

Chapter Fourteen

## Lost Planet Airmen

### *Mission Launch / Lekard – twenty-one-hundred hours*

By the time Ben and Luke finished their meal, the commissary had filled with cadets, instructors and flight-ops guys. In less than five minutes, the room had gone from quiet to raucous, suddenly overtaken with its usual pre-flight clatter and chatter, and of course the intoxicating aroma of Tito's late-night fare. Tito had single-handedly transformed the place from a mortuary with shit food, to a place everyone actually looked forward to going. Tito and his commissary/bistro had become the soul of Lekard, if such a thing was even possible. Even Wyncote had given it his own handle. The *Pancake Palace* he called it, so dubbed for the now infamous *Oysters & Pancakes*, a dish continually requested by cadets and officers alike.

Paige noticed Ben and Luke getting up to leave. To her knowledge, they were all headed out on the same mission. She wasn't able to keep her curiosity at bay. She grabbed a tray, and wove her way through the crowd.

"What's wrong, couldn't sleep?" she asked, looking only at Luke.

Luke looked at Ben, then back at Paige.

"Are you asking *us*, or just me?"

She curled her lip, continuing to look only at Luke.

"We've been...re-assigned" Luke replied

"Re-assigned? What does that mean?" she asked

"Well...as it turns out, Ben can't swim. So the Commander, re-assigned him, and I...agreed to tag along. A little recon mission out in the desert. We're off in fifteen"

Paige quickly darted her eyes at Ben and then back.

“Right...well...”

Too flustered to finish her sentence, she rolled her eyes, and used her tray to push through between them. When she did, her t-shirt caught on Ben’s utility belt, abruptly pulling her back.

“Oh for fuck sake!” she said.

She slapped the empty plastic tray against Luke’s chest without looking at him, and began struggling to free herself. She quickly grew frustrated.

“Are you just going to *stand there*, Captain Brexhill,” she said, eventually looking up at him, their noses almost touching.

“Well, this is just about the cutest thing *ever*” Ben said with a wide smile “don’t you think Reardon?”

“Yea it’s real fucking cute Ben, right here in the middle of the Commissary” she quipped as they both struggled.

“Would you please let me...” said Ben

“Oh, I’ve got it for Christ’s sake” she said, pushing his hands out of the way.

They both bickered back and forth trying to free themselves, when finally, she’d had enough and rotated her body hard to the left. The t-shirt tore, her arm slamming into Luke. When she did, the metal tray fell to the floor. Ben and Paige both bent to pick it up and bumped heads. She grabbed her head and squinted in pain.

“I’m sorry” Ben said “I was trying...”

“Jesus Christ! She interrupted “Give me that” she said “How friggin’ hard does it have to be to go and get a breakfast sandwich?!”

Ben extended the tray to her, but continued to hang on to his side.

“*Ben!* She said, in a forced calm voice, blowing the hair out of her face. “Will you please...just give me...my tray!?”

He released the tray, as she stumbled slightly backward. She looked at both of them for a second, then turned to walk away.

“Paige” hollered Ben, as she walked through the crowd.

She stopped, but didn’t turn around.

“Will you *please* be careful out there?” Ben asked.

She nodded, without turning around, then disappeared through the crowd.

Ben looked at Luke, who by now was full on laughing.

“What’s so goddamn funny!?” Ben quipped

“Are you serious right now!” Luke replied, “you honestly can’t see what just happened, can you?”

“Well, I mean I know it wasn’t probably the most graceful interlude, but ya know...she caught her shirt on my belt. It happens”

Luke only laughed louder as they made their way out into the corridor.

“Brexhill, do you ever watch any of those old movies, the ones Hollywood made back when California was still a place?”

“Just get to the point Lafurney.”

“So...did you ever catch any rom-coms?”

“Again, what’s your point?”

“My point is...*that shit*, that whole little dance you two just did, is straight out of a movie. In fact, it was *so* serendipitous and *so* ridiculously goofy, even a screenwriter couldn’t turn-out anything so hopelessly romantic”

“Shut up Lafurney, and wipe the powdered sugar off your mouth”

“Ya know Brexhill, rom-coms aside, I think you need to start listening to the universe my brotha’. Cause she’s talkin’...and you ain’t listening!”

Luke continued to laugh as the approached the lift. The pre-flight deck was one level up and although both had gone up earlier to see the new plasma thrusters, they hadn’t yet been fully retrofitted. As they exited the lift, one of the techs – escorted them to the station racks, where all Exosleeves were hung vertically, immediately below placards bearing the cadets’ last name. Present were two more technical guys and one of the system designers from the labs. For a second time, they gave a thorough tutorial on the thruster’s operation, briefed them on parameters for acceleration and deceleration, and again reviewed some of the differing flight characteristics, from the previous thrusters.

