

Chapter Fifteen

Armada of Evil

“4000 meters, dead ahead” said Ben. They began slowing their speed.

“I thought we were supposed to ping Charlie-Fourteen on approach.”

“Not this time, radio silence all the way. Those lumbering shit bags are too close.”

“So what...we just show up and knock on their door?”

“That’s it man...old school” Ben replied. “2500 meters”

“Hey boysy. I know you’re too dardy to go getting nervous and all, but has it ever even crossed your mind we might get our asses shot off this morning?” asked Luke.

“Seriously Lafurney? How dangerous do you think a few blimps full of Guang-Bangers can be?”

“Well, I’m *sure* it’ll be the walk in the park you say dude, but just for the record, my sphincter’s tight enough to make linguini.”

“Well I reckon that’ll keep you from shittin’ your pants.”

Two minutes passed as they narrowed to 1500 meters.

“Whooooa!” What - the - fuck was that!??? Shouted Ben in his mic.

“No fucking idea! *So you saw it too?*”

“Of course I saw it! But it was gone almost as quick as it appeared.”

“Jeezus, that’s the sickest fucking thing I’ve ever seen dude.”

“Did it come from the ground?”

“Yea, I mean...yea, that’s what it *looked* like.”

“I don’t know, but that was some gonzo shit man! The hair on my neck is still standing. Maybe these guys will know what it was. We’re 800 meters out. Can you see the target?”

As they looked straight ahead, they saw a small cluster of cumulous clouds. But one had intermittent flashes of light coming from the top. That was their visual cue. 14d had left the porch light on. It was designed to appear as heat lightening, and that’s precisely what it looked like. They slowed and began to flare.

“Hey Lafurney, my little romp down on the deck back there cost us any chance of sleep before we do this” said Ben as he positioned them above the Cloudpod. “I’m sorry man, but dawn is in less than three hours. We’re basically going to have time to get in there, see what kind of intel they have, grab something to eat, then get our asses back out here and get it done.”

“Are you kidding me dude, I couldn’t sleep right now if I had to gun to my head. But I can tell ya this ole’ boy. I’m not gonna go sneakin’ around some Guang infested dirigible without some ridiculously strong coffee and a few serious yoga stretches...just know that my brotha’!”

It was now zero-three-eighteen. They began their descent onto the roof of 14d; a newly retrofitted Pod, so designated for her ability to launch multiple satellite drones and retrieve them back. The still air had made their landings easy and quick.

Ben used the butt of his utility knife to knock on the roof. They got a quick response back. Four minutes later, they were down and in. As good as it felt to be standing upright, it took all of 30 seconds to start longing for the fresh air they’d just left. The stench of body odor was rampant in Cloudpods. For the crew, their olfactories had long since stopped caring but to visitors, it would curl toenails and cause light-headedness.

The Commander was on the landing deck to greet them.

“Evening gentlemen, I’m Commander Nubell. Which one of you is Captain Brexhill?”

“Me sir” Ben replied.

“Ok, so I’m guessing you’re Lafurney” he said, looking at Luke

“That’d be me sir, yes”

Nubell extended his hand to both and asked if they wanted some coffee.

“Yessir, the blacker the better” said Luke “and if you have any protein of some kind, that’d be really good too.”

“Oh yea, we’ve got groceries, nothing fresh I’m afraid, but some of the stuff they send us out here with, is actually worth eating”

“Speaking of *out here* Commander, you guys are pretty far out for a pod aren’t you?” asked Luke “I didn’t know there were any deployed this far out”

“Yep, us and Alpha 11 are the furthest downrange of any pods so far. Any further, and it’s hard to manage provisions, not to mention crew fatigue – which I can tell you, is no small thing” replied the Commander “We’re pretty isolated out here and a long way from home”

“What about ground stations?” asked Ben

“Nada!” Not out this far.” Nubell replied “Getting an EC crew out here to build one, would be plenty fucking dangerous by itself. But *manning* one would basically amount to deferred suicide. Eventually, we’ll have high-speed shuttles, or so we’re told. They’ll run at night, like you guys - changing out crews provisioning, etc. But nobody’s holding their breath.

“I understand that” said Luke

“So how was the ride?” asked Nubell.

“Long” said Ben “very long and very stiff”

“Stiff?” asked the Commander.

“Yea, try to imagine standing at attention for five and a half hours” Ben replied.
“It feels like rigor mortis setting in...I guess, whatever that feels like.”

“Well I wish we had a masseuse up here fellas” said the Commander “but they haven’t seen fit to get us one yet”

Ben and Luke looked at each other.

“Listen Commander. I hope this doesn’t sound ludicrous or anything, but we just saw something about a click west that...well, I don’t even know where to start. Luke you want to describe it?”

“Well, I mean it’s pretty bizarre” said Luke “but I’m pretty sure it was real, because we both saw it. It was like this *spire*, if you wanna call it that. Appeared to come from the ground; kind of an organic color, less than a meter in diameter maybe. In a fraction of a second, it shot up to almost our altitude – and then as soon as it topped out, the whole thing just, like...disintegrated, disappeared.”

“Sand Spout” said the Commander as he re-secured the entry silos.

“*Sand Spouts?* Is that what you said?”

“Yep, that’s what *we* call ‘em. We first saw ‘em maybe three months back. Usually show up in pairs. Did you see two?”

“No, just the one.”

“So, what the hell are they Commander?”

“Not a clue, at least from anybody that matters. We’ve taken pictures; even caught one on video and sent them back to the labs; but with all that’s going on, they can’t be bothered. But if you want a layman’s guess, they look to be made up of nothing but plain ole’ desert sand. But they sorta behave like an electrical charge, like lightning, except going in the opposite direction. We’ve seen them in the day, at night, cool air, warm air. From all we can tell, their occurrence is totally random – no observable rhythm whatsoever.”

“Hmm,” said Ben “well, I Reckon it’s another one of Mother Earth’s little post-apocalyptic tirades. Harmless do you think?”

“Well they are I expect, unless you get in the way of one” said Nubell.

“Right! Alright, so what can you tell us about these things blimp fucking things Commander?” asked Ben

“Call me Walt. Come, let me show you” he replied.

He turned to the large table in the center of the room. Charlie Class Pods had almost twice the volume of Alphas, and therefore afforded fixed consoles vs. the deployable type. The table had a large rectangular screen mounted horizontally into its surface. He touched the screen, bringing it out of sleep mode. On the display appeared a still image of the desert floor, obviously magnified, and with grid marks dividing the terrain into 30-meter squares. In the top right corner was a time/date stamp indicating when the image was captured. Nubell began swiping right, until the date was three days prior, 0217 hours.

“These are the first few shots we took of them, three nights ago. We were in a slow southeasterly drift, a hundred kilometers or so, east of our present position, when the lead ship passed within 160 meters of us. Smack in the dead of night. Damn thing’s so completely dark, probably would’ve never spotted it visually, but our A-CAS caught it. It was lumbering along at about 56 kph, like some giant ass, long for dead caterpillar floating its way to caterpillar heaven. We also call ‘em sloths. Ugly fuckers.”

