



Chapter 19: The Future Takes Off

The school was invited to gather in the main hall where a new and bigger monitor filled the wall behind the podium. They sat in excited anticipation as the scene on the monitor changed from a small unusual plane—like a jet fighter but with more visible air intakes—sitting on a desert runway to a Control Room, where men sat glued to screens with figures and numbers flashing and scrolling in vivid colors. The screen returned to the plane, which was now rolling down the runway in the shimmering heat.

The plane lifted off and the Control Room erupted in an excited cheering. On myriad screens, the plane climbed into the sky and shrank into a barely discernible dot. The screens switched to the view from the plane's forward cameras and the cameras that monitored the cockpit screens.

"All systems are normal from here, Captain Goodwin," the Control Room manager said. "Is that what you see?"

"Everything is perfect from here, Kurt," Goodwin replied. "The program is now moving from air-breathing to ram jet. Instruments show everything good. I can feel some vibration but it doesn't show anywhere on the screen."

"We don't see any vibration either, Harry, but it's your call. You can bring it back down if you feel the plane is in difficulty."

"And let Jim take the number two plane up tomorrow—no way!" Harry laughed.

"If the plane is in difficulty—"

"No, Kurt, the plane isn't in difficulty and neither am I. It was just a joke to keep you slackers on your toes."

"Okay, Harry, but no more jokes, please."

The boys watched as the scene on the giant monitor slowly morphed from sky blue to navy and then black.

"Ram jet is off and I'm on rockets, gentlemen. We are in space."

The monitor switched back to the Control Room where excited technicians were cheering, hugging, and shaking hands.

The monitor switched back to the cockpit cameras and the blackness of space once again filled the screen. Alexis watched in awe and with a feeling he'd never had before. He knew what it meant, though.

"Holy jumping," Harry Goodwin's voice came through the speakers, "they don't exaggerate when they talk about space garbage. The monitor shows me in the middle of a pile of junk."

"Is the computer evading it?" The manager asked anxiously, staring at his own screen where points of brilliant light appeared like stars in the blackness. "Yeah, it's fine. It's just a surprise. I've set a course above this mess. When

I'm sure I'm out of it, I'll carry out the test program."

"Okay, Harry. You're in charge."

On the screen, the forward cameras showed the stars and other points of light moving across the void of space as the plane rose higher. The moon came into view, surprisingly large amongst the debris.

"It looks close enough to visit," Harry Goodwin commented.

"Soon, Harry, but not this trip. Prove you can get back to earth first." The points of light disappeared from the monitor and now only the blackness of space with far-off stars was in view.

"It handled that maneuver well," Harry said. "Now I'll try left and right." The moon swung into the screen, crossed it, and disappeared. A moment later it reappeared, crossed the screen in the opposite direction, and disappeared from view.

"I'm letting it run through the test program now, Kurt, so wake up down there."

"The recordings will catch anything we miss while we're napping, Harry. Don't you worry your pretty little head about a thing."

"As always, Kurt, you and the boys make me feel so secure, I just might take a nap myself. After all, if this thing can't fly itself, what are we paying the nerd folks for, right?"

"Right, Harry, now shut up and let us concentrate."

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In the hall, the monitor showed the Control Room where busy technicians hunched over screens, busily identifying occasional bursts of data. The celebratory air of earlier was gone and it was all work.

In the school hall, the waiting began to drag as the plane went through a number of maneuvers without any further comment from the pilot or the Control Room crew. Younger kids began fidgeting and senior kids slapped a few of the rowdier ones before Dean said, "First and second year students, back to your classes."

There was a groan and mumbled complaints from the assembled seven- and eight-year-olds but slowly they left the room, leaving the older boys to watch events unfolding on the monitor. Truthfully, many felt, it wasn't nearly exciting enough. The organization's first foray into space should have had more drama. They didn't really want anyone hurt, but the common whispered aside was that a small accident would have reinvigorated the morning.

Finally, the Control Room Manager said, "We're done, Harry. Anything you see that we can't?"

"Nope, everything's as good as it could be. I'll set the course for home. This is where it might get exciting."

"Hope not."

"Me too, I guess, but it hasn't exactly been Star Wars stuff so far." "Boring is good for some things. Remember, these planes are going to be carrying us all to new worlds soon. We don't want exciting."

"I'm heading south," Harry said. "See if there's less junk over the southern hemisphere."

The monitor now showed the curve of the earth shining brightly against the dark sky.

"Definitely less crap here, so I'm setting my course for home."

Darkness left the screen and the earth now filled the monitor.

"Entering the atmosphere and I feel the vibration again. There's nothing on the monitors so I guess it's just my heart thumping." He paused for a moment, then gave another update. "The plane is adjusting height and speed to keep the skin temperature in its safe operating envelope."

“Looking good, Harry.”

“I think so. I see India down there and now the ocean. Temperature is steady and altitude is falling as designed. Is that what you see?”

“Yeah, that’s it, Harry. Everything good.”

“Africa coming up on the forward cameras and I feel the ramjet slowing. I think the computer is early on this. I’d stay on ramjet longer to make a quicker return.”

“For the future, Harry. Today is about the readings.”

“Sorry, I forgot you guys were the important folks here.”

“Well, don’t forget it again. You can buy us all drinks when you get back.” “In your dreams, brother. I feel the ramjet shutting off and the regular jet winding up to speed.”

“Yeah, everything’s good.”

“Over Africa now, speed is Mach 5, height is twenty-five thousand meters.”

