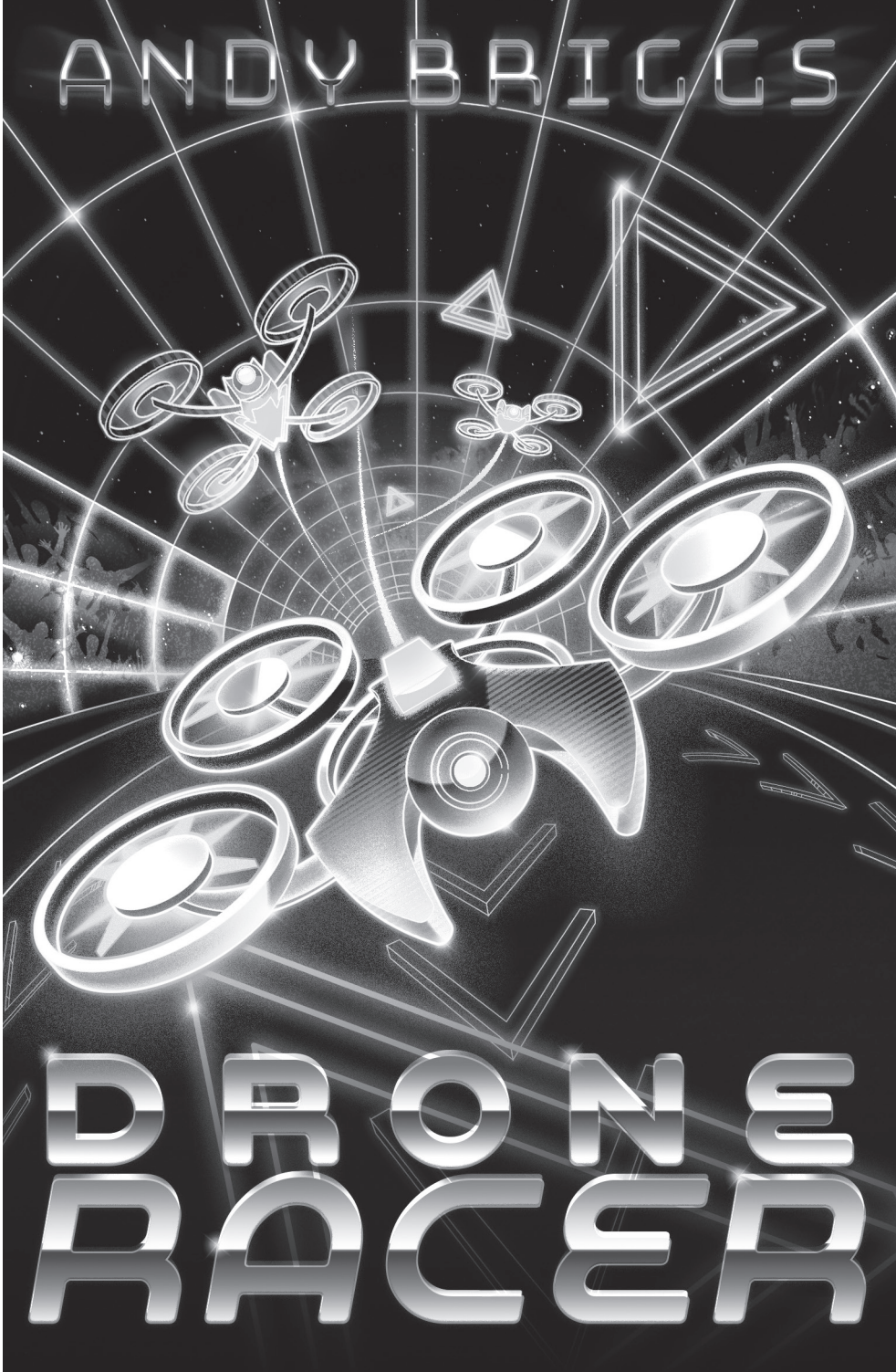


ANDY BRIGGS



DRONE
RACER

Scholastic Children's Books
An imprint of Scholastic Ltd
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First published in the UK by Scholastic Ltd, 2018

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ISBN 978 1407 18842 3

A CIP catalogue record for this book
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Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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*I think it is possible for ordinary people
to choose to be extraordinary.*

—Elon Musk



Chapter 1

THE RACE

Carson Lox's palms were sweaty as he nudged the throttle forward. The ViperLyte FPV racing quadrotor drone responded instantly, nudging towards eighty miles per hour.

His craft banked effortlessly between the track's neon-blue signs, which became high-speed blurs as he zoomed past. Ahead, the running lights of Logan46 blinked their silent challenge at him.

