

Over the Abyss

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Laughter rises from the grassy hill, tossed about in the morning breeze. Families shout playfully at one another amid the din of airships arriving and departing from out over the darkness. Below the green slope, a myriad of airships speckle the plain, ready to be boarded. Passengers meander, preparing to launch out over the Abyss.

Before aviation, the Abyss was the end of the world. Once submerged into its depths, no thing or person returned. But ever since humans had harnessed flight, the journey across the Abyss had become an everyday affair.

The airships range in size and engineering. The oldest hold one or two passengers and run on a combination of inefficient combustion and human energy. The pilots of these antiques crank and pedal and pull their machine through the air in a kind of desperate necessity. Some pilots of the smaller airships get a running start before leaving land, feeling the ground beneath them swallowed into the chasm.

The newer airships are quieter and put out less exhaust, and the newest passenger-ships can carry up to 200 passengers. One of these ships stands out among the rest, glinting like a sun on the surface of the earth, its chrome exterior beaming. On the ship's side, large, bold letters spell out its name: *LAZARUS*.

A pilot from the old war labors up the initial steps to board the ship. He is enveloped by a once-regal pilot's jacket, hemming in more memories than even its wearer retains. A white, wiry beard hangs off his chin. As he trudges down the aisle, some passengers venture a friendly nod. Making it to the bottom of the internal stairs, he removes a discolored handkerchief and takes a moment to wipe his forehead before ascending to the cockpit. Reaching it, he opens the door and takes his seat.

With the last passenger on the vessel, the boarding door slams shut, and deep vibrations run through the ship's frame. A moment later, a flight attendant pops into the cockpit and announces that the passengers are almost settled. The grizzled veteran waves her off and picks up the speaker broadcasting to the cabin. His raspy voice grates on the passengers, "Hello, passengers! Thank you for flying Efficiency Airlines. Today we're running a direct flight across the Abyss." His frown bleeds through his voice as he continues reading from the company placard posted next to the microphone. "We'll get you there safely and, as always, with a concern for your wallet."

Clicking off the speaker, the old pilot lets his thoughts wander. Depth without bottom; unsearchable; everlasting unto everlasting; beyond measure; its limits not set; fathoms unto fathoms; complete removal from the surface; utter –

PSSSH!

“*Lazarus*, this is flight control.” The buzzing radio snaps him back into the cockpit. “You are set to roll over to runway 8.”

“Understood,” he mutters into the comm. His hands dance around the instrument panel, working life into the plane. The large engines of the airship begin to turn, like giants rising from slumber, and start a slow crescendo into more vigorous life. The passengers chatter unconcernedly about nieces’ dance recitals, dogs’ surgeries, and the mundane intricacies of business deals.

The airship lurches over the plain toward the Abyss. Wheels rotate slowly, dragging the *Lazarus* over the dust-laden concrete along a yellow-marked path. Other airships mosey along their own paths, lazy until the defining moment. Soon, the *Lazarus* will pass the others and venture out over the darkness.

The din inside the airship increases. The whole cabin vibrates, forcing passengers to shout over the engines as they continue their small talk.

Buckle, announcement. Listen, look, feel. The motors rise. Stop, wait. The motors rise. Lurch, movement, speed. More speed. The motors are risen. Yet more speed! Tilting, tilting, their stomachs are left behind. The angle increases, and...

Suddenly, the ground is below them. They have grown wings. A miracle! A miracle every time.

In his cabin, the old pilot notices a hodgepodge of smaller airships distributed across the sky to the left and right of the *Lazarus*. Their variety is astounding, seemingly reflecting the bottomless creativity of biology. He sees ships stay afloat via giant bags set off to either side filled with light gases, mimicking a croaking toad with a propeller strapped to its hind. Other ships have fin-like wings protruding here and there, as if they are meant to cut omnidirectionally through the air, a kind of predator in hunt of sky fish.

Some ships are more patchwork, a conglomeration of disparate parts sharing a purpose but not quite planned. It's as though they were cobbled together by some isolated welder working out his imaginings in the bowels of the earth. Materials – leftovers from some more handy generation lost to time – are scant. They are panels of varied metals, all rusted, secured by bolts and clamps and friction and glue; smoke stacks welded askew; seats taken from old rocking chairs and bicycles; and chains and belts and cylinders exposed from the sides, threatening to sever fingers or worse.

Soon the *Lazarus* reaches its cruising altitude and members of the cabin crew file down the aisles, handing out mini pretzels and wine.

Far out to the old man's left and above him, he spots a speck: a tiny ship trailing thick, black smoke.

As the *Lazarus* draws nearer, the neighboring ship grows in size; it's started to lose some altitude. The old pilot fixates on it.

It closes in, descending nearly to the level of the *Lazarus*. Just a few hundred yards away now, the pilot sees the man at the helm crumpling his body at the demands of his ship, his limbs spilling out. Both legs are forced out on either side, and never extend completely as they pedal. He hunches under a low ceiling, head pressed against the top.

The old pilot's hand moves to the throttle. It stays there, frozen, and his eyes fixate on it as a bead of sweat forms on his brow. Then he slightly adjusts the throttle backward and the engines stoop in their grumble by a semitone.

Again, the old war captain peers out his window. Now, the struggling pilot is near enough that sweat can be seen streaming off his rigid face. His body is contorted, and veins pop out of his neck and bulge at the back of his hands. His eyes are locked straight ahead, without deviation or second thought. Lower, lower, he sinks in his flight. The old man has seen this face before. He has worn this face before.