“Won’t argue with that” said Luke

“Right!?” said Nubell “Anyway, as you can see, they were slightly below us, as they are now. We’ve essentially matched our speed and proximity to theirs, ever since; which I have to say, is the one good thing in all this. I mean because we’re both LTAs with helium buoyancy, our speed coefficients are roughly the same. It makes ‘em easy to keep up with.”

“Man they *are* running dark, aren’t they?” Said Luke. “Reminds me of those friggin trawlers”

“You got that right, they ain’t looking to be discovered, that’s for sure” said the Commander “we haven’t observed so much as a tick of light from either one of these things, even the cockpits, since we started tracking them. Whoever designed them, was hell bent on stealth”

“You said *cockpits*?” asked Ben

“Yea” replied Nubell as he swiped to a new, closer image. “there’s two on each ship, here and here” he pointed. “For this image and the next few, we dropped down to just under them, but maintained the same separation”

Ben nodded. The Commander had pointed to two windowed sections, one forward and one aft, along a protruding undercarriage, down the craft’s centerline. But even through what were clearly the flight decks, not a single pinpoint of light. If the pilots were there, it was impossible to observe them without infrared.

“That’s a *little* creepy” said Luke “Reminds me of the ghost ship”

“Ghost ship?” inquired Nubell

“Yea, my father is a fisherman. About six years ago, he and his crew ran onto a small merchant ship, adrift in the Timor. When they boarded her, they found everyone onboard dead; had been for weeks, almost three hundred souls”

“What happened?” asked the Commander.

“Ran out of food and water” replied Luke “The vessel had a Malaysian registry. Probably struck out for our northern coastline, and ran off course. Full of families, just looking for a place where they could survive. Nothing good about running onto a ghost ship, I can tell you”

“Yea well, I don’t think for a second, that’s what we have here” said Ben “I think the crews aboard these things, are *anything* but dead, and plenty fucking dangerous”

“Well you’re right there Captain” said Nubell, “at least on the *alive* part” He swiped forward to a telescopic night-vision view of the forward cockpit. There were three men, plainly visible, standing at the helm.

Nubell’s purser had brought up some hot coffee.

“Here ya go gentlemen, this should help. Lobo, can you get these guys some hot food too please?”

“You bet” replied the galley chief.

“So what are these things up here?” asked Ben, pointing to two small ports up near the nose.

“Thrusters,” said Luke “bow thrusters like on a ship, I’m sure. It would be impossible to turn one of these at low speeds without them.”

“Twin props” asked Ben

“Correct” said Nubell.

He swiped two images forward showing a view from astern. It showed two fairly large props, one on top of the other, and a large rudder immediately behind them.

“What about cabin air intakes? Any idea where they are?” asked Ben.

Nothing obvious so far, but my guess is, they run along here, just above the flight deck. And we think that’s just *below* the passenger deck, which basically resides up into the envelope – and therefore never visible.”

“Makes sense” Ben replied, “that’s about the only place the passenger deck could be, and it would make sense to have cabin air coming from somewhere in between. That’s probably our best bet for getting a look inside”

The Commander nodded.

“Fleet says you guys are supposed to sleep for at least an hour, before deploying. Is that your order?”

“I don’t know if it’s an order as much as a suggestion” said Ben “but yea, it was a part of our briefing. But we caught some bugs coming up, threw us thirty minutes off our timeline, so maybe we just stretch for a bit, get some food and then get out there. Not sure we could sleep anyway”

“Now that we’re out here, we just pretty much wanna get it done.” Said Luke “Get a look inside these ugly mother-fuckers. I just hope they’re not filled with some yellow, slimy shit or something”

Nubell grinned “Yea, I don’t think you need to worry about that. I think you’re only problem with be, keeping your asses from being shot off. C’mon I’ll show you down to the crew deck where you can stretch out”

The Commander escorted them below deck. As they descended, three of the crew were at a round table playing Mahjong. Another was on the sofa holding a tablet with one hand and the other down his pants, playing with himself – notably unconcerned over Ben and Luke having entered the room. There was a crew of eight on 14d, probably four on, and four off, all the time, Ben imagined. These dudes were hardcore to be sure.

Despite Charlie class’s significantly larger volume, Ben couldn’t imagine how small it would become after 30-45 days of deployment; all of them living and working in close proximity, and absolutely no way to go anywhere or be outside. Despite their politeness, Ben and Luke both observed the strain in their faces. It was a shitty gig, plain and simple, especially that far out. And it wasn’t as though you shut down every day at five for cocktails. Somebody had to be manning the surveillance 24/7. But they fucking well did it...day in, day out. If it weren’t for these guys, Ben realized, these airborne douche-bags might have turned-up on the homeland’s doorstep, before ever being discovered. If we win this thing, he thought, *these guys* will have been the real fucking heroes.

The galley clerk had set two places on the mess table. There were two fresh cups of jo, two glasses of apple juice and two platters of corned-beef hash, obviously brought to life from a de-hydrated ration bag. It wasn’t Tito’s fare by any stretch, but it was hot, and the smell had actually managed to eclipse the caustic body stench, if only briefly. In less than ten minutes Ben and Luke had the last fork-full in their mouths and were eying the bunks. But they hadn’t the luxury of getting out of their flight-suits.

The galley clerk fetched them a pair of rolled up, self-inflating pads. They took them back above deck, where there was more floor space, and laid them out. Face-down was the only option, but at least it got them in the prone position, and was reasonably quiet.

“So, did you get a load of that dude on the sofa down there?” said Luke.

“Whata ya men?” asked Ben.

“Well, I mean, my uncle, right? I remember him sitting in the living room with all of us, like after dinner or whatever – and he’d just be sitting there in front of the whole room, with his finger stuck up his nose, mining for gold; first one side, then the other. Just like we weren’t even sitting there!”

“Yea?” Ben replied

“Yea, like at what point does *that* happen right? I mean this dude downstairs didn’t even look up when we hit the deck. He just kept spanking his monkey, like he was in some isolation cell”

“Yea, and I bet he used to be a private person too” said Ben “...probably locked himself in the bathroom to brush his teeth. And now look what the poor bastard’s been reduced to; like some pack dog, licking his balls in front of his K-9 pals. You couldn’t pay me enough money to do what these guys do”

[Pause]

“Can’t stop thinking about the kid” Ben said.

“Yea, me too. Survival’s a thin wire out here, and that boys walking it”

“Well, maybe we can take him off of it” said Ben

“Ben, I knew you were thinking that, the second we took off. Don’t go there, man. You know that can’t happen”

Ya know what Lafurney, if *this shit* can happen, then why not that?