“We don’t want sonic booms—you’ll be over the Atlantic before they start.”

“I see the ocean coming up.”

“Home in time for lunch, Harry.”

“I hope so. Liquid lunch.”

“Not till the Doc’s checked you out, you won’t.”

There was a long silence, punctuated only by the conversations of the Control Room staff and the noise of monitors humming below.

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“South American coast appearing on the forward cameras.”

“Exactly as planned,” the managers said. “It’s going so well we won’t need pilots in future. We’ll do it all from here.”

“Sorry, guys, my contract is iron-clad. You’re stuck with me for years yet.” Alexis watched as the dot appeared in the sky above the jagged Andean peaks and took on the shape of the space plane. The terrible feeling of foreboding he’d experienced throughout the return flight grew until his stomach was in knots. His fingernails cut into the palms of his hands as he clenched his fists in anticipation of the disaster he felt certain he was about to witness. It was inconceivable that their flight into space—the institute’s *first* spaceflight—could go so well; there had to be a catch. Something that would balance out the success.

The plane lined up for the runway that, in the heat of the day, shimmered like a mirage. It wavered so much on screen that it looked like the plane was coming in to land on the ocean. Its wheels deployed from the wings and the plane continued straight as a die toward its home base. Alexis closed his eyes; he couldn’t watch.

He heard cheering and opened his eyes to see the plane rolling smoothly down the runway, braking hard, until it slowed enough to turn off the main drag and head for its hanger. Excited technicians were running out from the Control Tower toward the hanger to congratulate the pilot and themselves for this historic achievement.

Alexis saw the plane halt, the door open, and Harry Goodwin step out. He’d removed the cumbersome helmet of his space suit and his face was beaming with his own delight and excitement.

“That’s what I’m going to do,” Alexis said to Jamie, speaking for the first time since they’d watched the plane take off hours before.

“Fly a space plane?” Jamie asked.

“At first. Then I’m going to lead us all into space.”

“We can’t live up there,” Jamie said. “And as I recall, you don’t like heights.”

“We’re going to because I’ve had enough of the human race down here on Earth. We’ll take only

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those who share our vision with us, like the Founders did with the Islands. And my fear of what's going to happen here is way greater than my dislike of heights, believe me."

"But the Americans, Chinese, Indians, and Russians are going to be there as well. Even the engine we're using is British, so they'll be trying to keep up too."

"Those people have a lead at the moment, it's true, but their wealth is dribbling away. We'll catch and overtake them."

"Most of the institute's money now is going into building new lands, Dean said that recently."

"It does now, but soon it won't. And remember, when the Americans decided to go to the moon it took them only ten years starting from scratch. We have access to the world's space equipment and we'll soon have all the best engineers. It's taken us only two years from starting work on the spaceport to putting a man and plane into space. From now on, we will steadily pull ahead of the others because we don't waste time and money on irrelevancies. We focus only on the job in hand. By the time we're old enough to lead the organization, we will be able to focus on having all new islands where those decaying countries can't get them. They'll be part of our colonies on the Moon and Mars."

"The Founders may not like the idea."

"The Founders will be retiring soon, so their 'likes' won't be an issue. Anyhow, I think once the attacks on our Earth-based islands begin in earnest, they'll be convinced my idea is the right one."

"When do we start?"

"We start today by applying to join the school's flying club."

"Shane will be pleased to hear we're planning to leave Earth," Jamie said. Alexis nodded. "I thought of that too. I think it will be good all round."

He can run the institute here on Earth. I think he'll enjoy taking on the world's useless leaders. Then I can run it in space, where I won't have to worry about stupid quarrels. It's a win-win for us both, I'd say."

Jamie grinned. "I guess so, boss," he said. "There are a few of the university guys who think they should be running things too though, and they might have a different view of it."

"That's between them and Shane, I'd say. I've never heard any of them saying they want to rule space."

"That's true," Jamie said. "Space is ours without a doubt."

“It is. Let’s go get started.”

The two friends left the Assembly Room and headed to the Administration Offices where they signed up for the Modest Proposal Institute’s flying club—and their future.

Alexis stopped the recorder and stood up. He was stiff with sitting, which was a lesson for him. He needed to pace the room as he recorded the next part of the story because it was going to take a while to tell. In this first attempt, he’d only advanced about five years and he’d been talking and recording for hours. Even then, he’d left so much out. The autonomous robots, for example, and the undersea cars built by the university guys so they could later build and live in undersea cities. The cars were well-advanced by the time he’d made his first solo flight, and they’d become the toy of choice for so many of his fellow students. In fact, he realized now, they were a sign, a signal of what was to come. Those who loved the underwater vehicles—you could hardly call them cars, though most did—were self-chosen to stay on Earth. The sea was to become their home and they would soon be called a new “sea-people.” Those who found the darkness under the sea claustrophobic and sought the open skies, as he had done, would be the ones who left the Earth for what seemed then a precarious life on Mars and various moons. But he was getting ahead of the story again. That was the future, though it was so long ago in the past, and he needed to rest now. He’d start telling the story of the next five years tomorrow. They were good years for him and the institute, but painful too. Nadia still loomed large in his mind, even after all these years.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul James is an engineer with a life-long interest in books and writing. Originally from England, he's lived near Toronto, Canada, for many years and where he hikes, runs and takes wildlife photos whenever the weather will let him. In his writing, he likes to capture the humorous side of life even when the times sometimes don't seem to warrant it. For his new series, The Modest Proposal Institute, he's returned to one of his earliest loves — science fiction.

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