

Final Descent

Jason Callahan didn't like mornings, but he respected them.

He woke at 4:55 a.m., five minutes before the alarm, like always. No snooze. No sunlight. Just muscle memory, black coffee, and the sharp metallic click of a bathroom light. He gave himself twelve minutes to shower, shave, and suit up. The uniform pressed itself into his silhouette like armor.

By 5:30, he was behind the wheel of a matte-gray electric Roadrunner GT, windows down, stereo up. Echo liked driving with no music sometimes. Said he could hear the city better that way. But today it was synth jazz on low volume, riding the bass line of the pre-dawn skyline. The Dallas towers flickered like they were still deciding whether to wake up.

He pulled into the DFW staff lot like he owned the place. Technically, he didn't. But nobody made decisions in the tower without running it by Echo first. He was twenty-four, the youngest certified ATC lead in Class B airspace in the southern region. People said he had "instinct," but that wasn't it. He had repetition. He had pattern recognition. And he had that weird, quiet confidence that made pilots breathe easier on final approach.

He walked in with a World's Greatest Dad mug even though he didn't have kids. "In the tower, I'm the Papa Bird and the I'm going to bring all my little birds into the nest safely."

He did his morning sweep: checked flight schedules, sipped black coffee, reviewed weather updates, winked at Sharla, and made a half-snide remark about Barry's outdated loafers. At 6:05, he was headset-on and already talking down a flight from LaGuardia through thick fog and two unexpected crosswinds.

By 6:18, it was wheels down. Clean. Smooth.

"Taxi to Gate D26," he said. "You're right on time. Welcome to Dallas Fort Worth, where the coffee's hot and the controllers are hotter."

The pilot laughed. "Thanks, Tower."

Sharla rolled her eyes. Barry chuckled. Echo just grinned.

At lunch, he took the high-speed mag to downtown Dallas and grabbed a salad from a spot called Crate. Everything was made from hydroponic greens and goat cheese with names like "Canyon Rinse" and "Texture Bowl." He got the "Sky Harvest" and a turmeric tea, then ducked into a side booth where he faced with Treyvon Reece, starting point guard for the Mavs.

"You missed a good one last night," Trey said, still shirtless, lying in what looked like a sunken hot tub.

“I heard,” Echo said. “Twelve assists. I was busy keeping a few thousand lives in the air.”

Trey grinned. “I dunno, bro. Landing planes or feeding dunks: it’s all rhythm.”

They talked for six minutes. Sports. Weather. New drone cameras. Echo promised to hit courtside for Friday’s game. “Just don’t make me wear one of those promo jerseys again,” he added.

“No promises,” Trey said. “You’re still the best hype man this city’s got.”

That afternoon, Echo was back in the tower for a double shift. It wasn’t required. He volunteered. Said he liked the view.

And truth was, he did. From 550 feet up, he could see half of Dallas Fort Worth unfold beneath him like a living topographic map. Planes lined up like beads on invisible threads, sliding down glide slopes with the grace of choreography. He loved the sound of it: the clipped back-and-forth between pilot and tower, the timing, the tempo, the sheer control of it all.

People thought air traffic control was chaos. It wasn’t. It was jazz. Calculated, syncopated, gorgeous jazz.

By 7 p.m., the sun dipped low, and the sky turned sherbet orange. Echo leaned back, cracked his neck, and brought in the last FedEx freight of the day like a bedtime story. He could’ve left right after. But instead, he stayed another half-hour to run drills on blackout protocol. Just in case.

Echo didn’t believe in luck. He believed in reps.

His apartment was on the 34th floor of a mid-rise just outside Deep Ellum. Floor-to-ceiling glass, minimalist furniture, one vintage guitar, and an espresso machine more expensive than his car insurance. His fridge was mostly prepped meals, protein shakes, and a weirdly large collection of hot sauces.

That night, he sat on the balcony, legs up, city below. Drone traffic zipped silently across the skyline like glowing fireflies. He sipped bourbon. Just a finger’s worth, neat. Opened a book. Some sci-fi classic about time travel and the end of the world. He didn’t get far. Too tired. Too satisfied.

He had everything. Youth. Talent. Swag. A job he loved. Friends in high places. A growing reputation as the guy who could bring down anything with wings and a prayer.

And tomorrow? Tomorrow would be even better than today. It always was.

He would wake before the sun. Slide into the tower like a symphony conductor. Run the board. Save lives. Make people laugh. Keep things moving.