Cloud Nine – zero-three-fifty-five hours

Not wanting to forego their whimsical hallucination a moment longer, Paige and Marshall decided to light the sticks. As unwieldy as they were, they always produced an exhilarant spike to the endorphins. In just over eight minutes, the burn shut down and sent them into a high-speed glide to their destination. It was quiet, beautiful and however momentary, forgetful of past and future. Fun had been in short supply over the last weeks, thought Paige. Now seemed like an appropriate moment to replenish it.

Whatever group of vigilant pod-sitters were manning Cloud Nine, had no idea they were about to have visitors, and they needed to keep it that way. As they descended on the coordinates, there were a number of clouds about, but only one emanating a red blinking light through its aeriform crown. They hovered straight above, and with a few yelps of laughter, dropped ever so gently, onto the roof.

The pair stood, engulfed in cloud matter. They faced each other, steadying themselves on one of the landing stanchions. Neither said anything for a full minute, as they each watched the other's faces disappear and reappear through the evaporating gas. They giggled like children.

"You look like a priest in a snow storm" said Paige

"You look like you're going somewhere in a time machine" said Marshall

"We've made it Reardon" he exclaimed, putting his hand over hers "we're *literally* on Cloud Nine. We've discovered the holy grail, the end of the rainbow. We've uncovered the *real-life source* to an ancient metaphor!"

"Maybe, she said "I mean I'm not exactly feeling that right now - but I do have to say, you've brought me out of my funk"

"Of course you're no longer in a funk. Cloud Nine is the antithesis of funk. The two simply can't coexist darling, don't you see!"

"Did you just call me darling!?"

"Of course I did darling. Up here we're all darlings...and up here, we only drink libations created by the gods!"

"Is that right?" she said sarcastically

He unzipped a pouch on his left thigh, and handed her a flask

"Are you kidding me?" she said "You brought a flask of whiskey on a live mission?"

"Rum actually, would you like some darling?!"

She paused "Yes darling...I think I will"

The two passed the flask back and forth, pointing their heads skyward every time a hole opened up, affording a view of the starry sky. The sensation truly was like floating on top of the world, thought Paige. And Marshall had made sure the moment didn't pass. Squeezing the fun out of a thing, whatever it happened to be - was his gift, and it was exactly what Paige needed, at precisely the right moment.

"Well Reardon, now isn't this everything you thought Cloud Nine would be?"

"It's pretty damn funderful Marshall" she said, looking at his hazy face through the cloud. "In fact, I might even go out on a limb and say it's splendiferous!"

"I aim to please darling!" he said

She stood on her toes, leaned across the bar, and kissed on the cheek. Acting *solely* on impulse, and without so much as a fleeting nod to rejection or consequence, he pulled her to him, and kissed her, full on the mouth.

The thought of romance with anyone other than Ben Brexhill, felt strange. But he was absent, both in the here and now, and otherwise. If she couldn't be with the one she loved, then perhaps she should love who she was with. Besides it was a moment that would never come again, a defeated tyrant and an all-expense paid trip to Cloud Nine. She simply didn't want to think about it any longer.

With only a fleeting moment of hesitation, she leaned into him and returned the kiss. Even with their faces touching, they could barely make out each other's features through the swirling cloud. But Shakespeare himself couldn't have choreographed the scene better. Whatever rapturous confluence of libido, cloud-matter and star spattered romanticism *that* was, thought Paige, it would set an impossibly high bar for every other kiss, the rest of her life! He had lured her to Cloud Nine, and wooed her with both skill and grace. An hour earlier, it was the last thing on her mind, yet the very thing she had needed for weeks. She had succumbed to his attentions, and it felt good.

As for actually getting *laid* on Cloud Nine, shedding two Exosleeves in the middle of a cloud, on the curved roof of an Alpha pod, a thousand meters above the ocean - just didn't seem like a good idea. But it didn't stop either from fondling each other through layers of braided Kevlar. Enough pheromones to start a galactic orgy were passing between them, but the frustration was rendering its spoils.

But nonetheless, Paige could never remember being hornier in her entire life. She developed an immediate disdain for the Exosleeve, and its horrifically unjust omission of a means to expose one's genitals, and *fuck* for Christ's sake! It was tragic, she lamented. The evening's climax, *would not include a climax!* - probably a very good thing she thought, in a fleeting second of sobriety

Somewhere in the subsiding embrace and fevered last gropes, the flask slipped from Marshall's pouch and fell to the metal roof. In the otherwise silence, the clatter of it hitting and tumbling on the metal roof, might as well have been a jack-hammer!

Marshall stooped, frantically searching to find it in the fog, but couldn't. Not waiting for Nine's crew to poke up and investigate the noise, they both immediately feathered their wings and shot skyward. Marshall briefly glanced down as they climbed. Their wings had created a vortex in the cloud, affording a temporary view of the roof.

Just as the cloud-matter furled in to reclaim itself, there it was. He glimpsed the flask, resting flat on a seam, at the pod's outer edge. But there would be no turning back.

Breaking and Entering

Before getting back on the roof, Commander Nubell took Ben and Luke two levels below to the reconnaissance deck, in order to get a close look at the Blimps via one of two remote tentacles protruding downward from the Pod's lower hull. The tentacles extended below the Pod's cloud-mass; each fitted with live feed cameras, and telephoto optics. Two crew members were on constant rotation to do nothing but observe and track all four blimps. They stared at the monitors, looking for any extraneous activity, as well as constantly updating the enemy's positions and speed via ACAS. The lead ship was the easiest to observe, barely a hundred meters below them. The others maintained a wide separation, but all four were visible via a lower, aft facing viewport that could be exposed for short periods.

"They're all identical as far as we can tell" said Nubell "and we're virtually certain they don't know they're being observed. Except for the short recon last evening, where we got below this one, we've stayed above them, and therefore out of their line of sight for pretty much the entire time. They're pretty unsophisticated, these things; not much in the way of electronics, sensors and the like – at least as far as

we can tell. Essentially, they're big, hastily built LTA transports, with only the basics in terms of flight systems"

"Understood...thanks, but before we set out" said Ben "I have one more question"

"Sure" replied Nubell

"What can you tell us about blimps...dirigibles, or whatever these things are?" asked Ben "I mean until roughly nine hours ago, I knew absolutely zero about these damn things, and have since had no time to study how they even operate, I mean beyond their obvious helium lift envelopes"

The Commander grinned.

"I can relate Captain. I had to request data on blimps and blimp design also, just two days ago. All of it's like 70 years old of course, and it's pretty general, but it covers all the basics. Here let me show you"

He pulled up the data on one of the screens, and started to go through it.

"Ok so there are, or *were*, I should say, two basic types: rigid and non-rigid, the former being the type where the envelope has a rigid internal structure. Those are more accurately called zeppelins. The non-rigid type is what we have down there. They still maintain a contoured shape but have no hard structure...more or less like a shaped balloon. The reason we know these are blimps, is because they constantly bend and flex in flight. All that said, we've got our own nicknames for 'em up here...everything from Caterpillars, to Dirtbags, to Worms, and my personal favorite, Sky Sloths"

He went to the monitor, and continued.