"You wonder what he set out for. What would he risk a trip for in that ship?" The captain murmurs under his breath, shaking his head.

PSSHT! The radio kicks on. "*Lazarus*, this is Air-Control. Come in, over."

"Air Control, this is the captain of the *Lazarus*, over."

"*Lazarus*, we just received an alert that you have deviated from the flight plan. If you continue on your new flight path you will run out of fuel before you make it across the Abyss. You must course-correct immediately."

After a long silence, the old man responds.

"You've probably been in the southern deserts. At least flown over them." He holds down the speaker, not allowing a response.

"Did anyone ever ask you for your water in the desert? Maybe they should've brought more water. They knew how big the desert was. Everyone does. And maybe you only had enough water for yourself. But you knew how hot it was out there. You could feel that heat and you knew that same sun was beating down on them too."

"Maybe they didn't even ask with their words. But you knew who you were, and what you were about and what you deserve and what you've been given. And you saw them, and you knew that they'd been through it. And you didn't quite understand why you had the water and they didn't. Because you were wiser? Not wise enough to have extra. And even though you knew that you had just enough to get through, you wondered about what it might mean to give some away. Right? Because you were under the same sun as they were, and it was hard to think about not making it."

The veteran takes a long pause. As the silence stretches on, lights on the instrument panel blink red warnings at him. He begins again, "And you knew that you had just enough. But this guy didn't." A few hot tears fall out of his eyes. "But see, I didn't earn it. I'm not better than him! But maybe God will give me more if I give it away..."

The captain lets the radio fall out of his hand and leaves it hanging as he makes for the cockpit door. "Captain? Captain! Return to your flight path immediately!" crackles the voice from the speaker. He resolutely descends the stairs, and passenger conversation ceases as he parts the aisle.

Stopping at the boarding door, he collects himself before the now-attentive passengers, then grabs the spinning, locking wheel, and turns hard. Bolts clear their holes and the door flies open, forcing the captain to grab onto the wall as a violent rush of air threatens to rip him from his feet.

Wide-eyed passengers grip their armrests, dig their fingers into the cushions, and hold their breath in suspense.

Air still whipping around the cabin, the captain rights himself, inches to the open door, and cranes his head out. He looks down into the nothingness below, then calls as loudly as he can to the man pedaling in desperation.

The anguished traveler looks to the large airship, spying the pilot's motioning gestures. He pivots his small, smokey ship toward the open door, maneuvering it within feet of the beckoning captain.

Bracing himself, the lone flyer crouches on his seat, preparing to leap. In one swift motion, he abandons his grip on the handle bars and kicks his dying machine back and away from him, springing toward the captain and the open door. The two collide, chest to chest, and crash to the floor. Instantly, the newcomer crawls back to the door to watch his decrepit craft plummet downward. The captain grabs him and pulls him into the cabin as the exterior door closes with a thud. The cabin pressure returns to normal and the passengers release a collective breath. With hair and clothing disarranged from the whirlwind, passengers begin to apprehensively applaud, then crescendo into a roar of appreciation.

The two pilots embrace. As the applause fades, the captain breaks off, faces the passengers and addresses them.

"Sometimes, a question is asked of us." Faces stare back blankly. "If we're lucky, maybe more than once. And we must respond. When you hear the question, you are bound to answer. You cannot shrink in non-response into eternity.

"Many of us have learned to act like the question was never asked." His voice grows sharper. "You ignore it. But you have numbed yourself to what matters most!"

The passengers shift uncomfortably at his growing severity.

"If you have once heard the call and ignored it, some light has gone out. The world has been made darker. Some little wound has been opened. Then, over the years, it festers. So we invent ways to forget about the question. Ways like cake, and clothes, and sports, and sex. You can act like the light never called you. You can bury that memory in all this shit." He spits. "But it will not go away. We either treat it or let it grow."

He glares at the stupefied passengers. Only the drone of the engines sounds. No one moves.

Suddenly, warning lights start flashing red around the cabin. The confused joy of the passengers evaporates in an invisible wave.

"Captain!" A panicking young woman jumps up from her seat. "What's happening? What do we do?"

A bleating siren begins to sound through the plane.

Voces around the cabin rise in a muddled panic. Short sentences. Many questions. Seeds of fear quickly sprout into saplings and full-fledged trees.

The captain whispers to himself, "We gave our water to someone in the desert."

Then, an automated warning issues out over the speakers: *WARNING! LOW ALTITUDE! LOW FUEL. WARNING! LOW ALTITUDE! LOW FUEL.* The warning repeats ad nauseum.

The cabin is flooded in red light.

An ancient terror overcomes the passengers, who no longer command their own thoughts. Instead they speak an ancient tongue, guttural, with a very plain syntax—one long, instinctive scream.

The engines putter into silence. The red lights and warnings cut off into darkness, and weeping, and the gnashing of teeth.

Near the boarding door, the captain searches for the one he saved. He finds him on the floor, in the fetal position, crying, and lies next to him, wrapping him in his arms.



On the far edge of the Abyss, at the airship's intended destination, laughter rises from the grass, tossed about in the morning breeze. Families shout playfully at one another amid the din of airships taking off and arriving. The *Lazarus*, a speck in the distance, sinks below the horizon down into the void. Busied in conversation and in life, no one notices the ship, like some luminous stranger, settling down into the grave.