As Ben and Luke were being helped into their flight suits, Wyncote entered the room and waited until the techs gave their thumbs up. The growling sound of the servo motors abruptly started, as the concealment roof began to open, exposing the night sky. The cool salty air rushed in. The night was unusually still, barely a hint of breeze from the west. But for the first day of summer, it was notably cooler than normal. The Pathagorens were high in the northern sky and barely obscured by high broken clouds, pretty much as Bohmar had forecast.

Ben, Luke and Wyncote all ascended the launch stairs together. The three lab techs followed them up. Normal launch protocols called for cadets to stand in a concentric arc on the outer edge, opposite their respective captains. But things were less formal with only two flyers, same as it had been the previous night, during the trawler overflights. It was hard to believe all the events having transpired in just 24 hours, thought Ben.

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“Gentlemen” said Wyncote “I wished we had another way of positioning you out there. I really do. But we don’t. The alternatives are too risky and too slow. Anyway, you wanted more speed. Well now you’ve got it. But be careful and stay alert. It’s going to be a long night, and unfortunately, there ain’t no autopilot. You fall asleep at that speed and you’ll wake up next to a cactus with coyotes chewing on your asses. Understood?”

Yessir”, they both uttered, checking the read outs on their face screens.

“When your one hour out” said Wyncote “contact *Charlie-14* on one-seven-zero; Commander Walt Bell. He’ll be looking for your call. Alright, you guys good?”

“Yessir” Ben replied

Ok, good luck and be safe!”

“Copy that” said Ben

Wyncote, looked at his watch. “On my mark” he said.

He counted off from three, with his fingers. Ben and Luke flipped their remaining headgear down and dropped their hands to their side. As Wyncote gave a thumbs-up, Ben and Luke raised a few inches off the pad, then shot skyward. In less than three seconds, they had disappeared into the blackness.

As they climbed out and turned east toward the coastline, Ben looked over his left shoulder and saw Luke on his wing. How the hell had he noticed such an obscure detail; some kind of unusual churn off the end of a trawler in the dead of the night? Who notices shit like that...and why? Whatever the reasons, he had potentially saved thousands of lives, or maybe the homeland altogether. His one astute observation had unveiled the venomous quills of a maniacal bedlamite, and set the entire Dulkan Military Complex in motion. And as if that weren’t enough to deal with, the same demonic lunatic had now deployed an armada of airships, potentially full of Hollows...or soldiers, or whatever the hell. Winning a rugby match, somehow hadn’t borne the same gravitas.

As they approached their prescribed cruise altitude, the Taratolla coastline came into view, just as it had the previous night. It was home, nothing more beautiful or peaceful, Ben thought. But it was scary as hell to think how fragile it all was. The navy had ruined that. He knew too much now. He knew the enemies would keep coming.

### **Burn baby burn**

Ben and Luke looked at each other as the coastline passed beneath them. As serene and satisfying as it was, the mission clock was ticking. It was time to formally commission Bohmar’s little plasma thrusters and launch themselves out over the

Vendazzi. Ben checked the heading in his face mask and dialed in their ultimate cruise speed to 410 kph.

“Ok, let’s put these bad boys through their paces” Ben said “On my mark...In three, in two...”

Since Ben’s dominant hand was right, and Luke’s left, the accelerating triggers were integrated into the left and right wrist of each suit, respectively - their guards positioned precisely and comfortably at each flyer’s trigger finger. Ben immediately recognized Bohmar’s input on the trigger’s design. It closely mimicked that of his ridiculously cool, magic pipe lighter. Bohmar’s brilliance as a physicist, was only exceeded by his attention to detail.

The instant the triggers were touched, an analog speed dial appeared in their face-screens. And there in the middle, digitally displayed was the dialed-in cruise velocity at 410 kph. But how quickly or slowly they got there, was entirely up to them. Firing the boosters required nothing more than simply pulling the trigger back, which they both did simultaneously. Immediately they surged forward, but unlike the old rocket boosters, there was no gut-busting to hold your intestines in.

Ben and Luke both continued squeezing their triggers gently back, as the g-forces tugged on them. The delicacy and surety of control was impressive, thought Ben, altogether tractable, just as Bohmar had described. The trigger’s design had obviously been carefully attended to. It was tactile and visceral, almost like an extension of the body itself. There were subtle, but distinctive clicks at every .5 kilograms of thrust, which made it effortless in making synchronized adjustments; critical in maintaining tight formation with others. To arrive at any speed in between, it was simply a matter of pulling the trigger back and watching the air-speed indicator. When it had crawled to 290 kph, Ben keyed his mic...

