By the time they came topside, a Monarch IV transport was waiting on the tarmac, rotors spooling. The sky was black and filled with stars. The Pathageron moons were still amber, hanging low across the eastern sky and barely a sliver of the old moon was waning to the southwest. The Lieutenant Commander and Major Cocoa were the only officers that boarded the Monarch along with the cadets. The inside was stripped down and configured with seats along both sides, facing inboard. The Lieutenant Commander waited for everyone to strap in and spun his fingers to the first officer. The Monarch raised and slowly lifted off facing the sea, turning due north on its climb-out.

Paige, the only female cadet, and Ben were the only civilians aboard that’d had ever even been in a Monarch, or any aircraft for that matter. When the rotors pitched, it moved the aircraft forward, Luke grabbed his seat base like the rope stump on a pissed-off bull. Ben laughed.

“Be careful!” Ben shouted above the noisy rotors.


“Yea you don’t want to piss yourself in front of Reardon over there”

Reardon overheard them. She grinned.

Lafurney let go of the bar on his seat base go just long enough to flip Ben off, then quickly returned his death grip.

The Monarch stayed fairly low, hugging the mountains to their left, remaining on a northerly heading. The Monarch’s top speed was a little over 600 Kilometers per hour, but Ben reckoned they were moving half that speed.

A little more than an hour after they had taken off, the Monarch began to slow as the rotors pitched slightly starting a slow descent. A cross wind was jostling the aircraft side to side a little as they continued their descent, which only increased the look of terror on Luke’s face.
“Lafurney, how is it you can put on an Exosleeve and fly like a goddamn falcon, then get in one of these and piss yourself?”

“It’s because of that dude up there”

“The pilot?”

“Yea, the pilot. He looks like a primate...you know, not fully developed.”

“A primate?”

“That’s right, and he smells like soup”

Ben stared at his pasty face, shaking his head. Out the small windows it was hard to tell where they were landing, but it sure wasn’t an airport. They were directly above the mountains with no visible landing site. Eventually the aircraft ceased its forward motion and flared for landing. The two main gear touched down but out the windows from Ben’s view was still nothing but a craggy mountain face and a couple of red nav lights. The nose gear touched down and the engines began to spool down. The first officer looked back at the Lieutenant Commander and gave her a thumbs-up. She unstrapped and motioned for the cadets to do the same.

Only after Ben and Luke sat foot on the ground, did it become apparent where the Monarch had put down. It was a flat concrete landing pad built into the mountain side, roughly square and with eight blue navigation lights marking its outer edges. On the eastern side, was a spectacular vista looking down across the farming valleys and out to the sea. On the mountain side, there was a giant laterally telescoping hangar door. It had literally been cut into the side of the mountain face and was closed. The cadets followed Lt. Com. Laramie and Major Cocoa across the tarmac toward the hangar door’s right side. As they cleared the Monarch’s rotor blades, the Captain spooled the engines back up and the Monarch lifted off.

“There goes our ride” said Lafurney

The base commander had come down and was waiting to receive the group just outside the hangar’s secured personnel entrance, immediately to the right of the large hangar doors. The CO obviously knew Major Valdez and the Lieutenant Commander. But he took the time to introduce himself to each of the cadets before bringing them past security.
“Leiutinent Roger Fitzgibbon” he said as he shook hands with each cadet. We’re glad you’re here. Let’s bring you inside”

On the CO’s nod, one of two guards, buzzed the group into a small security area. As a matter of protocol, each civilian was patted down before being allowed into the hangar itself. Security was heavy and the reasons were obvious.

When the security checks were completed, Fitzgibbon finally opened the door onto the hangar floor. The sight was beyond imagination.

“What the fuhh…” said Luke under his breath.

It looked like an alien spaceport, otherworldly Ben thought, like something from the pages of a comic book. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected but this was beyond anything his imagination had conjured.

The sheer scale was almost overwhelming to take in. Its proportions were immense, even in relation to the giant hangar doors they’d seen from the outside. The ceiling extended at least 15 meters beyond the door’s upper edges and was more or less dome shaped; entirely made up of the craggy, raw exposed granite of its original excavation. A flat ceiling network of catwalks, electrical conduits, pipes and lighting was suspended from the granite ceiling via anchored cables.