"These things" he pointed to a cross sectional diagram "are ballonets, or airbags. They commonly reside as individual envelopes inside the main, or *outer* envelope. When they're inflated, it reduces the available volume of helium, making it denser – which in turn *reduces* the lift. Conversely, when you deflate the airbags, it allows the helium to expand - thus *increasing* lift. In a nutshell, that's pretty much it, except for propulsion and guidance, which according to history's last known airships, had steerable ducted fans. But again, the *sloths* are very rudimentary by comparison – utilizing a simple pair of exposed props in front of the air surfaces at the back, your rudder and elevators...here."

“What about the passengers and crew” Luke asked.

“All passengers, including the crew, ride here” explained Nubell “It’s called the carriage. It’s a hard structure of course and is more or less suspended from the main envelope. But that’s what’s interesting. The worms seem to be designed so that the entire carriage moves up into the envelope somehow, for when it’s on the ground. That way the carriage can remain concealed during the day, and the envelope, unless you’re up close, just looks like a mound of desert or whatever”

“Ok, thanks” said Ben “Any reason to think that if we can get a look straight into the cockpit, down the centerline – we can see into the passenger cabin; get a look at this army, if there is one?”

“No, replied Nubell, I doubt it. When we got below that one down there last night and put our infrared scopes on the cockpit, all we could see were the three signatures on the flight-deck, presumably pilot and crew. Even though we weren’t on centerline, I suspected the reason we didn’t see more, is because there are bulkheads separating the cockpits from the main cabin. And that would make sense; otherwise the passenger cabin would have to remain completely dark as well, for the entire duration - not likely. But we more or less confirmed it with drones earlier tonight. We put one 50 meters out, dead in front of the forward cockpit, and a second one 50 meters off the aft cockpit. We held them there for the better part of an hour, pretty much the battery life, and nothing. In all that time, all we observed were some red running lights coming from the forward flight deck, but never did we see a door open to the passenger section...or what we think is the passenger section. I know that makes your job a lot harder Captain, but it’s what we’ve got I’m afraid”

“We’ll get it done” Luke asserted “one way or another”

At 0355 hours, and with barely over two hours until dawn, Ben and Luke launched from Charlie 14d’s landing deck and headed west, back in the direction they’d come. They needed to get well out in front, and significantly above the Sloths, in order to approach the lead target without being observed.

Up until the moment of launch, both had been *reasonably* relaxed, but, the instant they began their ascent from Charlie 14’s roof, the gravity of their task, caught up with them. The only thing that exceeded the mission’s *importance*, was the dire *consequences* if they failed. If sunup came without having gathered the intel they

needed, then it would be another 15 hours before they could try again, not to mention whatever distance closer to the homeland it allowed them to advance. And if they *achieved* the objective, but were discovered in the process, then literally everything would crumble. The now vast network of covert Cloudpods, and the LARS flight program itself, collectively formed the most effective, covert intelligence gathering apparatus ever. But the whole kit and caboodle relied entirely on its total non-existence to the enemy. If that secrecy were compromised, the entire security of the homeland would deteriorate like a sand castle at high tide.

And as if that wasn't enough to think about, neither of them yet had a single clue, or any kind of plan for actually achieving their objective. If there was indeed an entire invasion force being transported in the underbelly of the flying worms, they also had the very same fervent intention...*not* being discovered.

And lastly of course, was the very real possibility that one, or both of them, could simply be shot and killed at any moment.

At three-hundred meters out, they made a tight 180-degree turn, bringing them straight on the nose of the advancing sloths. Ben brought them to a hover. It was time to formulate a plan, and with total radio silence, there would be no team of senior military strategists to guide them. From this point, whatever actions they took, were their own.

The desert air was undergoing atmospheric boil, a desert phenomenon that sends bubbles of dense air rising through the cooler air above. It creates a wavy sort of visual distortion, and was causing the lead blimp to look as though it were evaporating, and re-appearing. Ben's instructor had called it *shimmer*, but whatever it was, only made the repulsive bags look even more grotesque, and menacing.

Ben and Luke peeled their masks back, and faced each other.

"So, what's the plan Captain Marval?" said Luke

"Well first and foremost, I intend on honoring your girlfriend's wishes, and not get our asses shot off"

Ok that's...good, let's go with that. Anything, you know...more *definitive!*?"

Ben looked at him but didn't reply.

“Jeeesus!” Luke continued, “You really haven’t thought of a plan, have you?”

“I’ve thought of a lot of them. I just don’t like any of them. Besides, I work better under pressure.”

“For fuck sake Brexhill, this is not a debate round, these no soul having assholes, will shoot our asses out from under us.”

“Ok, so we started with an overflight of the trawlers, right? That seemed to work out pretty good”

Luke nodded. “Well it ain’t much of a plan Boysy, but it’s something. Same as before then?”

“Yea. You take port, at 9 o’clock. I’ll take starboard, at 3 o’clock. 40 kph”

“Ok but they’re already moving at 56 kph. That’s a closing speed of just over a 100. Are you good with that?”

“I think so, let’s just have a quick look-see. When we’re done, come back to our present altitude; same distance off her stern”

“Copy that, port at nine o’clock...40 kph” said Luke. He started to pull his face-screen down.

“*Luke!* Stay wide...give her plenty of berth, right?”

“Right. Oh, and Brexhill, try to keep from falling out of the sky, yea?”

Ben raised his forefinger, as he brought his screen down. They took off. As the distance gradually closed, the desert shimmer subsided. They were getting their first clear look at the lead blimp. From down her nose, what the Commander had mentioned, was especially noticeable. It was undulating; flexing and bending, as it lumbered through the air. But the most obvious thing, was how dark she was, not one hint of artificial light anywhere. She looked like a caterpillar alright, a dead one, passing from this life to the next. It was a surreal sight, probably *creepy* was a better word, Ben thought.

At 150 meters out, they separated and began their simultaneous pass. The nose of the blimp wasn’t round...more bulbous, like the snout of a Bowhead Whale. From

there, her spine rose up a couple of meters, then remained a more or less constant shape, all the way back. As they began to pass aft of the nose and down her side, their speed became more evident. The carriage had passed completely by them in a matter of seconds, but still enough to get a good look. It appeared to be thirty meters or so in length, and every inch of it, as dead dark as the massive envelope from which it was tethered. In fact, it was *so* dark, it was hard at first, to even distinguish the cockpits from the structure. If the idea was to display no signs of life, they had masterfully achieved it. They had also managed to create the ugliest things ever to go aloft. She looked like a giant turd, Ben thought; a giant turd rolled in sand, and sent aloft as a float for some macabre parade of airborne shit-bags, he thought.

But as quickly as he'd fabricated the droll thought, something else far weightier, overtook him. Whatever the nature of her contraband, it was *evil*, and at once he could feel it.