“Let’s hold here for a minute”

They both toggled their triggers inward, toward the body, also a new feature which would maintain any selected speed. In locked mode, the thrusters automatically adjusted themselves to hold the speed. And at 290 kph, it hadn’t take either of them any time to notice the differences in flight characteristics over the old thrusters. Even subtle body movements would alter their line. Pull your toes up, even slightly, and you started nosing downward. Lift your chin and the altimeter inched up. It didn’t take long to get the feel of it.

Luke checked the mission clock: At 11 minutes, 27 seconds out, Taratolla was already well behind them and the Dulkan border lied only eight minutes ahead. Once they cleared the boundary and were over the Vendazzi, the flight plan called for them to climb from their current altitude of 900, to 1850 meters, maintaining level flight all the way to their destination.

“How ya doing over there Lafurney?” asked Ben

“I forgot to pee. Mind if we pull over?” Luke replied

“Peeing’s for pussies. Let’s turn some corkies...get the feel of these things” Ben said.

He slightly widened the gap between them, then gently adjusted his feet in opposing directions. He slowly began rolling clockwise, simultaneously sending the horizon rolling in the opposite direction. The readouts in his facemask started gyrating. But not content with his rate of rotation, he added his hands to the mix. In an instant, he was spinning like a spiraling dart. Luke followed his lead, and quickly recognized the moment’s need for an appropriate set of song lyrics. Undeterred by the clamorous windrush, Luke regaled them at the top of his lungs.

*Fly me to the moon...  
Let me play among the stars,  
Let me see what spring is like on..*

“C’mon Brexhill, you know the words...”

*a-Jupiter and Mars  
In other words, hold my hand...  
In other words, Becca, kiss me*

The horizon thru their face-screens were doing somersaults. Ben had often been amazed at Luke’s singing abilities; as he often sang along with a recordings. But rarely, if ever, had he heard him belt out something a-cappella. It was undeniably impressive, and without question, his selection had well-served the moment! As far as Ben was concerned, high-speed corkies were the purest form of exhilaration, in some cases rising even above sex on the euphoria scale.

But like all bliss, it was short-lived. The warning buzzers started to go. Like being slapped out of a wet-dream, they had strayed off-course. Indignant over the

interruption, Luke continued his airborne lullaby into a second verse, but there was no staving the inevitable. They both countered their movements, slowly retarding the rolls. Their wind disturbance cavitated their bodies, as the horizon in front of them slowed its rotation, eventually returning to flat and level.

“Where are you?” Said Luke

“Above you, ten o’clock” Ben replied.

They made the necessary adjustments and brought themselves back to course. But no sooner than they had, a deafening sound went off in their helmets and in an instant, neither of them could see through their face-screens.

*“What the fuck!!?”* Luke cried.

Whatever it was, barely lasted a couple of seconds but had been so forceful, it actually decelerated them on impact. The abrupt insult had also instinctively caused them to physically react, altering their flight posture – not a good thing moving at 290 kph. With virtually no visibility, they struggled to right themselves. The artificial horizon and the force of the wind on their bodies, was all they had. Ben focused on the instruments, while Luke preferred the more visceral approach. But flying in formation, or in close proximity to a wingman, meant the airborne collision avoidance system (ACAS) was disabled. That meant neither had any idea where the other was, and if they crashed into one another, it could be disastrous. By whatever means, they had to re-posture themselves directly into the wind, and fast, or they would be completely out of control. The forces on their bodies were insane, making it virtually impossible to stabilize.

“Decelerate!” screamed Ben thru his mic

Luke was already on it, having toggled the trigger outward, releasing the trigger slowly forward.

“Got it...can you see!!?” asked Luke

“I can’t see shit!” Ben screamed. “My whole screen is blacked out!”

“Mine too!”



As an aerial diver, Ben had an extremely good air-sense, but such skill relied on sight markings, and did him little good in the current predicament. They were both dancing on the edge of tumbling, and that was the last thing they wanted. The first obvious answer was to peel their face-screens back and restore sight, but at anything over 210 kph, the screens were locked

Luke fought with every muscle to force himself back to straight and rigid, and as he did, it became easier to feel the relevant direction of his forward movement. He struggled, gradually trying to pull his nose back into it.

Their airspeed was dropping and they hadn't yet collided with themselves or the ground; two good things.

Ben was vacillating between his instruments and a tiny sliver of visibility through his face-screen, which the wind slowly seemed to be widening.

By the time Luke's airspeed read 230, he had more or less maneuvered himself into the wind. He was then able to use the artificial horizon and pitch indicator, to regain straight and level flight. But with his mask still virtually opaque from what was presumably bug splatter, he was solely navigating on the head's up instruments displayed in his face-screen. He was also doing everything he could to retard his speed, so he could retract his face-screen.

But Ben was still struggling as his body tumbled through the air. His instruments were gyrating to the point where he'd lost both his orientation and ability to focus on them. He had reached up twice already trying to pull his face-screen back, but he too was still traveling too fast.

