

CHAPTER OUTLINES

Prologue – A young girl (7) sits on the front porch with her Grand Mom, a once world-renown architect. She describes the world she occupied as a young woman before the apocalypse; and in particular, the major cities like *Paris, New York, Shanghai* and *Prague*. Her descriptions are eloquent, her remembrances filled with life. Her Images of youth-filled streets and vibrant universities swirl in the girl's head marking the beginnings of a powerful lifelong longing for something that no longer exists.

- 1. The Retro** - The story opens on the venerable *Retro*, a 75-year-old breakfast house; a coveted pre-apocalypse relic and the undisputed social hub of Taratolla (the statehood's capitol). Ben and his younger brother Connor (*afflicted with Autism*) still come here every Sunday morning, honoring the legacy their father started from as far back as he can remember. The Retro is a revered throwback to a world that no longer exist. The hash house, and its owner quickly become characters in the books.
- 2. Down & Out on Queensland** – Queensland Meadow is the city's central park and a promontory overlooking the town and harbor below. Ben and Luke play rugby and cricket here and the infamous Poindexter's Rocket stands here, a living monument Ben's father gave birth to. But this chapter also sees Ben's ongoing anger play out as he almost kills an opponent for making a flippant remark about his father.
- 3. Desert Dogs & Birthday Cake** – It's Ben's 18th Birthday. And as with all his birthdays since the age of five, they celebrate it at the Retro. #5s, Salt Shakes and Creosote Coffee are flyin'. But a half-hour in, a news broadcast breaks depicting a major border overrun by 1100 *Hollows*. As the Dulkan military surrounds them at Figranno Beach – infighting among the Hollows breaks out and by morning, only six are left standing - a complete self-annihilation. The surrounding forces never fired a shot. The entire event is an enigma – a mystery that no one can make sense of. Also, the father of the injured rugby player further interrupts the celebration by turning up with a gun. He is livid and in front of the whole restaurant, threatens Ben 's life.
- 4. Conscription Day** - On the same afternoon, Major Richard Valdez (Cocoa) brings Ben and Luke onto the Naval base, within an underground compound. They are both of age to serve now – and this will be their first taste. In a secured room Cocoa drops the first hint of a top-secret program called *Cloudburners* and how they've both been selected, along with six others, to form the elite program's initial two squads.
- 5. Bitter Pill** – Cocoa introduces Ben to one Captain *Reed Merrick* on base. Ben has never heard of him but quickly learns he was with his father when he was killed. But Ben's anger quickly wells as he is only learning of this now. Additionally, Merrick's story

doesn't make sense to him. His bullshit meter quivers and his anger again rails – but this time to a ranking Naval officer, within a service branch he is about to enter.

6. **Shot Down on Base** – Ben & Luke meet one Petty Officer *Rebecca Beatson*. She has been assigned to record minutes of the initial base orientations. Luke is totally taken with her from the first moment and despite their age difference (he 19 - her 26), he mounts an impressive vie for her affections – but is summarily shot down in flames.
7. **Cocoa's Kimono** – Ben's rugby coach turns up at his house to tell him he is permanently off the squad and this time, banned from the sport entirely. Meanwhile Ben is formally inducted into the navy. (where his father served for 22 years). He and Luke are given A-4 security clearances – and Cocoa unveils the first details and the top-secret mission objectives of the Cloudbunner program.
8. **Airborne** – Ben and Luke, along with the other six cadets, all ship out to *Lekard*, the remote underground training outpost that will be their home for the next 12 weeks. It's here they all don the Pherillium Exosleeve – the amazing winged suit that will grant them autonomous flight and adventures beyond their imaginations.
9. **Revelation at C-Base 6** – 5 weeks into their training, all eight cadets are airlifted from Lekard, to a secret outpost called *C-Base-6*, cut into the side of a mountain. It's here they all get their first look at a *Cloudpod*, up close and 'naked'. They witness the Alpha-class pod being launched into the black starry night, for its deployment over the Vendazzi. But the chapter's substance comes when Ben seizes the opportunity to unveil his assessment of what really happened at Figranno Beach, to the brass in attendance.
10. **Dawns Early Light** – It's here the reader meets *Paige Reardon*. After an exhausting training mission, Ben and Luke convince her to join them on Lekard's craggy rock roof to watch the sunrise, replete with Choco and Cigars. They discover her biting wit, and tom-boyish charm and it ignites what will become an inexorable bond between the three, and eventually, more than that for one of them.
11. **No Good Intel Goes Unpunished** – barely sixth weeks in, Ben unwittingly draws his first enemy; one *Warren Rittles* (Director of Intelligence) an impossibly arrogant asshole. Ben's formal report has now been sent up the chain. It contains critical insights into the Figranno incident that will directly impact the homeland's security. But it also directly refutes Rittles' own report and sets up a bitter ongoing chess game between the two.
12. **Bladder Bombs over Kabra** – A training mission turns into a live one over the hostile Vendazzi desert, as a faction of *Hollows* intends on overrunning two villages, killing and enslaving its inhabitants. It becomes Ben, Luke, Paige and Marshall's job to warn the two villages on the impending attack – but it doesn't exactly go as planned.