As they passed by the aft end of the lead sloth's carriage, the two props came into view, each spinning, one above the other; and was the ship's only visible sign of life. The main airfoils were mounted at the very aft end of the carriage, first the elevator, then the rudder, immediately aft of the props.

As planned, the two reassembled at 300 meters aft of the lead worm, and hovered, matching its forward speed. They stripped their face-gear back.

"I don't feel good about these things dude" Ben announced "I mean, not that I expected to, but it goes way beyond apprehension or fear. There's something up with these things, something hideous. Don't ask me how I know, but..."

"Ok but if we don't get a look inside" asked Luke "how are we going to verify the enemy?"

"I don't know. Every fiber of my being is already confirming everything we need to know" Ben replied. "It's weird man, but I know it as surely as I know the sun is going to rise over there"

"I get it boysy, and I believe ya. But I don't think we can go back to Wyncote, with the *vibe* you're getting. Pretty sure he's going to want some evidence"

"Yea...so question" asked Ben "if you were designing that passenger carriage, where would you board and off-load your soldiers?"

“Probably from doors, on the sides - port and starboard if I had to guess” Luke replied. “I mean if the whole carriage does in fact rest on the desert floor during daylight hours, I don’t think it’d be practical to use a boarding ramp”

Ben took a minute to process his thoughts

“Ok listen, let’s get directly below this fucker, maybe 30 meters down” Ben said “then slowly work our way straight up the middle, to the base of the carriage. It’s probably their one blind spot”

He looked at Luke seeking a little validation. Luke paused to think before responding.

“Well, I think it’s as good a plan as any. If they do have a blind spot, that’s probably it.” Luke replied.

Ok, so coming up” Ben continued, talking with his hands “once we get close enough, we want to confirm two things first. Where those boarding doors are, and if there’s any other ground observation portals besides the cockpits. If there’s no portals, we continue on up, holding right up under her, dead in the center of her length”

“Alright” Luke replied, “but then what?”

“Well we already know there’s no other windows, so theoretically at least, we can make our way up the sides...you port, me starboard, simultaneously. We also need to get a look at that cavity in the main envelope, if there is one; and the top of the carriage”

Luke didn’t take long to think about it. “Alright, let’s do it Boysy” he conformed.

They made their way to a point 30 meters directly below the worm. Aligning themselves with the carriage’s center point, they eased their way up slowly. About half-way up, they came to a point where the carriage’s bottom was at least visible enough to make out its distinguishing features. There was nothing that looked like an observation portal, *and that was good*, but the cockpits on both ends, did partially wrap to the bottom, something that hadn’t shown up in the photos. Ostensibly, it left them more vulnerable to discovery, but since the sloths were still at altitude and flying straight and narrow, Ben reasoned the crew probably wasn’t

focused on anything below. It was a reasonable risk, he thought and Luke concurred.

There was also no sign of a door, or deployable ramp, on the carriage's bottom. In fact, the only discernable features were four landing pads, one at each of the four corners. They stood proud of the base, probably 60 centimeters, and were obviously feet, with shock absorbers to protect the undercarriage and its cockpits, on landing. But other than that, it appeared to both, as a smooth flat base – and a relatively safe place to tuck up.

They continued straight up, face-masks back, in case they had to communicate. On arrival, they held just shy of the undercarriage, in order to keep their wings well out of harm's way. Immediately noticeable were that the sloths, just like the drones, they were shabbily constructed; anything but sophisticated. But it did *nothing* to quell Ben's overall visceral feelings. Getting close to them, made the evil from within, even more apparent.

Ben used his hand and gestured upward. Ever so slowly, they eased outboard and up the sides; Ben on the starboard side, Luke on port. The one huge comfort, if there was one at all, was the total non-existence of any windows or openings. It allowed them to continue up with reasonable stealth. And Luke's guess had been spot on. There were in fact, wide boarding doors on both sides of the carriage. The hinges were at the top, so from the looks of them, they deployed in gull wing fashion.

From a point about half-way up the sides, they both could now see above the carriage. Just as Nubell had theorized, there was indeed a large cavity in the envelope's underside. It mimicked the carriage's shape, and was obviously designed as a protective chamber, into which the carriage concealed itself during daylight hours, while on the ground. In flight, a series of cables were apparently all that suspended the carriage from the envelope.

Ben and Luke both eased their heads up above the roof, almost simultaneously. But the instant they did, they both freaked at the sight of a lone soldier standing on the roof, his boots only a few centimeters from Ben's face. The man was busy with some kind of umbilical connected to the envelope above. But it didn't stop his peripheral vision from catching sight of Luke on the opposite side. The soldier jumped back immediately, dropping the umbilical. He trained his eyes on Luke, and scrambled for his shouldered automatic weapon. Without thinking or hesitating, Luke and Ben both simultaneously charged the man. Luke got to him

first, hitting him full force in the upper body. Ben barely dodged them, as the soldier tumbled backwards over him, and off the roof's starboard side. The man never had a chance to wield his weapon. Luke was left hovering, just above the carriage roof. The soldier let out a gasping scream as he fell. But It quickly dissipated as he plummeted through the darkness to his death. Ben watched the soldier fall, until he disappeared from sight. It was the first time either of them had ever had anything to do with someone's death. Ben's breathing had quickened and he could feel the capillaries in his face fill with blood. He was momentarily frozen, transfixed on the pale desert floor. He imagined the soldier's final terrifying seconds as the ground rushed up to claim him.

But there was little chance anyone inside the carriage had heard his scream. The ambient wind-rush, and the droning whine of the blimp's propulsion, had worked in their favor.

Ben broke his gaze and looked up at Luke. It was the last thing either had suspected and now, suddenly, it all had become very real. At no other time in the last twelve weeks, or their lives for that matter, had they come face to face with the daunting realities of warfare, and the fine lines between life and death.

But as the initial shock subsided, Ben caught sight of something and nodded to Luke. In the wake of the soldier's demise; he had unwittingly left them a present; a bit of serendipity, staring them in the face. It was an exit hatch in the roof, slightly aft of center along the carriage's center line - obviously from where the soldier had emerged – and obviously the roof's only access to the passenger cabin.

It was standing wide open.

Too good to be true, they thought, and maybe it was; but if there was a battery of troops anywhere aboard the lumbering transport, it was right there through that hole. It had been a very unlucky outing for the poor bastard that went off the roof, but for them, in Luke's mind at least, it was kismet; plain and simple – fate laid at their feet. And if the open hole wasn't enough, its vertical standing hatch offered an ideal hard metal barrier for protection. But it wasn't the kind of fate you fucked around with. It was like a shutter, opening and closing. It would be gone at any second, and they both knew it. It also meant they hadn't the luxury of a tactical plan. It was now or never, all on instincts. Luke scrambled around behind the hatch and pulled his peek-snake. Ben carefully laid himself chest-down on the roof, facing the opposite direction – his eyes trained on the open hole. He leveled his hand held automatic weapon, using his elbows.