Because that’s what he did.

He controlled the sky.

* * *

“You’re gonna have to find the river, Rogan.”

His voice came out calm, clipped, practiced. Cowboy drawl dressed in federal authority.

“Say again, Tower?”

“I said follow the river, not the rail line. If you’re looking at tracks, you’re already too far west. You keep those wings level, and when you see the red water tower near Euless, you bank northeast and start flaring. Tower out.”

The line crackled. Then: silence.

In the half-second that followed, Echo exhaled for what felt like the first time in an hour. Or days. He wasn’t sure anymore. The World’s Greatest Dad mug beside him had gone cold three cups ago, but he wasn’t about to microwave it. He hadn’t trusted the break room since the power grid flickered off and came back wrong.

“C’mon, baby bird,” he muttered under his breath, eyes locked on the blank spot where Rogan’s transponder should be. “Come home to Papa.”

The other tower consoles were half-manned, half-abandoned. Radios sputtered with overlapping voices, some coherent, some cracked open by panic. Paper was strewn across desks, on the floor, pinned to the walls, taped to the windows. Mostly empty pizza boxes lined the halls. Dallas Fort Worth had always been controlled chaos.

Now it was just chaos.

Suddenly, like a ghost flickering through static...

“Tower, this is Cargo 981. Wheels down, all intact. We are down.”

Echo grinned, tight and tired. Slammed his special mug once on the desk, not too hard, like a gavel.

“That’s what I’m talkin’ about,” he said.

“Next.”

The tower looked like a war zone, if the war had been fought with stress, sleep deprivation, and microwave burritos.

Hard to believe that when Echo clocked in just 48 hours ago, the world was normal.

Then the FAA bulletin hit inboxes just before sunrise on that first day.

SUBJECT: TEMPORARY SATELLITE INTERFERENCE

Please be advised that GPS-based navigation anomalies have been reported across multiple regions. Ground-based systems are working to restore signal integrity. Remain at post. Remain calm.

It was the kind of memo that felt like a shrug dressed in a suit. No signature. No contact number. No answers.

Echo had read it over and over. Each time, it sounded more like a lie.

Most of the tower crew shrugged it off. A few cracked jokes about solar flares. Barry blamed the Chinese. Sharla said her dog refused to go outside that morning, and she trusted him more than the FAA. But by mid-morning, when inbound flights began requesting reroutes off routine vectors, Echo started making backup plans. He printed old sectional maps, grabbed his own laser pointer from the glove box, and began sketching crude overlays on the windows with a dry-erase marker.

His boss, Art Simkins, took a different approach.

Art was a lifer. Thirty-eight years in the tower, 13 as DFW's supervisory controller. He was steady, deliberate, a paperwork kind of guy. You didn't go to Art for innovation, but you could count on him to get a waiver signed in triplicate.

That's what made it so terrifying when Art lost it.

Sometime early on Day Two, just as word came in about a bird in Kansas that vanished from all radar, Art emerged from his office, pale and sweating through his uniform. He marched to the break room and stood dead still for several minutes. Then he walked back into the control deck, looked out the window at the sky, and muttered, "This is it."

Echo had asked, "What's it, boss?"

Art turned, eyes wide. "They turned off the stars. That's what this is. We flew too close to something. Now everything's shutting down."

He pissed himself right there on the rubber floor tiles. In front of all of them. Made a sound like a hose against linoleum.

Nobody laughed. Nobody moved.

By the time anyone thought to speak, Art was already gone. He walked straight out, uniform soaked, headset still around his neck.

He never came back.

Day Two was not good. But it was relatively quiet.

The transponders began dropping in batches. Pilots were calm but confused. Some flight decks were running blind. Weather systems updated wrong. Nav radios began picking up bleed-in from distant stations. Echo could hear Boston controllers arguing with pilots over Arizona. The noise floor had become a circus of crossed wires.

Sharla tried to patch together a new flight board manually, sketching arrivals with colored pencils like she was drawing a kindergarten poster. Barry attempted to crosscheck weather data between five different sources. All five were wrong.

But planes were still landing. Echo brought them in using voice, instinct, and muscle memory.

A few controllers left after their shifts and didn't return. Some said they needed to check on family. Others just ghosted. The cafeteria ran out of bottled water. The vending machine refused cards. Then bills. Echo started rationing coffee.

