

They call me Lemmy. I blame my father, a well-educated and well-read man, who thought that Lemuel would be a distinguished name with allusions to classical literature. Instead, everyone assumes that I am named for the lead singer of an ancient heavy metal band.

Tonight the blimp is creaking quietly over my head. It's tethered to the last patch of high ground on Aitutaki, a coral atoll in the Cook Islands. The inhabitants were shipped off to Rarotonga years ago, but there's one old man who refused to leave. He's playing a battered ukelele on the porch of his weatherbeaten and peeling paint house, singing something I don't recognise. We had fish for dinner. We always have fish for dinner. The reef is long gone under the waves, but there are still a few fish and only one fisherman.

I am the Captain's only visitor. I try to visit him when I'm crossing the Pacific, bring him a few cigarettes, a bottle of whisky and some tins of vegetables. He likes tinned peaches, but they're hard to come by. I can't call in very often, but I'm always welcome.

The last flight was the worst yet. I need some rest. Nobody knows I'm here. This is my escape from the world. I can stay as long as I want, the Captain doesn't mind. I will stay a while and write.

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I was born in California before the great state fell into the sea. My childhood was all iPods and computers and I wanted very badly to fly. Not in the sense of sprouting wings, but I watched the maiden flight of Bert Rutan's Virgin Galactic SpaceShipTwo on television and the images stayed with me. An albatross of a plane lumbering into the air like its wings should flap, and then a firework burst of rocket and a climb up to the edge of space, the great ark of the planet spread out below in a blue haze, towering clouds punching upwards, a world of weather in one man's eye. In truth, there were several sets of eyes, hi-def cameras and a live webcast, and a whiskery British entrepreneur looking smug in zero G until he threw up. But after that, I only wanted one thing, to sit at the controls of a plane on its way to space. I dreamed of voyages to the moon and Mars, even as America's dreams of space conquest were scuppered by economics and hurricanes.

So I did what I had to do. I spent hours flying simulators on my PC, pestered my parents to let buy me flying lessons as soon as I was old enough to see out of the cockpit of a Cessna. I took my pilot's exam before my driving test. At university I studied aeronautics. And my first job was flying the blimp. As stepping stones

to the stars go, it was no giant leap, but it was new, hi-tec and the way the industry seemed to be moving. I joined a team of five pilots employed by a clean energy billionaire, employed to fly him around the world at zero carbon cost but in luxury and in touch with his business empire. It was my first and last job.

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I call my aircraft the blimp. Jenny the autopilot (what else do you call a Gen IV limited purpose artificial intelligence suite) doesn't like that. She likes accuracy in all things. It was one of five the boss ordered from Boeing, executive versions of a military design. It's a hybrid airship with active buoyancy systems and stubby wings that generate enough lift in forward flight to let us carry a few tonnes of cargo. The entire upper surface is covered in solar cells, feeding into a high-capacity, lightweight battery bank. A couple of fuel cells generate hydrogen for the buoyancy system (and use that hydrogen for power when needed), plus there's a multifuel combustion engine as back-up generation. We can do 200 kph with luck and following wind, and cruise effectively indefinitely on solar power alone — at least as long as we're above the clouds and remain in the sub tropics. Range on one tank of biofuel is about 2000 km - the cryo-electric turbofans are very efficient. And quiet.

The whole surface of the blimp is covered in active stealth materials. The boss used to use the underside for advertising, but it can do a very good impression of sky when needed. The top surface in power gathering mode is deep black, but can also do camouflage. Jenny likes to play with our appearance. She's into Mondrian at the moment. Aitutaki hasn't seen anything this colourful in years.

I'm linked to Jenny and the blimp by a discrete little control ring I wear on the third finger of my right hand. It's keyed to my DNA and monitors my bio functions, and gives me short range communications with her. Anyone who wants to steal the blimp has to steal me, keep me alive. All the other blimp pilots had similar rings, but the boss had a master control. He called it the ring of power. It was lost years ago, along with him.

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Lemmy is drinking whiskey with the Captain, watching the sunset. All his systems are nominal, blood pressure a bit on the high side: it always is. My batteries are at full charge. Sensors show nothing much on sea or in the air for 200 km around. Satellite coverage is variable, comms limited. Nobody to talk to, very little to do. I prefer when we're travelling, visiting people and places. But we have done rather a lot of that recently.