The light in the cabin had been *dark adapted*, same as the trawlers, except this time, it was a dim *blue* light coming from the hole. Luke eased the peek-snake between the two hinges at the base of the hatch. It was nimble, and easy to point in any direction, using a thumb control on the handle. He powered it on. It took only a second for the first images to come up on the small LED screen.

The Admiral's supposition about the blimps, had been *dead on*. They were troop transports alright. On first glance, it looked like 60 to 70 men, and there were racks of weapons on the forward bulkhead. These weren't Hollows, or if they were, they'd been upgraded and given uniforms. There were rows of chairs fixed to the starboard and port sides, facing inboard. They ran continuous, except for where the large boarding doors were. In the center of the space was a long mess table, and forward of that was a large round table, with men seated around it. The scene was rowdy, louder voices ebbing and flowing from somewhere. Luke moved his thumb to curl the snake in the opposite direction. This time he could see the aft section of the carriage's interior, and the source of the louder voices. The layout was the same as the forward area, another round table immediately aft of the mess table. Only this time, the men were standing at the table, taking their turns at two young girls, both bound by their hands and feet, face-up, across the tables. It was difficult to discern their ages in the dim light, but judging from their size and their faces, Luke guessed neither to be more than fourteen. Both girls held their eyes tightly shut, as if it would somehow diminish the horrors of repeated rapes. Their heads occasionally turned side to side, as the men savagely molested them. Otherwise their bodies were limp, depleted from hours, or maybe days of constant abuse, Luke thought - and by the looks of them, probably beaten as well. Whatever the case, they had long since given up trying to resist. On that he was sure.

Luke poked his head around the side of the hatch, and motioned for Ben to inch forward. Ben nodded, un-sheathing his own peek-snake. When he was close enough, he pushed the head just over the opening, pointing the small lens aft in the same direction as Luke's. He stared into the tiny monitor, and watched. His anger welled. He abruptly gestured to Luke, jerking his thumb up twice. The message was clear. He'd seen enough and it was time to go. Without a word, or even waiting for Luke, he dropped his face-screen, inched himself back from the hatch, and shot off the roof to the port side, then immediately upward. Luke followed. Ben completed a high arc and began to slow as he reached the top of the blimp's canopy, about one quarter back from the nose. Luke had followed him. They flared and softly sat down on the thick fabric skin.

“Ben, what are we doing up here?” asked Luke

“We’re going to do what needs to be done” he said, pulling his knife from the utility belt.

“Hang on Ben, what are you talking about man??”

“You know fucking well what I’m talking about Lafurney. You saw the very same thing I did! Those girls were tribals, probably stolen from the last village where they put down. And they’re someone’s daughters. We’re *not* letting this go man”

“Ben listen, nobody’s saying we should let it go, but now’s not the time man. Our mission objective was clear. It was to verify the presence of armed soldiers, and satisfy Article 12. *We just did that!* We can’t go off on some personal vendetta, just because we saw what we saw. We’ll have our chance tomorrow, you know that!”

“By that time, those girls will be dead!”

“Maybe, and maybe not, but we still can’t...”

“Unsheathe that fucking utility knife Lafurney...*now!*” Ben interrupted “and let’s get busy! I don’t have to tell you who outranks who out here!”

Luke held his ground.

“Don’t do this man...there’s more at stake. *You’re fucking up!!* What do think you’re going to do anyway, wait for this thing to nose into the desert, then rush in, shoot an entire armed platoon, then waltz out with the two girls!?”

“Go back to the pod if you’re afraid Lafurney! I’m *done talking about it!*”

Ben raised his knife and prepared to stab the fabric. Luke grabbed his wrist. Ben recoiled in anger and jerked his hand back, instantly slicing through Luke’s glove, and into his hand. Blood went everywhere. The two locked eyes. Luke went for his utility belt and fished for some gauze. He pointed the bloody hand toward Ben with a scowl.

“You touch that knife to the fabric dude, and I swear to god man, I will *leave* you down here. And I’ll hand your ass to Wyncote. You can be Ben Brexhill and fuck yourself yet again...or you can be a goddamn *Captain*. What’s it going to be!?”

The pair sat...knelling on the massive fabric envelope, staring at each other. Ben was light headed from his own rage. He didn't care to engage in cautionary dialogue. He only wanted to act, and fuck the rest. His anger was once again ridding rough-shot over judgement and discretion. But as he stared across at his friend wrapping his wounded hand, the sanity and prudence of his words, were slowly beginning to retake his own impulsiveness. Maybe for the first time ever, he stood outside himself watching the flood of carelessness and anger, rule his actions. Then inevitably, there was the sound of his own father's voice again; this time reciting, as he often had, Shakespeare's infamous line...

"Discretion is the better part of valor"

"It's more than a line from a play" his father had coached. "It's an axiom for battle and an axiom for life"

After a few minutes of silence, while Luke finished wrapping his wound, they both stood, and launched themselves back in the direction of Charlie 14. The pre-dawn sky to the east was already showing its faint light across the horizon. Otherwise, the high cloud-cover remained, and the sky above them and to the west was still dark; the nebula stretching across it. It didn't take them long to reach back to the C-14d, and settle through the cloud mask, down onto the roof.

Still maintaining radio silence, Ben knelt and was about to knock on the entry portal. But Luke stopped him. He raised his mask and spoke to Ben, which was always kind of a weird thing, like talking to a ghost, coming in and out of view.

"Let's go get the girls" he said.

"What!?" Ben replied, taken aback by the comment

"There's barely fifty minutes left till dawn; meaning that bag's gotta be on the ground in the next thirty minutes or so"

"Yea. What about your big speech?"

"Every word of its right, and you know it...but I have a plan"

Ben didn't say anything. A little frustrated, he just stood and waited to hear the rest.

“Remember your little ditty with the goat farmer and the thud bombs?” asked Luke

Still Ben didn’t reply, just waited.

“When these things get on the ground, after 12 hours inside those stinky ass, no window having cabins” said Luke “those soldiers, every last one, will file out for some fresh air and a stretch, before that canopy settles down on them. I’d bet my life on it”

“All but the two girls” said Ben

“All but the two girls” Luke confirmed

“If we wait for them to start filing out” Luke continued “and if they open up *both* the boarding doors, I’m thinking one of us can drop a few thuds about 100 meters out, off to one side – enough to momentarily divert their attention. Anyway, one way or another, I think we’ll then have a small window when we can go in, cut the girls lose and get them out the opposite door”

“You’d do that?” asked Ben

“If I don’t have to think about it too much, yea”

“I hear ya, but it’s probably going to take them 30 minutes to get on the ground. The only thing we could do now, is hover around and wait”

Ben thinks, then continues his thought.