"Ben, where are you!?" Luke shouted thru his mic.

"I don't know" Ben replied, his breathing labored.

"Can you see your airspeed!" shouted Luke "What is your airspeed Ben!?"

There was no reply.

Luke's hope was that his tumbling had bled enough speed to put him below 210 and therefore able to lose the face-screen. He also wanted him to deploy his wings, but if he was going too fast, it would sheer them off. But before he even got the words out completely, he knew that in both cases, the question was pointless. If

Ben was tumbling or out of control, the airspeed wouldn't read true because the pitot had to face into the wind in order to produce an accurate reading. He posed the more critical question.

"Ben, what's your *altitude*!? Look at your altimeter Ben!! Can you hear me?"

He repeated the question again, trying not to scream, but desperate to have Ben hear him. There was no reply.

"Goddamnit man, stay with me!" he pleaded once more. If you can hear me Ben, try your face-screen and deploy your wings"

"Lafurney...I tried. My face-screen won't..." Ben mumbled, beginning to panic.

But all at once, through his face-screen, Ben caught a fleeting glimpse of the Pathagerons, as they raced from right to left across the one tiny clearing in his screen. Any kind of visual marker could save his life at this point, plus he knew the three moons were low against the horizon, which at least provided one axis of his orientation. He instinctively rolled his body left, trying to turn back toward the moons, desperate to regain sight of them. If he could somehow hold the Pathagerons in his sight, then he could orient himself, or so he hoped. Since the artificial horizon was a part of the heads-up display, it didn't require he take his eyes away from the face-screen. But when he did catch sight of it, it showed the exact opposite of what he wanted – that he was inverted. For the first time in his life, his heart was racing; in fact beating out of his chest. But finally, there they were again. The three buttery moons again raced across the clear sliver in his screen, this time going the opposite direction. He quickly rolled back right, frantically working to get them in the center of the cleared spot, and hold them there. His airspeed indicator now read 190 kph and whether it was right or not, it should still have unlocked his mask. He fought to pull it back, but it was stuck, or locked, or both. But in a couple of seconds, the moons re-appeared, and he carefully adjusted his flight attitude, finally holding them steady in his view. He could now also see the horizon, if only barely. The earth was *above* the moons and slanting 30 degrees left. He quickly rolled 170 degrees, keeping the moons in his view. He was now flying straight and level, and with the moons still visible through the tiny clearing. It was then he caught sight of the altimeter.

Instantly, he jerked his neck up and arched his back, simultaneously pulling the throttle trigger for more speed - but it was too late. He clipped the top of an embankment, which robbed the remaining bit of his airspeed. Still unable to see

much, and with his body in the wrong attitude for climb, the thrusters plowed him into a sandy arroyo on the ridge's opposite side. The impact was so hard, it knocked the breath out of him.

"Ben, where are you man...you're freaking me out!"

Ben could hear Luke's call but his lungs were deflated, making it impossible to answer. Again Luke shouted through his mic.

"Dude, c'mon man, come back to me!"

Ben could feel himself shutting down from lack of oxygen. With nowhere for the air to go, his gasps were short and futile. Then all at once, he felt a kick to his left side. Whatever it was, had been just enough to move his diaphragm. With one enormous gasp, the air had somewhere to go this time, and rushed down his windpipe, inflating his lungs.

"Ben answer me man...what's your altitude?" Luke cried, at this point beginning to think the worst. But as Ben got his breath back, he managed to utter a reply.

"Looks like zero-zero" he said in a slight voice.

"What!!??" replied Luke. "Ben, is that you!? Say again. Zero what?"

"Zero...Zero" Ben replied, now beginning to regain his voice.

"What are you talking about...*you landed!?*" Luke asked. "*You're on the ground?*"

"Well, I wouldn't really call it a landing exactly" Ben replied.

"Jesus Christ" said Luke "Ben turn on your ACAS. I'm coming to find you"

"Copy"

He continued to lay face down for a few minutes, still trying to fully get his breath back. But whoever or whatever had kicked him, wasn't content with no reaction, and delivered another blow, this time harder, and from the opposite side.

Ben's first reaction was to simply roll over, but he had the presence of mind not to. He didn't know much about plasma thrusters, but he was pretty sure they wouldn't react well to sand. Instead, he tried to sit up, but literally everything hurt when he moved. He finally managed it and was sitting upright; his feet stretch out in front of him. He immediately tried his face-mask again, but still it was stuck. He continued to try, but it wouldn't move. And it was dark on the ground, very little help from either of the moons.

"Hey, can you hear me?" said a voice in front of him.

He nodded his head, knowing how ridiculous he must've looked.

"What are you? The voice asked, clearly that of a someone younger, a young boy he imagined.