"Come on!" Carson howled. He gritted his teeth in concentration as Logan46 abruptly shot straight up to avoid a sheer wall in their path. Carson heaved the joysticks back and followed the leader in a steep

climb – but it was a short one. A vast dark ceiling filled his view and he heard the plastic on his radio controller creak as he pushed the sticks forward to level his aircraft out.

Had he been a split second slower, he would have hit the ceiling at full pelt. There would be no coming back from that. It would have meant death in a shower of plastic pieces.

Concentrate, he silently ordered himself as he drew closer to Logan46. His rival may have had superior engines able to spin him through tight circles, but Carson's drone had been tricked out by his engineer and he knew he was faster. And now the racers were on a straight, he had the advantage.

The track strobed its multicoloured yellow and red stripes beneath him, and the noise from the crowd began to rise as he doggedly pursued his rival.

Ahead, a flashing circle indicated the descent into hell – a fully enclosed tube that coiled like a snake. Most pilots would be forced to slow down here, but not Carson. And clearly not Logan46.

The view ahead was suddenly swamped by darkness as they plummeted at speed into the tunnel. The speedometer floating over his display

clicked over ... 89 ... 90. Only the drones' headlights revealed the curving walls that spiralled down and to the right.

Carson's jaw began to cramp – he was clenching his teeth out of sheer concentration. He had memorized the course; every twist and turn...

Logan46 suddenly slowed as it performed a barrel roll right in front of Carson. It was a pointless display of acrobatics – but it had the desired effect.

Carson nudged the controls to the left to avoid colliding – but he was going too fast to compensate for the abrupt turn in the tunnel. The edge of his forward portside rotors clipped the wall and shattered. The aircraft lurched to the left under the strain of the missing propeller and Carson's aircraft spun one hundred and eighty degrees around—

Just in time to see the racer in third place behind him round the tunnel bend and slam into him at full speed.

Carson's world went black.

Carson yanked his virtual reality headset off in anger. He rubbed his sore hazel eyes as they adjusted from the FPV (first person view) of the goggles and

looked out over the course that was spread over three levels of the multistorey car park. The crowd whooped as Logan⁴⁶ crossed the finishing line in record time.

Logan himself stood several metres away, his radio control unit firmly in his hands as his fingers nudged the sticks to make his drone perform a victory roll around them. Sweat poured around his VR glasses, which were covered in stickers: a skull and crossbones and another declaring him to be *King of the Sky*. His crew of three long-haired, muscular teens stood behind, swapping high fives. One looked at Carson and spread his index finger and thumb across his forehead: *loser*.

“Smooth move,” said Eddie from behind. He was three centimetres smaller, quite a few wider, and a month younger than Carson. All twelve years old, Carson’s team were the youngest racers here. Eddie (his full name *Edward*, every letter pronounced by his parents when he was in trouble) wore thick glasses, permanently marred by greasy fingerprints, that he always joked were AR goggles – *actual reality*. He was, for want of any better position, the team manager.

“That was a dirty trick,” Carson growled, slamming his visor on to the table.

Eddie hissed and scooped it up as if it were made of glass instead of plastic. He stroked the headset protectively. “Easy with those! You don’t have to break *everything*!”

“Well, Team Logan are known for their dirty tricks, Carson,” said Trix – again, not her real name, but she *hated* Tracy, even when she was in a good mood. Her dark brown skin was covered in sweat due to the humidity in the car park. It was so bad that her hair, normally gelled straight up in a cool spike – or a brush, as Eddie liked to tease – was already threatening to wilt like a badly watered yucca plant. “And I think you trashed my engine at the very least,” she reminded him. As the team’s official engineer, she traditionally complained about the slightest scratch on their drone. From the quiet way she spoke this time, Carson and Eddie were left in no doubt that she was saving her yelling voice for later.

“I really thought we could have won. . .” Eddie sighed. “Even second place. I could have done with the money.”

They all could have. They had begged and borrowed to build their latest drone, and Carson knew that it would be a long time before they could afford to fix a broken engine. If there was any further damage to the drone – and after a ninety-miles-per-hour crash, that was likely – then they would be well and truly stuffed.

“Carsonators?” came a voice from behind. Carson turned in recognition of their team name – and immediately regretted it.

Three bigger kids scowled at them. They all wore matching black tank tops with a familiar AirBlitz logo. The very same logo on the drone Carson had just flown into. Their pilot’s VR headset hung from his neck, and the radio controller in his hand had chunks of plastic missing from it where he had presumably slammed it frustration.

The furious spotty drone pilot tilted his head until his neck cracked. Then he thrust a fat finger into Carson’s ribs.

“You sabotaged my race! You owe me a new drone,” he said menacingly.