- 13. Redemption** – In spite of Rittles’ relentless efforts to the contrary, Ben’s intel report finally makes its way to the Admiral. Almost simultaneously, two defectors turn up in the back of a fish truck – the two Ben had theorized had to be out there. He quickly ascends to the rank of Squad Captain, the youngest ever in the Navy’s history. But Rittle’s is shamed across the ranks. Skilled in the art of reprisal, he plots his revenge.
- 14. Oysters Sweet on Bitter Street** – A new cook turns up at the Lekard commissary (to everyone’s delight) and is an immediate hit. His specialty: Oysters and Pancakes. But as his first act of retribution, Rittles leaks it to the base CO, that Ben and Paige are lovers defying a strict policy against fraternization. Paige is immediately reassigned to a new squad, but she believes Ben has architected the whole thing, after getting cold feet.
- 15. Night Flight on the Blue Dog** – Ben and Luke are tasked to overfly two suspicious Trawlers in the Timor Sea, just beyond the outer marker. They’re running dark with no markings and appear to be towing a submerged payload. They call the report into Fleet but before returning to base, quell their longings for home by overflying the sleeping Taratolla, ultimately savoring a sumptuous treat above the famed Blue Dog bakery.
- 16. Evil’s Wake** – Submarine S/N Brisbane is urgently summoned to come up underneath the two suspect trawlers and confirm or dispel Ben and Luke’s suspicions about a submerged payload. Ben and Luke’s supposition turn out to have been spot on. The larger trawler was indeed towing something – a pair of insidious looking drones clustered with strange biological riders and suspected warheads.
- 17. Margoza** – The next day, Patrol Boat *Grafton* intercepts the larger trawler *Margoza* and engage with her captain, eventually boarding her under the auspices of a routine inspection. It’s all smiles, but neither captain trusts the other. Following the boarding, *Margoza*’s captain is panicked and eventually cuts the remaining drones loose, an eventuality the *Grafton*’s captain had hoped for.
- 18. Dress Whites** – On returning from a mission, Ben is summoned to the naval base, where he will attend a high-level security briefing, full of brass – including the Admiral. It’s here he finally comes face to face with his newly acquired arch enemy, Warren Rittles.
- 19. Down & Out on the Grafton** – *Ethan Rourke* (25) is a highly skilled munitions expert and diver. He is ordered to the *Grafton* in order to dive on one of the two captured drones, remove its nosecone and diffuse the warhead. But with gale force winds and choppy seas, a *Monarch* dances precariously above the *Grafton* trying to lower Rourke onto the deck. It doesn’t go well and sends him to the ship’s infirmary while the clock ticks.
- 20. My Pleasure Asswipe** – At the end of the high-level briefing at Navy, Ben is privately confronted by his nemeses, Director of Intel *Warren Rittles*. There are choice words between the two. But In the end, even Rittles is no match for Ben’s skillfully delivered *and lethal* monologue. It belittles Rittles even further, a conflict that only spikes the

arrogant officer's rage. But Rittles is powerless to confront him publicly, as it will only damage his career further. The conflict becomes an escalating game of cat & mouse.

