of dinner.

Today, though, is not for fun. The woods and fenland between Panxworth and Pedham are the perfect hunting ground during pheasant season.

Ian has no time for people who kill for entertainment. Worse still, this lot are breaking the law. Shooting is banned on Sundays in England, even when the field is open. But they couldn't care less, and without evidence it's his word against theirs.

The video footage will change the game. Native uploads to Twitter and Facebook. He'll tag the Norfolk rags, TV and local radio too.

The pairing complete, he packs up the car with his gear and heads out to save some birds.



He can already hear the shots as he parks up. A crack. Then another. The business of killing is underway.

He unpacks his kit and leans against the car. A few tweaks and the drone is airborne. He focuses on the iPad screen, glides the quadcopter towards the low canopy of the woods and hovers over the birch. It's early October and the leaves are rusting.

Crack.

He swivels the drone right, searching the screen for a twat and a trigger. Sees a man. Holds the drone steady and zooms in with the viewfinder.

Bastard.

Crack.

The guy's head pivots sharply left to right, then tips skywards. His eyes look right into Ian's though the tablet.

Ian tries to process what he's seeing. The man looks terrified. And he's not armed.

Another shot rings out. The guy darts behind a tree, and Ian shifts the copter a fraction, keeping the man in his scope. His eyes dart to the corner of the screen. *Recording.* Thank Christ.

He places the controller on the bonnet of his car. Keeps one shaking hand free for the joystick and fishes in a pocket for his phone with the other.

‘Please state your name and the nature of the emergency.’

‘Ian Watson. I need the police. There’s a guy in the woods being shot at. They’re fucking hunting him.’ The words tumble from his mouth, the pitch rising with every syllable.

‘Where are you, sir?’

Crack.

He breathes deep. Thinks: keep it together. ‘The public footpath on the corner of the Panxworth Road. By the orange house.’

An idea tickles. He swivels the drone in a smooth arc until he sights the line of shooters. He’s expecting camouflage, not waxed jackets and tweed caps. NFN. Normal for Norfolk.

Back to the guy. He lowers the copter until it’s a couple of feet above the man’s head. Gets his attention. This close, beads of sweat are visible through the retina display, as is the abject terror on the guy’s face.

Ian moves the drone ahead. The guy doesn’t twitch. Ian tweaks the stick to push the drone towards the man, then moves it ahead again: *Follow me, you dozy fuck!*

The man seems to get it and takes a tentative step. Then another. Ian lifts the drone to the treetops and brings it – and the guy – home.



His name is Feliks and he's from Lithuania. He came to help with the harvest but they took his passport, and with it his liberty.

He's not the first. The shooting party have been operating for years. Forensics found a mass grave. They're still piecing together the broken bodies and stolen lives.

Ian hands Feliks the Celestron bins and a beer. The sky is big and clear. Tonight's a good night for looking up.