He moved his head, trying to find the clear spot on his facemask, but even it was now coated in dry sand. He then remembered, the Exosleeve's designers had allocated a zippered pocket that contained, among other things, a moistened pad, for presumably just such mishaps. He pulled it from the pouch and began swiping it across his face-screen. The bug juice had hardened in the dry air, but it was coming off nonetheless. Soon he could see a figure standing in front of him. The faint light didn't reveal much, but from what he could see, it was indeed a young boy, maybe eight or nine, and standing beside him, a dog.

With Ben's movement, the boy stepped back but repeated his question.

"What are you?"

Ben well knew the sanctity and seriousness of LARS flight's anonymity, not to mention how they were never to touch ground outside the Dulkan borders. He thought before answering the boy's question.

"I'm Captain Connor" he said thru his mask.

"What??" the boy said, having heard only a muffled voice. He leaned in, this time, his nose almost touching the face-screen. Even in the dim light, Ben could now see the boy's face clearly. But the boy could see only his own reflection, and blackness through the glass screen. Ben raised his voice this time.

"I'm an airman from another planet. My name is Captain Connor"

His voice was still muffled, but this time, the boy had made out the words.

“That’s what I thought” he said “which one?”

“One what” asked Ben

“Planet, which other planet are you from?”

“Oh,” replied Ben “It’s ah...it’s that bright one up there” as he pointed.

“I thought so” he said, “cause it’s the closest, right?”

“Yes, the closest” said Ben “but still very far away”

Now leaning directly over Ben, his nose literally touching the face-mask, the boy launched yet another question.

“How can you talk earth language? He asked

“We studied your ways very hard, before we came?” Ben replied

“We? You mean there’s more people from your planet? The boy asked

“Yes, in fact one of them will be here shortly”

### **Timor Sea – twenty-three-fourteen hours**

Beta 12b’s Commander was one Kaitlyn Blaylock, one of only two female Cloudpod Commanders. At 182 centimeters, she stood taller than any of her male subordinates, and had the worst B.O. imaginable. It was stifling; the kind of repugnant stench that could wilt flowers.

“Blake, get these guys some coffee” she said, with a warm smile, as if she hadn’t a clue about her own ghastly failings “Let’s get this show on the road”

Beta Cloudpods were laid out almost exactly like Alpha Pods, but roomier and they accommodated two more full-time crew. When the table was deployed, she

brought up a monitor mounted in its surface. It displayed a map of the Timor Sea, specifically, a section 160-kilometers running north-east to south-west, by 87 kilometers east-northeast to west-southwest. Laid over the map was a grid with intersecting points at 20 kilometer intervals. Captain Obart's now famous plot line crossed the map in a shallow arc. Peppered along and to either side of the line, was a concentration of blue dots, each one a confirmed drone location. A sector had been marked off containing 22 targets.

"These are your targets ladies and gents" said Blaylock. "Which one a you is Reardon?"

"Here" replied Page, standing as far as possible off the table. "Can you show us the ordnance?"

Paige had no intention of hanging around drinking coffee and getting dizzy on the caustic odor. She threw herself into urgency mode, and in less than ten minutes, she and her squad was back on the roof, all provisioned up with shape charges, goggles and head lamps. Fresh air had taken on a new meaning.

Barely more than an hour later, Paige had already been in the drink three times, each one delivering a post-dated castration (a term she particularly liked), to another one of Guang's malevolent little floating drones, and the evil mass of parasitical creatures glammed to their skin. It was without question, the creepiest, most frightening thing she'd ever born witness to, let alone been involved with. And everyone in her squad felt the same. Plunging into a dark sea in the middle of the night was already foreboding enough, but whenever her head-lamp's beam inevitably passed across the mass of insidious little *whatever-the-fucks*, it literally raised the hair on her back, and sent goosebumps erupting down her forearms. In all her vast imagination of where Lekard and her LAM flight training would take her, nothing like this ever even crossed her darkest fabrications. The whole scene was like something created by a horror novelist; something utterly inponerable in real life, she thought.

Yet there they all were, inflicting extermination to the entire fleet of them, and all of it, completely invisible to Guang...or so they believed. But creepy or not, tonight's mission was being carried out under her tutelage. Wyncote had given Reardon temporary command of the temporary squad, a situation created by Ben and Luke's temporary re-assignment. In any other case, she would have assumed the position with glee, but the fact that it would all go away when Captain Marvel returned, *temporarily* pissed her off.

The squad consisted of herself, Winton Ellsworth, David Ackerman, and of course Edwin Marshall, or as he often like to ennobleize it, J. Edwin Marshall, III. Despite his routinely being grilled over the “J” and the “third”, he’d never bothered, and quite enjoyed, his own lack of explanation. Marshall was the sort that believed life should be an amalgamation of fact and fiction; a place where hyperbole and exaggeration were given the same revered import as truth. “It’s my Tao”, he’d once said, and he practiced it with great dedication.