21. **Back in the Drink** – After two hours in the ship's infirmary, Rourke emerges with two broken ribs, a minor concussion and a fractured collar bone – but insists he's well enough to go back in the drink and try to remove the drone's nosecone and diffuse the warhead, so it can be safely brought aboard Grafton for inspection and reverse engineering. Every minute without the critical intel, leaves the homeland vulnerable to attack.
22. **Bloodbath** – One of the Grafton's divers, *Sarah Vickers*, volunteers to assist Rourke as he dives on the captured drone. Working as a team, they are successful in removing the nosecone but to everyone's surprise, no warhead is found, only a rudimentary guidance system. But when they eventually drop a crane over and attempt to bring the drone aboard the Grafton, the insidious biologic 'riders' turn out to be anything but innocuous. They viciously attack the deck crew. It's a horrendous bloodbath, sparing no one.
23. **Hush Hush Qui Vive, The Brink** – It's an eerie ensuing 48 hrs as the drone's disassembly, its absence of a warhead and the insidious biologics, are assessed by fleet. But in the end, there is only one logical conclusion. Guang's drones are not intended to destroy hard targets at all, but rather eliminate Taratolla's *population* with the biologics, allowing him to simply waltz in, turn on the lights and assume power.
24. **Radio Taratolla** – Ben is urgently summoned to *Port Inglise* on the mainland. There beneath an old long-defunct radio station, is a high-level military communications compound. It's here Ben meets the Admiral for the first time, and also the legendary physicist, *Alexander Bohmar*. They brief Ben on an urgent new threat on the opposite side of the continent, ordering he and Luke to the location for close-up intelligence gathering. Bohmar also refers fondly to his father and unveils plans for their rocket program and his goal of a network of satellites to re-establish global communications.
25. **Lost Planet Airmen** – Ben and Luke embark on the new threat mission, but two hours out they encounter a devastating high-altitude bug-strike. It sends Ben plummeting to the desert floor. He barely escapes with his life. As he lays in an arroyo, a young orphan boy discovers him. He is resourceful and inquisitive and steals immediately garners Ben's affections. But with no time to waste, they must continue the mission and can't reveal their identity. Instead he concocts a story that they are visitors from another planet. He promises to return.
26. **Armada of Evil** – After a long depleting flight across the continent, Ben and Luke arrive to Cloudpod 14d, 1400 clicks east over the Vendazzi, where the crew has been tracking the strange airships for more than 24 hours. Their sole mission is to determine whether they're troop carriers or other. But on witnessing a horrific act involving the death of

two young girls, it leads to a heart-wrenching scene, and sets in motion their own vile retribution. It's their first face-to-face with sheer evil.

- 27. Comeuppance** – Following the mission Ben and Luke know they went well beyond the mission's objectives and the Admiral's direct orders, but ultimately decide to omit nothing from their report – and simply let the chips fall. On their return home, the inevitable occurs as they are summoned to the Admiral's quarters. *The chips indeed fall!*
- 28. Commencement** – The end of their long twelve-weeks of training at Lekard has arrived. Although family or friends cannot attend, their graduation finally comes. It's held in an old hangar on the naval base. Luke tries hard to get Paige and Ben back on talking terms but to no avail. But, with a full thirty-day leave in front of them, nothing but home matters. Ben has changed over twelve weeks and longs to see his Mom and Connor.
- 29. Sweet Hiatus** – It's a long-awaited moment and a sweet chapter for the reader. It's also a watershed of emotion and release for Ben, Luke and the rest, after weeks of grueling training and unfathomable horrors. On returning home, Ben delivers a heartfelt apology to his Mom and gives Connor an authentic navy watch – an object he treasures beyond measure. Ben also comes to realize the true depth of his feelings for Paige and decides to go for broke. It doesn't exactly go as planned initially. But with the summer in swing, He, Luke, Connor and their Mom take long days at Lake Chilton, cliff diving during the aloft, long nights on Queensland Meadow, and homemade rooties on the veranda. Ben has made peace with his father's death and has found new purpose in life.
- 30. Reentry** – A lot has transpired during their 30-day leave – not the least of which is *Operation Reckoning*. It's a product of the Admiral's relentless obsession and carefully planned mission to rid themselves of Guang and his armies, once and for all. Ben, Luke, Paige and Marshall are thrust back into a hard and dangerous reality with little time to reflect on their brief hiatus.
- 31. Found** – The two defectors that had shown up in the fish truck were now becoming valuable assets in the planning of Operation Reckoning. They are providing high-level, verifiable intel of where Guang's primary military compound is, on the outskirts of Sydney. Meanwhile another Guang agent was flushed out and captured – but in three full weeks, he hadn't uttered a word. He eventually faces a firing squad. His final words: *"I wished I could be around to see the look on your face when it happens"*
- 32. Prelude to Slaughter** – Cloudbreakers are assigned their own barracks; a new home on the naval base – an entire building with a tar-beach bar on the roof. It's a far cry from Lekard and each evening is spent taking cocktails and watching the sun set over the Timor. It feels as though they've arrived. But when the missions lying ahead are finally revealed, they wonder how many of them will come home.