The main hangar bay stretched as far back as they could see from their vantage point and was filled with busy personnel of every description, moving about on pristine white hangar floors, a series of gantries, mezzanines, stairways and catwalks.

Luke discretely struck a pose resting his right elbow in his left palm with his forearm stretching upward; his hand in the shape of a gun.

“Hey Mr. Bond”

The Lieutenant Commander was staring at him.

“Me sir?”

Yea you, I’m going to have to ask you to put the finger away. Most of this equipment doesn’t react very well to fake gunfire.”
All remaining seven cadets broke into laughter.

“She’s right son, go ahead now, put it away” said the C.O.

More laughter. For better or worse, Lucas Lafurney was firmly establishing himself as the base clown but so far, the higher-ups had remained reasonably tolerant, if not mildly amused.

The expansive periphery of the space alone was impressive on any level, but the elephant in the room was what rested immediately in front of them. It resembled a floating house, an enormous orb with rounded corners, hovering, 3 meters above the hangar floor. All eight cadets knew it was surely what they’d been brought to this secretive mountain compound to witness, even before the CO spoke. It defied both physics and imagination to see something this large and heavy, hovering completely unsupported like some alien spacecraft. A u-shaped gantry surrounding the orb on three sides and various umbilicals were attached to its underside, extending to the floor. Ground personnel were moving in and out of the thing via the gantries and a white gas, presumably condensed steam, was seeping from a network of pipes that covered the orb’s exterior.

Fitzgibbon positioned himself in front of the cadets. He was tall and lanky, about 50, Ben imagined, with a pleasant face and a smooth bald head that reflected the ceiling’s klieg lights like a freshly waxed car. He was army, wearing a simple khaki uniform and from the patch on his arm, he held the rank of Sergeant Major.

“Welcome to C-Base 6 Ladies and Gentlemen. From a security perspective, the place your standing in doesn’t exist. I trust each of you know exactly why that is and acutely understand that the security of our homeland relies on it remaining that way?”

All eight cadets nodded.

The CO cocked his head, putting his hand behind his ear. “I’m sorry, must not have heard you.”

“YESSIR” replied the cadets loudly in unison.

“OK, so I’m guessing you all have an idea what this rather large apparatus hovering behind me is”
Prescott raised his hand. “Guessing it’s a cloud pod sir”

“You’d be correct. To put a finer point on it, it’s an Alpha-Class pod; believe it or not, the smallest of our three current operational classes. The Alpha also outnumbers the other two classes by almost three to one. It’s our workhorse. As you might imagine, this is what we call the naked version. Not necessarily its sexiest self, but plenty soft and seductive when she’s all dressed up. Follow me.”

The CO began walking toward the craft, talking as he walked. “Her skin is mostly comprised of carbon fiber”, he continued. “and other lightweight composites. The windows and portals are obviously used for observation but only in specific instances during night operations. As you can see, the Alpha’s underside has a network of ports, sensors, cameras and observation tubes, all of which handle the brunt of surveillance tasks. These devices, some computer controlled, and others manually operated, are in continuous operation throughout deployment. Any questions so far?”

Luke spoke up, trying to redeem his antics with something more serious. “I was wondering what the open ports are sir, the ones along the upper sides?”

“Good question Mr. Bond. Actually, they’re not really ports, their thrusters; compressed air jets and they’re used for propulsion. Or more appropriately positioning of the pod. Generally speaking, we want our clouds to float and glide directionally along with the real clouds that surround them. But obviously mission objectives dictate otherwise on occasion. Mostly this occurs during night operations, when we need to position a pod for specific observation and if that means straying from her more organic sisters, then we use these low impact thrusters to get us there. Anyone else?”

Paige Reardon raised her hand.

“Yes mam.” The CO pointed to her.

“Is it helium sir, is that what allows the pods to float?”