All of them had been a part of the original eight recruits, twelve weeks prior. But each now knew the other almost as well as their own siblings. Living on a rock in the middle of the sea, and flying nine hour missions every night, formed a tight bond - or distain as the case may be, and left little room for secrets, personal or otherwise. Ellsworth was not the brightest; to the point where almost everyone suspected his aptitude scores had been manipulated. But he was a hell of a flyer, and as far as Paige was concerned, an exemplary male specimen, at least in the physical aspect. Ackerman on the other hand, could best be described as stoic, never having much, if anything, to say. His brevity was *so* refined, it had become a source of comedic amusement. In fact, the rest of the squad once had a standing bet that involved asking Ackerman questions over breakfast, and getting a point for every word *over two* they could extract from his answer. But Marshall, *being Marshall*, once forced a conversation with him, an exchange that ultimately devolved into a monologue of mumblings about Fate and Providence, and divine reason. From that point forward, everyone grew quite content with his detached demeanor.

Beta 12b was an updated variant of the original Alpha design, her primary distinguishing upgrades being 1) she was fitted with a condensation chamber that could extract and replenish water from real clouds, and 2) she could drop *blind* payloads; meaning it could deploy supplies, food, medicine or whatever, by parachute, but retrieve the chute via drone, thereby leaving no trace of its origin. But the Alpha’s size certainly hadn’t changed. With its crew of four and her own foursome piled in, it felt like an over-invited slumber party.

Since nobody, especially mono-flyers, had ever done what they were doing, it all had to be made up, and most of it, on the fly. Each of the four were assigned specific targets – individually assigned drones. In order to avoid confusion, each flyer was given a wrist monitor that guided them to only *their* targets. But the location of each drone had been mapped by the same sonar buoys that discovered them in the first place, and it didn’t account for drift. So, depending on how early a

specific drone had been discovered, its drift might have moved the drone 30 or 40 meters in any direction. Had time permitted, a simple tracking device could have been installed on each one, which would have provided constant real-time location data. But it would have taken another 12 hours at least, and the Admiral wasn't about to afford Guang with another potential attack window.

But it in the absence of precise locations, it meant diving onto your given coordinates, dropping down 3 meters, and then in most cases, swimming in different directions with only the a single concentrated head-light through total darkness, until you found your target. But Paige had done drift dives with her Dad, in the Exmouth Gulf when she was younger. So she quickly figured that if her target wasn't in immediate proximity of her entry point, it was likely *down-current*, and in almost every case, it proved fruitful. It became her first substantive order as squad leader, and it paid off. After roughly three dives each, the squad's average time for neutralizing a drone, was about 11 minutes in the water.

There was no data yet coming back from Fleet on other squads, but Paige didn't need it to know what she knew. They were *killin' it!*

Ben keyed his mic and kept his voice soft enough, so the boy couldn't hear him.

"Lafurney, you there?"

"Copy, I'm at three-five-zero meters, headed your way now"

"Ok listen, before you put down, scan the area thoroughly" Ben replied "Make sure no one else is around. Make certain"

"Trust me dude, I'm as concerned about you being on the ground as you are" said Luke "We've got to get you back in the air, and get the fuck outa Dodge. I'll sweep the area at a 5 click radius"

"Oh, and one more thing" said Ben, "I've got company down here"

"*What!!??*"

"Yea a kid...and his dog, so... just needed you to know."

"What'd you say?" shouted the boy as he stared into Ben's face-screen.



“Nothing kid, I was just...like talking to myself?”

“Why!?” he asked

“No reason, it’s just something we do, ok!?” Ben replied, still wiping his face-screen down.

“Are those real wings?” asked the boy

“Of course they’re real” he replied, again shouting thru his headgear.

All at once, the boy’s dog started barking. He jumped up and down, then ran in circles. The boy was trying to quiet him, then looked up and saw the source of all his rumpus. At first, the figure appeared as little more than a black silhouette against the night-sky. But as Luke flared his wings and gently touched down, the moon’s reflected light, slowly rendered his features. The dog was still barking, and lunging back and forth. Luke raised his face screen and immediately, placed his finger to his lips.

“*Shhhhhhhh*” he said, sporting a warm smile.

He took a knee and held his hand out to the dog. The boy had his arm around the dog’s neck, trying to calm him down. Luke retrieved a piece of jerky from a zippered pouch and held it out. The scrappy K-9’s timidity quickly subsided, as he took the dried meat and began chomping on it.

The boy’s widened eyes looked like pearls against his dirty face. He hadn’t blinked since the new airman touched down.

“You taking care of my friend over there?” Luke asked

The boy nodded, still in awe. Luke walked over to Ben and knelt.