By the end of Day Two, someone lit a candle in the break room. Someone else brought in a Bible. Nobody spoke much after sundown. Outside, the DFW runways lit up like a Christmas tree. But only from memory: the lights weren't on. There was no power. Only phosphor haze and heat mirage in the glass.

Echo took his usual post. Marked up more windows. Scanned more ghost frequencies. Told himself again and again: Tomorrow will stabilize. This is turbulence, not collapse.

Then came Day Three.

And the first bird fell.

* * *

By Day Three, nobody believed anything the FAA was saying anymore.

There were still a lot of planes in the air. Still lives riding blind above the earth. And Echo was still at his post. Running on caffeine, instinct, and pure spite.

The first one they lost was a gut punch.

A small passenger jet on final descent. The pilot was calm, even friendly. Then the scream cut in. Not from the plane: from the controller.

"I lost him! I LOST HIM! He just turned nose down! What did I do wrong?"

Echo whipped his head around. Too late. The kid at Station 12 collapsed into his chair, eyes glassed over.

The radar blinked once. Then the signal died.

No crash report. No visuals. Just...gone.

There was no time to grieve. Not even time for shock.

The tower was silent for about three seconds, then...

"Next one's gonna be fun," muttered Sharla, dropping a sticky note at Echo's elbow: Avianca 131. Bogotá to DFW. No transponder. Spotters had visual near Denton.

"No transponder?"

"No nav. No comms. Just...hopes and dreams, cowboy."

Echo ran to a supply closet near the break room and found an Aldis lamp – an old-school signal light. Most of the other controllers still in the tower didn't even know what it was, let alone how to operate it.

Echo pointed it at the tower window and began blinking Morse toward the sky.

"Land Runway 17C. Repeat 17C. Wag wings if copy"

"Land Runway 17C. Repeat 17C. Wag wings if copy"

No response.

Then, unbelievably, a wing wobble from Avianca 131.

"Atta girl."

* * *

Minutes later it was Cargojet 707 from Toronto. With this one, comms were working, but for whatever reason, every incoming message was delayed about 20 seconds.

"Cargojet 707, confirm heading 184 and flare on final," Echo barked.

... [20 seconds of static]...

"Heading 184. Flare on final. Got it."

Echo ran the whole landing like chess by telepathy, instructing move-by-move twenty seconds into the past.

"You're gonna see a burst of wind shear in five...four...now. Compensate three left ticks on rudder."

Twenty seconds later: "We caught it. Stabilizing. You're a wizard, Tower."

“Don’t you forget it.”

* * *

EMERGENCY DIRECTIVE

ALL APPROACHES TO CLASS B AIRSPACE ARE TO BE HALTED IMMEDIATELY.

DFW IS TO SUSPEND ACTIVE LANDINGS UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.

HOLD PATTERNS TO BE INITIATED FOR ALL INBOUNDS.

SIGNAL WHEN STATION STABILIZATION COMPLETE.

– FAA Operations Command

Barry read it aloud and then stood frozen in place.

“They’re serious,” he said. “They want us to lock it all down.”

“They’ll crash in hold,” Sharla muttered. “You keep ‘em circling long enough, they run out of sky or fuel or both.”

Echo didn’t move. Just kept staring out the tower glass.

“That’s a death sentence,” he said.

Barry hesitated. “It’s federal, man. We’re under directive.”

“Directive from people who haven’t talked to a pilot in three days,” Echo snapped. “We’ve got birds in the air. I’m not telling them to circle while we wait for Jesus and the satellite fairy to high-five.”

Sharla chewed the end of her pen. “You really want to go against the FAA?”

“I want to go with the ones actually flying the damn planes.” He grabbed his headset. “We tell them what’s happening. Give them the choice. They want to circle, they circle. But if they want to land, I’ll get ‘em on the ground.”

There was silence in the tower.

Then Sharla nodded. “Pilot discretion.”

Barry didn’t look thrilled. But he sighed and sat back down.

One by one, Echo reached out to each inbound call sign. He explained the situation in plain language. No FAA bluster. No lawyerese.

They all chose to land.

Every single one.

And things were settling down. Echo had landed the next eight planes in his queue without any difficulty at all.

Under normal circumstances, he'd be cracking jokes and having the time of his life. But that was hard when every few minutes...

Barry stood up mid-call. "They're stacked too close. Delta 619 and Vega Air. Both called 17K."

Echo turned. "What's separation?"

"None."

The whole tower froze.

"DFW Tower...collision alert, collision alert..."

Then both icons vanished. A third appeared...then fragmented.