“That’s correct Miss Reardon. As you’re aware, we are blessed with a lot on natural resources in the Dulkins, and one of those is natural gas, from which most helium is derived. We use grade 4.5 helium which is what was also commonly used in weather balloons. But what a lot of people don’t realize is that helium can also be taken from the air. And in our case, we deploy and launch with the former
and replenish during operations with the later. We have two molecular extractors aboard each Alpha pod and they’re more or less in continuous use, replenishing or manufacturing new helium as required, depending on the altitude requirements of our missions and other factors. Let’s move around to the gantry”

The CO continues to provide explanation as he leads the group around to the gantry’s stairwell to the rear of the hovering pod.

“Helium is an inert, monatomic gas, similar to Hydrogen in make-up, but it has the lowest boiling point of all elements, which is partially why this facility resides at a higher altitudes and again partially why it’s stored and handled here in this cave, where the temperature remains at a more or less constant 43 degrees Celsius. The bladders surrounding the top of the pod is where the helium is stored for lift. Alright I’m going to need everyone to put a pair of these over your shoes before boarding the pod.”

The CO handed a box of anti-static cotton foot gloves to Major Valdez, from which he took a pair and passed the box. Fitzgibbon led the group up a wide set of galvanized steel gantry stairs. As they reached the pod’s main entry, everyone donned their booties and followed the CO aboard.

“I fucking want one of these things Brexhill” said Luke. “Can you imagine the shit we could do with one of these?”

“I Don’t know Lafurney, but I’m sure you’re going to tell me”

“Well since you’re single again now, we could get back to the business of honing our formidable skills of romantic seduction. And that pursuit ole’ boy would be infinitely enhanced with a sex cloud at our disposal.”

“A sex cloud?” Ben retorted.

Once all inside, the CO began his tour of the pod’s interior.

“This is the Pod’s main deck”, Fitzgibbon began, “which as you can see, is mostly living quarters. Each Alpha-class pod accommodates a crew of five and it’s here they relax, eat, sleep, and hopefully exercise a bit. A crew can be up for a week, sometimes ten days without being relieved, so we try to give them as much to do as possible.”
Luke again whispered to Ben.

“Ya see, we could take those stupid ladders out and replace them with spiral staircases. Lose the ridiculous gray floor and install a carpet. And right where the ping-pong table is, a circular bed.”

“I’m sorry Mr. Bond, did you have something to add?”

Luke looked up to find the CO staring at him.

“Me sir?”

“Yes, you. Was there something you wanted to share?”

“No sir, I mean, well sir, I was just telling my colleague here how nicely appointed the space is sir, the ah…the palette.”

“The palette!?” The COs eyes grew large. “Something of an interior decorator are you Lafurney?”

“It’s just a…sort of sideline sir, yes sir”

“A sideline? Well that’s terrific Cadet Lafurney. I’m sure that’ll come in handy on all those lame reconnaissance missions when you’ll be able to break the boredom by offering up your decorating advice. Would you like to escort us all up to the control deck? That’s an area that can sure use some help. Wouldn’t you agree Lieutenant Commander?

Commander Laramie chuckled under her breath.

“Well Lafurney, we’re waiting.” The CO quipped. “You know how to climb a ladder don’t you?”

Luke stuffed his hands in his pockets and shuffled in front of the rest, reluctantly leading the way to the deck above.

Once all ten had made their way up the deck ladder, the CO gathered them to one side and directed their attention to the center of the space.
“This of course is the Control Deck and not unlike a ship or a sub, it’s here where the cloud is controlled, maneuvered and navigated. What you’re looking at in the center here, is the navigation table. Its screens are used to plan missions, display dailies, and a host of other real-time data. The circular pylons you see on the ceiling directly above the nav table, are entry tubes. You’ll all become very familiar with these in the coming weeks as these are the only means of ingress and egress while a pod is under way. Obviously the nav table slides out of the way during boarding.”

After waiting for the CO to finish his sentence, a workman whispered something to him. The CO acknowledged and then looked at his watch.

“Ok Ladies and Gentlemen, I’m sorry but we’re going to have to cut this short I’m afraid. This pod’s launch has been moved up slightly due to weather and we need to get the crew aboard.”

Everyone filed back down the ladder and made their exit off the gantry back down onto the hangar floor.