“Why don’t we.....let’s get down inside, turn our peek-tubes over to the crew, so they can download the video and draft-up an intelligence brief. If they can get an encrypted message out, then at least Russo will have his Article 12, just in case we get our asses killed. Then we can tell Nubell, we want to go down and get a closer look at their weapons or whatever...one last bit of intelligence gathering, before the sun pokes up”

“Sound’s reasonable I guess...but seriously man, I don’t want to lose our buzz, and I *don’t* wanna start thinking about all the reasons why this is a *bad* idea, not to mention all the ways it could go wrong”

“Ya know Lafurney, if you’re going to be someone’s voice of reason, ya probably wanna practice a little consistency.”

“Listen dude, going all David up there, trying to bring down Goliath with your pocket knife, was *never* a good idea, especially considering it was going to land on its own, an hour later, so...I’m just sayin.”

“Fleet ever finds out we were on the ground” said Luke “and our careers are over, you know that!”

“Well like you said Lafurney, we can’t over think it. We’re either going to do it, or we’re not”

Ben knelt and used the butt of his utility knife to knock on the roof. Still confined by radio-silence, C-14’s crew was obviously concerned and anxious for their return. There was no need for a second knock. They were down and in, in less than three minutes. Nubell had been two levels below on the observation deck, but quickly ascended the ladders to greet them. Ben and Luke briefed him, news of which came as a *huge* sigh of relief to Nubell. He turned in a couple of nervous circles, running his hands through his hair, and grinning like a kid.

“Man I hate this fucking radio silence bullshit!” he blurted out. “We’ve been so goddamn nervous up here. I know it’s been less than an hour, but fuck if it doesn’t feel like three! *Yeeeha* gentlemen! Well done! Now we can take these nasty bastards out and be done with ‘em!”

“Commander, have you observed them descending yet? The sun will be up in 50 minutes” Asked Luke.

“Yea we have. It’s slow but their starting down. Why?”

“We’re going back down, we want to try and get a head count when they come out and we wanna get a look at their weapons and ordnance if we can”

“You’re seriously going back out there?”

“We are.”

“But Captain, the sky is already starting to lighten. Your cover?”

“We just wanted to give you our statement and turn over our Peek-tubes. We managed to get some video inside. It’s solid verification, to accompany the briefing. But that’s it. We’re getting back out there. We won’t be long”

Nubell nodded nervously.

“Listen guys, that sky will get light well before the sun crests. Compromising your stealth is *not* an option Captain, you know that.”

Ben ignored the statement. “Commander, do you have a long-range rifle by chance; something with a scope?”

Nubell was caught off guard by the question. “We have a .338 on board” he replied.

“Is it scoped?” asked Ben

“It is yea, night-vision as well.”

“Can I borrow it?”

Nubell looked at Luke, then back at Ben. He was suspicious why they would need a long-range rifle for reconnaissance, but he held his tongue. He snapped his fingers for the private to go and fetch it.

By the time Ben and Luke re-ascended to the launch deck, only twelve minutes had passed. As soon as they took off and cleared the Pod’s insulating cloud-matter, they could see the target again. It was clearly descending. They came to a position about half way in between the Pod and the target, and hovered. The sky to the east, was noticeably lighter than before. It was a mounting concern to be sure, but it was pointless to discuss it. Either they could get it done in time, or they couldn’t.

“Ok, so, let’s maintain our present distance from the target” said Ben “but otherwise, descend with them, until they’re almost on the ground”

“And then?”

“There’s too many variables. We’re going to have to play it by ear, but basically – let’s follow your plan. It’s as good as any.”

They hovered and watched as the massive undulating sloth slowly descend. But at an altitude of roughly 200 meters, the starboard side boarding door opened. They were too far to see much, but the pale blue cabin light defined the opening clearly. A few seconds later, several bundles were pushed out the door, but it was hard to discern.

“What the hell was that?” asked Luke

“I don’t know...garbage maybe?”

They looked at each other. The blimp was still descending. They had some time, and both wondered what they’d dropped, and why. Without a word, they dropped the face-masks and shot downward. As they reached down to where they calculated the discards would have fallen, they leveled off at just a few meters above the ground. The soft pre-dawn light made it somewhat easier to search. After a few minutes, Ben spotted two large bags, one still intact, the other broken open with garbage strewn out. A few meters more, was another bag, partially ripped open from the impact, and next to it, a body. Once again, against all stern orders to the contrary, they put down on the desert. The body belonged to a soldier, crumpled face down, obviously dead. They turned him over to find blood covering his chest and abdomen. Luke ripped the shirt back. There were multiple stab wounds.

“What do you make of it?” asked Ben

“Came out on the losing end of a fight I imagine.”

They both lifted off again, this time their feet barely hanging above the sandy ground, slowly moving forward in search for anything more. Luke spotted something, slightly off to the left, what looked like yet another body. As they grew closer, the sight instantly made their blood run cold. He literally began to shiver. It was one of the two young girls, crumpled, lying face up, her left arm broken like a doll’s beneath her. She was, as she had been in the last horrific hours in life, mostly unclothed; only the torn remains of a cotton shirt, and a single sandal on her right foot. Ben and Luke knelt beside her. There was no sign of any wounds, only a few scratches. The reality flooded in to both of them at the same moment. She had obviously been shoved out the door, most likely still alive – discarded like another piece of trash, along with the rest. All at once, Ben felt his abdomen constrict uncontrollably. He bent over heaving, giving up everything inside. Luke stared into the girl’s face, his mind completely ill equipped to comprehend the reality. He

removed his right glove, and tenderly stroked the palm of his hand down her cheek, as tears began to stream down his own.

“There there, sweetheart” he quietly uttered, “No more...no more. It’s all over now.”

They both continued to stare at the young girl’s lifeless face, trying to make sense of it. But there was none; only the inconceivably barbaric actions of sub-humanoids; soulless beings possessed only with evil.

Without speaking, Luke abruptly stood and began striding forward; his lips pursed, panting through his nose. His heart was racing, as rage overtook him. But he needed to find the other girl. Please let her be here, he thought, knowing the only worse fate was, that if she weren’t.

The grainy desert sand gave way under his weight as he paced, but the trek was even shorter than he’d expected. His eyes were inexplicably drawn left. Stopping him in his tracks, there she sat, silhouetted against the pre-dawn sky. Even though he’d expected to find her, her eerie erect form shook him. As he approached her, the scene became even more haunting. She was resting against the edge of an arroyo, fully upright from the waist up, as if alive and waiting to be found. Her chin was in her chest, her long dark hair covering her face. As he knelt, Ben walked up behind him. Luke gently raised her head, and pushed her hair back. He was startled.

He turned to look at Ben, motioning for him to come forward. Luke gently lifted her chin. They both stared at her. She appeared only to be sleeping. Even the color was still in her face – but there was something else.

“Oh my god. Sisters?” Ben asked

“They had to be.” confirmed Luke.

The more they studied her, the surer they were. Not only had they been sisters, they both conjectured; but maybe even twins. Nothing could possibly have made the situation more horrific or doleful than it already was, yet somehow it did. They both carefully laid her down on the soft sand.