Barry didn't scream. He just dropped to his knees.

Echo sighed and took a deep breath.

This was the darndest shift he'd ever worked. By his count, they'd lost at least 4,000 souls out on the airfield since he clocked in three days ago.

He hadn't lost a single bird.

Sharla pointed. "We've got one southbound over Mansfield. No transponder. Low altitude. Might be Kilo India 449, but...she's not responding."

Echo flipped through channels. "Kilo India 449, this is DFW Tower. Do you copy?"

Nothing.

Then, garbled transmission:

"Tower...help. I not...map...landing?"

Female voice. Shaky. Portuguese accent. No translation feed. Digital assist systems had gone down yesterday.

Echo pulled open a drawer and yanked out a laminated ICAO phrase sheet. Dog-eared, coffee-stained, last used in simulation training five years ago.

He scanned it like a man reading scripture in a language he'd forgotten.

“Você me ouve?” ... (Do you hear me?)

Static.

Then: “Sim. Muito pouco.” ... (Yes. Very little.)

“Continue...seguir o rio. Trinity River. Grande...curva.” ... (Keep going...follow the river. Big curve.)

“Torre vermelha...Euleless...você vê?” ... (Red tower...Euleless...do you see it?)

More silence.

Then: “Sim. Eu vejo.”

Echo leaned forward, his voice tight, focused, trembling with hope.

“Aterrar...devagar. Rodas para baixo.” ... (Land...slowly. Gear down.)

Five minutes later, a red streak of rubber arced across Runway 17R.

The landing was rough. But they were safe.

Echo didn't cheer. Just whispered:

“Boa menina.” ... (Good girl.)

Rami's hands shook. “He's gliding blind. Lost power. He says he sees runway lights.”

“There aren't any runway lights.”

“I know.”

“Cessna 71D, you're almost home.”

No crash sound. Just silence.

Rami unplugged his headset and walked out. It was his third downed flight.

He couldn't take anymore.

The pressure was getting to everyone.

A pilot screamed, then dove nose-first out of view.

A 727 skipped across a thunderstorm like a stone, then vanished.

A private jet mistook an abandoned strip for DFW and slammed into a closed hangar.

One icon blinked in from Denver, held eight seconds, and disappeared.

An incoming flight iced over at altitude. Final word: "freezing."

No one said "pattern" anymore. Just "next."

Sharla pointed to a 737.

"Minneapolis origin. No gear. Flying low."

"Visual?"

"Yeah. Rooftop cam. They banked hard left over downtown Dallas. Then nothing."

Sharla took off her badge. She was sobbing.

"I left a sandwich in the fridge," she said.

She walked out. Didn't look back.

And just like that, Echo was alone in the tower.

He brought in three more planes. Couldn't remember them later.

Then he gave one pilot the same instructions, word for word, as an earlier one. Realized it as soon as he spoke and corrected himself before disaster.

He finally sat down. Just to blink. Just to breathe.

“DFW Tower, this is Skylink 205 requesting emergency final...”

Echo stood up.

He still had his headset on. His voice was automatic, if a bit scratchy.

“Confirm souls onboard.”

“125. We’re hemorrhaging. Nav systems gone.”

He wasn’t sure how long he’d been out – probably just a minute or two. But his next baby bird was lined up.

“You’re gonna have to thread it. Come in low. Skim the river. Line up with the tower. Trust me.”

Static. Cut off.

The icon flickered. Then vanished.

His World’s Greatest Dad mug sat in its spot beside the monitor. The icon returned.

As if the last three days hadn’t been stressful enough. His team had abandoned him. His boss literally pissed his pants before they’d lost a single plane - freaked out, and gone home.

Now it was just him. They laughed when he brought the mug in. But if the last three days had proven anything, it’s that Echo Callahan was indeed the *World’s Greatest Dad*.

He hadn’t lost a single bird since the beginning of this nightmare, and he wasn’t about to start now.

“Skylink 205. Do you copy?”

“Skylink 205. Do you copy?”

Nothing.

“Skylink?”

“Ah, there you are. I was starting to think you made a run to the drink cart.”

Echo laughed and picked up his mug, more out of habit than anything.

“Copy that. Set heading two-one-zero. Drop to three thousand. Do it slow. You’ve got thermal chop under you. Flaps at twenty degrees. Keep your nose level.”

“Yes Skylink, you are exactly on approach. Your instruments are jumpy, copy that. Just stay with me.”

The radar blinked in and out. A smear of green on a cracked screen.