The CO brought everyone to his office on the hangar’s mezzanine level. The entire inboard wall was glass, affording an impressive view of the hangar floor, which was now scurrying with workman in prep for launch.

Ben, Luke and the six other cadets were spread out over the window’s length, watching the preparations taking place below.

The pod’s gantry rested on a series of tall inflated tires and had a driver’s cab mounted high on its rearmost point. Presumably the gantry would be used to move the pod out the hangar doors for launch.

The CO took a moment with the Lt. Com. and Major Cocoa.

“Major, my compliments. It’s a good looking group. I can see the enthusiasm and brightness in all of them; all except one maybe. I mean, I know you handpicked each of them and I’d never second-guess your judgement. But if you don’t mind me asking, what’s the deal with this Lucas Lafurney character?”

Cocoa grinned. “Well you pretty much nailed it in one-word Commander, he’s just a bit of a character. But don’t let it fool you. He actually has the highest ACS scores of the entire group, and by a fair margin I might add. Also comes from a
good family. As for the other part, I think the levity will probably prove a good thing for squad morale. He just needs to learn when to shut up.”

“I won’t disagree with that.” Replied Fitzgibbon. “Anyway, it’s good to see Bohmar’s dream coming on line.”

After fifteen minutes or so, a buzzer let go with three short blast and then repeated twice more. When the buzzers had stopped, all the hangar’s main lights shut down in sequence from front to back and were replaced with red lights. Simultaneously the hangar doors began to open, each accordion section slowly collapsing into the other, moving left and right.

The whole mood had shifted in an instant. As the mammoth doors slowly continued to open, the launch pad came back into view, this time with red light spilling out onto the tarmac, as if preparing to receive a contingent of aliens from a distant galaxy. The sky was black and littered with stars; and the sea was visible in the distance. Ben, Luke and the other six soon to be Cloudrunners stood at the glass, transfixed without speaking as the launch sequence unfolded below them. Three weeks ago, none of this was even imaginable; even for Ben, whose father had exposed him to a lot.

Base Commander Fitzgibbon came and rested his hands on two of the cadet’s shoulders. “It’s something to see, isn’t it?”

Cadets Reardon and Ackerman just nodded their heads without speaking.

“Well boys and girls, I don’t think we’re going to get in anyone’s way at this point” said the CO. “If we’re going to witness a launch, it doesn’t need to be behind glass. Let’s head down to the tarmac. And by the way, you can get rid of the cotton booties now if you like.”

By the time they descended to the hangar floor again, the undulating electric motors that had been moving the massive doors, growled to an abrupt halt. In an instant, everything fell silent; the massive doors fully retracted and the launch tarmac stretching out in front of them. The combination of quiet and the stillness of the night made the moment feel even more alienesque. The only sound at all was the almost inaudible whine of the giant gantry’s electric motor, slowly propelling it forward, out onto the launch pad - its floating payload in tow.
The outside temperature had dropped a few degrees since their arrival, making the night air chilly. The blue navigation lights at the tarmac’s outer edges reminded Ben of the times he’d been allowed to accompany his father on base when the Monarch’s night maneuvers were underway.

It may have sounded cliché, even in his head, but the truth is, it was magical; dreamlike in a way, even understanding the seriousness of it all. He also knew the moment wouldn’t repeat itself. Both for himself, and the rest, no matter how many cloud launches might follow, there would only ever be one *first* - and this was it.

All the ground umbilicals had been disconnected now and the gantry was well past the threshold of the doors. As the giant apparatus moved out toward the pad’s center-point, where the Monarch had touched down an hour earlier, white gases began forming around the pod. It looked like steam, first from the bottom, moving up on the sides and then the top. There were tiny sparks of light pinging through the white gas as it formed, almost like fireflies but as the cloud matter became denser, they disappeared.