“You OK boysy?”

“Yea, I think so” Ben said through the mask

“What, are you afraid the kid might recognize you or something?”

“I can’t get the fucking thing up!”

Luke got in back of him and wrestled with the headgear. All at once, it snapped loose. Ben pulled it the rest of the way back.

“Thanks, anyone else out there?”

“Spotted four infrared signatures about 4 clicks that way” Luke said as he nodded to the south “they weren’t really moving, but we gotta get outa here. Have you tried standing?”

By that time, the boy had squatted right in the middle of the pair, and was watching them intently, determined to hear everything they said.

“What’s your name kid?”

“Makka”

“Ok, so we need to get my friend up” Luke said “You wanna help me?”

The boy nodded and followed Luke’s lead, taking Ben’s opposite arm. Ben slowly rose, rotating his neck, trying to get the soreness out.

“You look like we do” said the Boy “ain’t no difference at all”

“Difference?” Luke asked, as he dusted the sand off of Ben’s flight suit and wings.

“He means our two planets, there’s and ours” said Ben

“Oh...yea, right!” Luke replied, clearly not up to speed, but going along.

From there, the flood of questions came, as the boy too was helping to dust the sand off Ben’s legs and back side.

“What’s that thing on your back? Do you have dogs on your planet?...How come you crashed? Are you gonna stay here? Where’s your space ship?”

“Hey kid, I mean Makka, we’re kinda in a hurry, so we don’t have a lot of time for questions right now” Luke explained “We have to get back to our space ship, and

go to a different part of your planet. And if we don't get there quick, we're gonna get in big trouble"

"Will the King kill you if you don't get there in time?"

"No, we don't really have...I mean, no. He won't kill us" Luke explained. "So listen, Makka, where's your mom and dad?"

"They was killed. It's just me and Rit now"

"Who's Rit?"

The boy laughed, "My dog!" He said, as if it was a stupid question.

"Right, so how were your parents killed?"

"They was killed by the Hollows, my brother too...but they couldn't kill me"

"No?"

The boy raised his shirt and pointed to a long scar on the left side of his abdomen

Luke ran his finger along the scar.

"That's a pretty good scar. He said "I can see you were too strong for them"

"My Dad was strong too! He killed one of them with a rock, but..."

The boy went silent for a minute.

Ben stooped down. It's ok, I know how you feel. My father was killed too"

"You had a father, and a mother? The boy asked

"Still got a mother, and a brother."

"Up there? The boy said, pointing to the star again.

"Yep, up there, the bright one. Listen Makka, what do you do out here? How do you get food?"

“I’m the well tender” he said proudly as he stood “Me and Rit protects the water well over there” he pointed “they bring food for us, every day”

“Who’s they?” asked Luke

“The village, over there” he pointed south “We can go there in the day sometimes for fixing buckets and to sleep if it’s hot”

Luke looked at Ben. They both knew they had a problem, but whatever they did, it had to be quick. They were already off their flight plan by 14 minutes, and they’d barely cleared the border.

“Makka, you seem like a good night-scout. Can you do us a favor, and go up on the ridge and check for other people?” asked Luke. ‘Our coming here has to be a secret right now, ok? It’s very important”

“I can see anything that moves” he said, his chest protruding “C’mom Rit” said the boy as they ran down the arroyo to the ridge’s highest point.

“Wait!” he said, turning around abruptly “You’re not leaving, are you?”

“We’re not going anywhere till you get back” said Ben “promise!”

The boy and his dog scurried down the arroyo.

“Brexhill, from the looks of things, you almost bought it dude. What the fuck!?”

“Had to be Nightbells” said Ben...insidious mother fuckers, and yea! I did! I clipped that ridge over there. If I hadn’t, I would’ve missed the ground altogether. Almost had it!”

All the instructors at Lekard had warned them about the little bean-size insects, but nothing about concentrated swarms. It would be disastrous if they encountered them again at even higher speeds.

“Well, if they managed to almost take us out at 290 kpm, imagine what the little bastards would do at 410! Anyway, are you ok? You still look pretty shook up”

“I’ll be ok, but I don’t know about all *this*” he said, looking at his wings and his flight-suit. He activated his wings and extended them. They began the familiar high-speed flutter, as he lifted himself off the ground a few inches and hovered there for several seconds, then sat back down.

“What about the plasma booster?” asked Luke

“No way to know until we get up there, but you can see the fucking trench I dug. It was all on my belly, but I can’t imagine a little sand not getting in those intakes”

“Well, we gotta figure out what we’re gonna do about the kid” said Luke “To my knowledge, literally no human being has ever laid eyes on one of us, outside our own military, right?”

“That’s the story, but has that really changed?”