“Ease left to one-niner-five. Count seven seconds and right the rudder. You’ll see the Trinity River cross the horizon. Look for the red tower in Euless. That’s your runway marker.”

“Copy. Don’t worry. You’ll see it. Trust your gut. You’ve got twenty seconds before the threshold. Gear down. Commit.”

“What do you mean you don’t see anything? The runway lights are on,” Echo whispered.

“I said the runway’s lit. You’re clear to land.”

The radar icon flickered once more.

Echo barked one more call into the void:

“Flare now. Touch down in three...two...”

Silence.

The icon vanished...

But there was no explosion.

Papa had done it again.

Echo took a deep breath. That was as close as he’d been. He took off his headset. For the moment the skies were quiet.

He walked around the empty tower reliving the past three days. The carnage outside was awful. The loss of lives had been unimaginable.

* * *

From his perch high above the airfield, Echo could see everything now.

Dallas Fort Worth had always been a city within a city. Seven runways, five terminals, over 17,000 acres of relentless motion. A concrete symphony of schedules and jet fuel and aluminum ballet. It once throbbed with life, with purpose. Now it looked like the end of something sacred.

The airfield stretched to every horizon like a battlefield frozen mid-collapse. Mangled aircraft dotted the runways and taxiways in disjointed clumps, their angles too jagged, their positioning too unnatural. Some sat upright as if nothing had happened, wings level, noses aligned. But the quiet betrayed them. No crews swarming. No luggage carts humming. Just silence.

Others told a different story.

A Delta jet rested with its nose buried halfway into Terminal B, tail raised skyward like a weathervane. The glass around the impact had shattered outward and inward simultaneously. Metal teeth of the terminal roof clung to the fuselage like fingers refusing to let go. The bridgeway had snapped, hanging loose from the second floor like a broken arm.

Two gates down, a smaller Airbus had come to rest in the short-term parking garage. Its right wing had sliced clean through three rows of parked cars before embedding itself into a concrete pillar. The garage itself had buckled under the strain, floors sagging like collapsed lungs. From this distance, it looked like a child had driven a toy plane into a Lego set.

There were fires, but they were fading now. Long trails of blackened streaks crisscrossed the taxiways. Runway rubber that had ignited from friction, fuel, and fury. Here and there, heat shimmered above these scars, the air itself unsure how to behave. The jet fuel fires from the earliest hours had mostly burned out or consumed themselves, leaving charred skeletons of fuselages that looked dipped in ash. Others still smoldered, coughing up low black plumes that drifted sideways into the Texas sky like forgotten prayers.

Near the outer perimeter, one 747 had nosed over entirely, its rear end perched like a whale's tail. It had clipped the edge of the westbound I-635 loop and taken out three light poles, coming to rest sideways across both northbound lanes. The word Lufthansa was still visible on the hull, scuffed but legible, like a headline that no longer meant anything.

Farther south, near the old employee lot, a commuter jet had landed successfully. Perfect pitch, textbook touchdown...but been struck minutes later by another craft descending blind from altitude. The second plane hadn't seen the first until the last instant. It landed directly on top of the parked jet, crushing the center fuselage like a soda can. Both planes still sat there, stacked like a mistake in a toy box. The boarding stairs had been lowered. One rear hatch remained open.

Echo squinted at that detail. Had the passengers gotten out? Had they seen the sky fall before they reached the highway below?

Scattered across the surrounding grounds were aircraft that looked less like vehicles and more like crashed birds. They had fallen at strange angles: in fields, on highway overpasses, even in the infield grass between runways. One had nosed straight into a drainage ditch, its engines barely visible beneath the overgrown reeds. Another had come to rest just shy of the Trinity River embankment, its nose wedged in the dirt like it had tried to drink from the earth.

The runways themselves were etched with emergency marks. Skid patterns, black striations, clawed tire bursts from desperate braking. In some places, the pavement had buckled from impact, warping the lines that once guided pilots home. Painted arrows pointed in directions that no longer mattered. The landing lights, once a symphony of guidance, sat dormant in their sockets, bulbs blackened or broken.

And yet...

Amid the devastation, traces of Echo's work remained.

He could still pick them out: the planes he'd brought down. The ones he'd guided by voice and instinct, flared in with nothing more than timing, prayer, and grit. They weren't unscathed, but they were whole. Like survivors in a sea of casualties, they rested on the far end of the east tarmac, nose cones slightly dipped, tails unbroken.