- 33. Poetry on the Bridge** – At 2300 hrs. the Grafton sets sail from the naval harbor. Aboard are both Clouddrunner squads, two instructors, Major Cocoa and Commander Wyncote. They're headed for a point 1400 clicks east where they will launch and rendezvous with two cloudpods hovering above Guang's compound. The atmosphere is jovial as crews mingle, and they struggle to mask the dangerous mission ahead. From the bridge, Paige recites a weighty pre-battle poem. In peak form, Marshall follows with one of his own.
- 34. Incursion to Evil** – An army insurgence team storms a compound near Geraldton, 80 clicks below the Dulkins' southernmost border. It's the trawlers home port and where the drones were manufactured. The operation is successful; all enemy eliminated, and the compound taken. But unexpectedly, a biological munitions plant is discovered. A handful of the suspected weaponized pellets are returned to the labs for evaluation.
- 35. Dream Oracle** – Following two intense nights of close level surveillance over Guang's compound, Guang still goes unsighted. But as Ben sleeps the next day, he is awakened by an intense dream, a premonition of Guang, not in his compound, but somewhere within the homeland. Simultaneously one of the detainees, a survivor of the Figranno incident, describes the very same premonition. Too compelling for chance, clues from both premonitions are used to try and gain a fix on his location.
- 36. Pathogen** – At the labs, biologists deliver their initial assessment of the pelletized munitions returned from the raid on Geraldton. One is an unidentified, but clearly manufactured, airborne viral agent. The other is a capsulized microorganism that appears to destroy organs from the inside - then producing hideous skin lesions in the host, finally erupting and releasing themselves to find new hosts.
- 37. Noose** – The dream clues prove reliable and Guang's hide-out is systematically closed in on. Bravo company takes up surrounding positions. A family is being held hostage. When a young boy leaves the house for food, Ben and Luke follow him, eventually questioning him. Critical intel is gained. Two hours later, the house is stormed, killing four of Guang's men, but Guang himself escapes. The boy's mother dies in the crossfire.
- 38. Dust to Dust** – Guang himself, alone and desperate, turns up in a catholic church only blocks away and is shot by a nun. Troops descend on the church and take him, still alive. Having confirmed his capture, the Admiral gives an immediate order to destroy his compound outside Sydney, and everything around it. But before Paige and the Cloud crew can carry it out, they have to save two families of farmers within the blast radius.
- 39. Crumbled Pearl** – When the mission is completed, it's time to go home. But Paige, no longer able to resist her yearnings, diverts her squad through the burnt out remains of *Sydney*. But as the city's retched ruins pass beneath them, her heart sinks - until two unlikely sentries and a dose of serendipity guide them onto a vibrant enclave of young people having claimed a corner of the former metropolis for themselves. Street life abounds; food vendors, music and the exultant aroma of rebirth. It may not have been

the *Shanghai* or *New York* her grandmother described, but for all four, it will assuage their deepest longings and forge new hope for others like it on the outer continents.

- 40. Grafton's Redemption** – After their airborne jaunt through Sydney, Paige and the remaining Cloudbrunners under her command return to the Grafton. The crew of Pod 14d are also airlifted to the patrol vessel after five exhausting weeks of duty. The crew of the Grafton are jubilant and *Tito*, the revered cook from Lekard had prepared a feast for them. Celebration ensues as the ship turns and heads for home. But on the evening of their arrival, Marshall has a bad - *but uniquely Marshall* - love making accident.
- 41. Ravenous Retro** – Three days later, Ben, Luke and Page smuggle Marshall out of the base hospital and wheel him off base and up to the Retro where everyone is waiting, on one of the busiest days in the legendary diner's history. Saltshakes, #5s and creosote coffees are flowing. The world is once again spinning in greased grooves. But when Christina launches one too many sexual innuendos in Ben's direction, Paige has enough. She stands, getting up in her face. In front of god and the whole place, she sends her packing. Turning back to the table, she's embarrassed, but they all stand - toasting her performance!
- 42. In Victory's Wake** – The PM announces an all-night celebration on Queensland Meadow. Over 200,000 show up. Perched on rooftops, balconies and in surrounding streets, they've come to celebrate the end of a tyrant and the beginning of new hope for both themselves and the outside world. At 10:00 pm, *Poindexter* emerges from his rocket and delivers his infamous projections for the future. It was a jubilant occasion of massive proportion. Ben recalls his father as he stares at the rocket and it's humble beginnings from the of the old rocket bank – a present on his 5th birthday.
- 43. Requiem for the Devil** – At midnight on the biggest celebration in Taratolla's history, a giant effigy of Guang is lowered with a crane, onto a massive bonfire. As the tyrant's likeness is engulfed in the flames, the crowd erupts in exultant cheer, eventually subsiding into a long reflective silence. Within minutes after the evil despot's spirit is expelled, an enormous atmospheric *blade* appears in the night sky above the crowd. It extends west as far as the eye can see; its origins and purpose...completely unknown.
- 44. No More Coyotes (final chapter)** – As the celebration on Queensland Meadow continues through the night, Ben and Luke inform Paige they have one more mission that won't wait. From the naval compound, the all three don their suits and head out over the Vendazzi – devoid of any permissions. They descend on the same coordinates where Ben had gone down. Eventually, they locate the boy. Ben stoops and asks...

..."would you like to come and see our planet?"