In less than six minutes, the entire pod had transformed itself from this manmade *thing* of rivets, composites, tubes and portals – into a rolling billowy cloud, churning and reforming itself like one of those time-lapsed sequences of a thunderhead making itself. Even the smell of the air had changed somehow, like an ionization of the molecules. Again, Ben likened the whole scene to the pages of a comic page coming to life. It defied imagination and he longed for the ability to share the experience with his Dad. Was there an afterlife and if there was, could his father peer into the world he’d left behind? He desperately wanted to believe the later, longed to believe he was somehow silently standing beside him, witnessing all this with him.

Ben had never much subscribed to the notion of God, but the moment was powerful…ethereal; and regardless his beliefs, there was a momentary current of spirituality coursing thru him; something he couldn’t define. Perhaps he thought, even the presence of an oracle sent to merge the two worlds and offer a conduit to his father. But at the same time, he was a big believer in the empirical world, and in that world, he defined spirituality as little more than goosebumps, euphoria laden endorphins, racing to fill the heart and mind with a feeling of transcendence. But whatever it was, it left him with a great feeling of purpose and the feeling that anything was possible.
All at once, a gentle beeping sound broke the silence. The enormous gantry structure, was now moving slowly backward, its connective appendages and catwalks again returning to view as it moved out and away from the pod’s blanket of undulating white gas. Alpha Pod 7, was no longer tethered and now floated independently in the precise position where the gantry had released her.

The beeping stopped as the gantry came to a halt, perhaps 30 meters back. The scene was again silent and still. No one spoke. Even the ground personnel were merely standing in wait.

Fitzgibbon addressed the group of cadets in a low voice.

“It’s all up to the Captain from here. They launch on his order. Ground flight is no longer involved. Right now, the crew is checking systems and monitoring outside air movements.”

Another 10-12 minutes passed as the pod still hovered in precisely its released position. Absent of lights, buzzers or any sort of prior notice, the cloudpod simply began to move, beginning its silent ascent. Up and away from the pad it lifted like an apparition returning itself to the spirit world. When it had gained ten meters or so in altitude, the silence was temporarily broken with three short bursts from the pod’s thrusters. It gently set Alpha 7 moving out away from the mountain as it continued its ascent.

“And once again, there goes our ride,” said Luke.

“This is seriously fucking amazing.” Said Ben. “I’m starting to get why Bohmar is some kind of revered god.”

“I know, right? I’ve had a hard-on since we got here.” Lafurney replied. “I don’t even really believe what we’re seeing!”

Everyone’s gaze was held as the pod slowly moved up and out on a temporary heading in the direction of the sea. By now, Alpha 7 merely looked like a lone cloud in a sea of starry blackness. As Ben stood, transfixed, Bohmar’s genius and vision, came flooding in, in a way he could never have fully understood before; or so it seemed. There simply could not have been a more elegant solution, he thought. The unassuming innocence of a floating cloud; arguably the most commonplace and ubiquitous of all earth’s natural phenomenon. Its success as a surveillance apparatus was utterly undeniable, remarkable in its conceptual
simplicity and fulfillment of duty. And the irony of it all, was that its pre-apocalypse predecessor, *the almighty satellite*, for all their global reach, were utterly useless wherever the impenetrable opacity of cloud-cover arose, rendering them blind to the ground below. The most sophisticated global surveillance system on earth, had yielded to its one and only foe, the always fashionable, ever-graceful cloud. He grinned at its cleverness.

The gantry’s beeping began again, unofficially marking the close of the launch. The towering metal structure slowly continued its retreat backward into the hangar. As soon as it had cleared the door’s threshold, the giant hangar doors themselves began closing. Everyone, including ground personnel, began moving inside as the doors slowly shut.

Ben still had goosebumps on his arms and neck from the launch. Again he thought of his father, how he surely must’ve stood on a similar precipice, and reveled in its intelligence. But the goosebumps quickly faded as the opportunity of the moment presented itself. Walking just ahead of him was the Commanding Officer of an entire cloudpod launch facility, *maybe the only one*, a high raking Navy Lieutenant Commander and Major Cocoa. This was the moment he thought. He had to present his thoughts to an audience that mattered. Would they think he was crazy? Maybe, *probably* – but even if they did, he knew there was enough there / there to get them thinking and that’d be enough for now.

He double-timed his steps until he was walking beside Cocoa.

“Major, may I have a word sir?”