There was the Avianca flight from Bogotá, its wing still marked by the Aldis lamp exchange that had saved it.

There was the Cargojet from Toronto, the delay-loop transmission craft he'd landed on time-warped intuition.

He even spotted the red paint streak left by Kilo India 449 – the talented Portuguese pilot who didn't know where she was until she saw the Euless tower through the smoke. That rubber arc etched the tarmac like a signature.

The sky above all of it had turned a dull eggshell blue, tinged with ash near the horizon. DFW's iconic control tower loomed over it all like an ancient sentinel. Its sides were dirtied by soot and rain, its windows smeared with time. Below, the concourses had gone dark. The monorail was no longer running. Jet bridges drooped toward nothing. Gate signs still cycled digital messages out of habit. Now boarding, Group A.

Echo turned away from the glass and let his eyes fall shut.

In another life – it was only a moment ago – this place was a marvel: a hub of motion, energy, human ingenuity. Now it was a graveyard for machines and a shrine to those who tried.

But it wasn't just the wreckage that haunted him. It was the stillness. The profound absence of motion. Planes were meant to move. Airports were meant to hum. And yet here everything sat: paused, broken, waiting for instructions that would never come.

He pressed a palm to the glass, steadying himself. Somewhere out there were still pilots trying to find a way down. Still birds in the sky, wings level, listening for guidance.

* * *

And Echo was still here.

Watching. Waiting. Listening.

“DFW Tower, this is JetBlue 237. Manual nav only. Requesting emergency approach. Fuel’s in the red. We’ve got visual but no systems. Can you talk us in?”

Echo was already standing. Headset on.

Voice steady as gospel.

“JetBlue 237, this is DFW Tower. Welcome to the quiet side of the apocalypse. We’ve been expecting you.”

There was a pause. Then: weak laughter from the flight crew.

“Copy that, Tower.”

Echo nodded once, his eyes fixed on the horizon.

“Set heading one-eight-five. You’ll follow the river till you hit the tower in Euless. Still red, still standing. That’s your mark. Drop to twenty-five hundred and hold it tight. You’ve got residual thermal chop and sidewinds east of the big loop. Flaps twenty. Gear when ready. Runway 17C is yours.”

“...You’re sure we’re clear to land?”

“As clear as anything’s been in days. You stick with me, I’ll stick with you.”

Silence.

Then:

“Roger that, Tower. Bringing it home.”

Echo smiled. Just a little. Just enough.

“JetBlue 237, winds calm. Visibility one soul. You are clear to land at Dallas–Fort Worth. Welcome home.”

The air in the tower was thick with dust and something older now. Something like dried sweat, ozone, and the slow rot of memory. Light filtered through slanted glass in streaks, yellow and grainy. The sun had shifted across the seasons since the Collapse, but the blinds had never been touched.

The consoles were still there. Black plastic bleached pale, keys worn shiny from thousands of keystrokes that now led nowhere. Cables dangled like vines, most of them unplugged or coiled like dead snakes across the floor. One radar monitor had cracked diagonally, spider-webbing out from a single impact point. A World's Best Dad coffee mug, fused with dried sludge, rested at an angle, stuck to the desk by time and grime.

Faint boot prints were visible in the dust, all tracing the same obsessive path: chair to console, console to window, headset to dead terminal. Again and again again. Over and over.

A fan in the corner spun uselessly, clicking once each rotation like a broken metronome. No air moved. The HVAC had died months ago. The room was stifling. Silent.

Except for Echo Callahan.

His once-crisp uniform had dulled to a mottled gray. He'd cut the sleeves off at some point. A radio headset clung to his skull like a relic. He had worn grooves into the armrests of the command chair from gripping too hard for too long. His lips moved constantly. Sometimes loud, sometimes a whisper. Always in rhythm.

"Delta 1309, turn left heading one-niner-five. Confirm visual. Confirm souls on board. You are clear to land."

He adjusted imaginary frequencies. Reached for switches that no longer worked. Nodded to ghosts only he could hear.

His face, once full of swagger and fire, was hollow now. Scruff shaded his jaw. His eyes – bloodshot, glassy – still scanned the sky like it held answers.

Outside the tower windows, the tarmac was cracked and broken. The graveyard below was silent. There was no movement.

"American 702, welcome to Dallas Fort Worth. Glad to have you home. Taxi to Gate C17 when you're ready."

He smiled, just barely. Nodded once at the empty sky.

"We've been waiting for you."