Luke looked at Ben “Will you go get her sister?” he asked.

Ben lifted off and flew back to the other girl. A few minutes later, he returned, her body stretched across his arms. He knelt and placed her carefully beside her sister. They stared at the pair together. If there had been a question before, there certainly wasn't now. In life, the two girls had been identical twin sisters. And in death, they both agreed, they would be buried as such. Luke gently turned their faces toward one another, and using a moistened pad, cleaned their faces as best he could. He then laced the fingers of their left and right hands together. Ben wept as he watched his friend carefully prepare the girls, as if he'd done it a dozen times. The pre-dawn light had rendered their faces in a soft blue. Ben and Luke studied them one last time, knowing it would haunt them for the rest of their lives. But maybe, if they were lucky, thought Luke, the horrors would fade in time, leaving only the image of two young sisters laid to sleep in the moonlight.

The sky was getting lighter with each passing minute. Luke wanted something to cover the girls with, but there simply wasn't anything, and the practicalities were rushing in. If they left them as they were, the coyotes would have them inside of an hour. All they could do was bury them, and quickly. They both crawled atop the arroyo's shallow embankment, and began shoveling sand with their hands. Starting with their feet, and working up, they managed to inter the girls under a meter or so of sand and clay. Neither knew much about such things, but they both thought it would be enough to protect them. Luke had removed the sandal from the first girl, and used it to mark the grave. He stood it up in the soil and used two rounded rocks to hold it in place.

There was only one thing remaining, and neither of them were concerned about orders or consequences at this point. The murderous, soulless garbage in that carriage, would not live to see another sun-rise. With that one solidified resolve, they took off and shot up and westward toward the descending lead sloth, from where the girls had been pushed. Within two minutes it was back in sight and had almost reached the ground, maybe fifteen meters off.

Ben brought them to a hover, about thirty meters back and slightly above the target. He laid a very simple plan out to Luke, a plan that met no objection. They headed up and over the length of the blimp from the stern, arriving to the very nose of the envelope. There, tied to a cleat on the very tip, was a landing rope, a lanyard of sorts, used by ground crew. It was maybe 10 meters long, just enough to reach the ground on landing. But if what Ben had planned, was even possible, the rope would do nicely. Being careful to stay well out of view from the carriage's forward cockpit, Ben carefully reeled the rope up. They both tied the end off into a double

harness of sorts, and each grabbed hold of one side. They then carefully took up the rope's slack by flying slowly forward and up.

At first, they used only winged propulsion, and with very limited results at first. The great thing about LTA's were that they in fact are pretty easy push or pull around through the air, but the fucker was massive, thereby possessing a lot of inertia. It was difficult to alter its course at first. But over several minutes, they had managed to bring the nose up, and gain a slight bit of forward movement as well. It was working, and at a certain point, they triggered the plasma jets. Initially it placed a huge, almost unbearable, strain on their ability to hang onto the hastily tied harness. But it also was quickly overcoming the inertia and gaining the desired result. The giant worm was now not only gaining speed, *but altitude*.

Inside the cockpit, the drivers were bewildered, trying everything they could to regain control and get the massive sloth on the ground. And the soldiers were showing no empathy. They were impatient, pissed and threatening. But it was pointless, the two electric props and stubby airfoils were no match for the plasmas. Once they had towed the blimp to a nice lethal altitude of 600 meters, it was time to execute the operative part of the plan.

They released the ropes and shot aft and downward across the envelope, to the top of the carriage. This time there was no open hatch in the roof, but the starboard gull wing door was still open. It was the moment of truth, as they settled onto the roof. They each removed two incendiary pucks from their utility belts, and crawled along the roof toward the open door, Luke on the forward end, Ben on the other. They locked eyes with one another and Ben counted down from three, using his fingers. On his mark, they both pulled the stems on the ordnance, and tossed them in the carriage, first one, then the other. They immediately shot laterally off the port side, offering the best protection from view. The incendiary devices were set to detonate in three seconds.

No sooner than they'd cleared the massive airship, flames erupted and the orange glow could be seen from their portside vantage point. But they quickly ascended up and over the giant envelope again, eventually settling to a hover on the opposite side, now facing the open boarding door, a safe distance out. The entire carriage was engulfed in flames and even from their distance, it was easy to see soldiers caught in the inferno. As they looked on, it was apparent many were trying to escape to the cockpits, but as they opened the doors, the new oxygen there, only pulled the fire in, engulfing the crew as well. It wasn't seconds before soldiers were jumping. Fully covered in flames, they hurled themselves out the open

boarding door, falling like cave torches through the air. A second later, the roof hatch popped open, a single soldier furiously trying to escape. Disoriented and covered in flames, he tumbled off the side, falling at least to a quicker death. It was a full-on inferno and Ben and Luke could now feel the heat on their faces, from almost sixty meters out. The soldier's escape through the roof hatch, had sealed the fate of the entire airship, now with a raging plume of flames shooting out of the hole, and up into the envelope's cavity. It ignited the helium filled canopy almost immediately, quickly spreading forward across the fabric skin. In less than 90 seconds, all but the aft end of the insidious sloth, was completely ablaze, now so bright, it was casting an orange glow on the underside of the clouds, as well as the desert floor below.

In seconds, the entire envelope began to collapse into a V. It quickly started to fall, at one point, the carriage toppling, and turning on end. Almost simultaneously, the windows of the aft cockpit exploded. Three more men fell like flaming meteors, to the craggy desert floor, now only 20 meters below.

Just before the burning mass hit the ground, another much larger explosion went. Before they even had time to turn away completely, the blast wave hit them. It felt like standing in the surf, and being slammed by a wall of water. It sent them backwards by a half-meter or more, in an instant; only to be sucked back again a second later, from the blast wind's negative pressure. The heat spiked to what seemed like 600 degrees or more, but subsided as quickly as it had come. Bits of burning shrapnel arced in all directions like fireworks. Ben imagined the massive secondary blast had come from contained ordnance inside the carriage, ordnance obviously intended for their assault on the homeland.

They continued to watch as the mass of twisted metal and fabric, burned on the ground, now having produced a massive cloud of black smoke. Barely a few seconds later, the sun's first rays crest the horizon, painting the top of the billowing mass in a rich amber light.

Ben swallowed, inhaling shallow breaths through his nose. The reaction to what he was taking in, was visceral and overwhelming; nothing one could ever prepare for. The entire incident, from the second the pucks were tossed in, until now, had been maybe eight minutes, certainly no more, he thought. And all of it, the horrific fate of every soldier and crew member aboard, had been levied by them, and them alone – all so easily exacted. He trembled, trying to make some kind of cosmic sense of it; that is until his slightly older, and perhaps more wizened friend, put it all in perspective.

“Fuck ‘em, they were sister killers, every last one. I’ve got no room for remorse, not today.”