The two men looked at each other, pondering the obvious. Had the boy seen a top-secret mono-flight pilot, or just your garden variety space man?

“How old’s the boy would you say?” asked Luke

“I’m guessing nine or ten” said Ben

“Right, probably. So, do you think he’s really buying this whole lost planet airmen thing?”

“yea...I do” said Ben

“Ok, so we’re space men from another planet, but what are the villagers gonna think or say, when they hear that story?” Luke posed.

“I have no friggin idea.” Ben replied “But I do know we don’t have time to ponder every possible scenario. We’ve gotta make a decision, and get our asses back up there, not to mention sorting out the bug problem”

Ben stared up at the sky, looking for answers. There was a large oval hole in the cloud-cover, revealing an ocean of stars against a pitch-black sky. Two shooting stars crossed paths simultaneously, something that took him by surprise – and something he’d never seen.

“Well, I mean, what this really boils down to I guess is whether we tell ground about it or not” said Luke “If we call it in, it means more time on the ground, right? I mean that’s for certain. They’ll have to hear the story, relay it to Command, assess it, and then come back with an answer”

Again, the two men stared at each other, just as they had on the rugby fields, sorting out game strategy. They both wanted back in the air, and they were burning precious minutes. But who knew what the boy’s credibility was with the villagers. By the looks of it, thought Ben “he was more or less an orphan, on his own. And if they asked him to hold their existence in secret, would he...and for how long? Ben allowed himself no more time to think about it.

“Let’s get outa here” he said.

The boy and his dog were running back down the arroyo toward them.

“Ain’t nobody out there” said Makka “I looked in all directions, just some scrawny coyotes”

“Ok thanks, well done” said Ben. He knelt and put his hands on the boy’s shoulders “Makka, listen we have to go now. We’ve got a long way to travel. But I need you to promise me something, and in exchange, I’ll promise something to you, ok?”

Makka shook his head enthusiastically.

“I need you to keep a solemn secret. I need you to never tell anyone about us, nothing about ever seeing us or anything, not to anyone, ever. Can you do that?”

“What’s slolum?” the boy replied. Ben smiled

“It mean’s *very important*.”

“I promise” said Makka, nodding his head “I can keep any secret and forever”

“Ok good, now come here and turn around” said Ben

The boy turned around so his back was toward Ben. Ben pulled the boy into his chest, and wrapped his arms around him. When he did, Rit started up barking again. But Makka calmed him down.

“Ok which way’s your village?”

The boy pointed south.

“You wanna see how it looks from up there?”

He nodded, but was clearly a little nervous.

“Ok” Ben said “hang onto my belt then. Ready!?”

Makka nodded. Rit was still nervous, but he refrained from barking. Ben deployed his wings and set them in motion. Sand scattered as they started to lift off, first hovering a few seconds, then shooting straight up. The boy was spellbound, as he watched Rit and Luke grow smaller and smaller as they climbed. As they reached sixty meters or so, Ben pointed.

“Is that your village? He was pointing to a small cluster of warm lights, about 3 clicks to the south.

Makka again nodded, but he still hadn’t uttered a word since going aloft. He was clenching Ben’s belt with all his strength, and was hardly moving. Ben climbed another thirty meters and hovered again, this time slowly rotating a full 360 degrees, so the boy could see his domain from all directions, at altitude.

“That’s the well!” he said, finally breaking his silence.

“The little building out there?” Ben asked, pointing.

“Yea, we stay on the roof at night, so we can see everywhere and protect it”

“I see” said Ben

Ben felt himself wanting to take the boy all over creation, sweeping low and fast over the arroyos and cruising slow up just below the clouds; all just to see the look on his face. They both had something big in common, and he had a wide-eyed, inquisitive demeanor that Ben liked. But their time constraints were completely unavoidable, and he headed back down. As they softly touched down, Rit started barking again, but quickly calmed down as Ben released his master. Ben turned Makka around again, so he was facing him.

“So I told you that if you kept your promise, I would give you one in return, remember?”

Makka nodded, wiping the sand from his eyes.

“Ok, well my promise is this. I promise we’ll come back...and I *always* keep my promises”

A huge smile rolled across the boy’s dirty face. He was missing an upper tooth, but it somehow only added to his off-the charts cuteness. His eyes lit up!

“*When?*” He asked

“Well, I don’t know for sure” Ben replied “We have a lot to do before we head back home” he nodded up to the bright star “but we’ll come back. That I promise”

Ben extended his hand. The boy held his out as well. They shook hands.

“Alright, cover your eyes from the sand” said Ben.

Ben and Luke lifted off and hovered a second. They gave a wave, then shot straight up at full speed. Makka tried to hold sight of them with his keen eyes, but within a few seconds they had melted into the darkness. But as he continued his stare, he saw a pair of blue lights, and followed them too, until they finally disappeared.