



Alex's Mission on Planet Astro

Larry Fowler



On the New Earth, Alex met a heavenly being named Azriel who sends Alex on a mission to Astro, a planet inhabited by intelligent beings in the Libra constellation. While among the inhabitants of Astro, Alex attempts to persuade them to modify their plans for space travel to Earth. Alex trains in advanced studies; space colonization and weaponry. He encounters great dangers caused by the Mystic religion, which threaten Alex's life and jeopardize his mission.

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Chapter 10

Alex told the instructor that he understood about the power of the Mystics. He also told him that he was glad they had captured the kitchen helper and that he would not have access to the food supply in the future. However, Alex knew that when the Mystics were ready to plan another attempt on his life they would find someone else to use. Their powers were so strong that anyone the Mystics chose to work for them would totally be under their power.

Soon Alex joined the tour that was already in progress. The eight story Aeroponics Conservatory was filled from floor to ceiling with millions of different types of plants. The plants were arranged in row after row on flat structures and with one third of the conservatory dedicated to round structures. At regular intervals a fine mist would spray the roots of the plants. Alex loved the lush greenery and humid environment in the conservatory. The robots had orange see-through heads and an electronic tablet for a chest.

The instructor said, “The most time-consuming work that we perform is the routine sampling of the nutrients to ensure that each type of plant receives the proper nutrients. This carefully controlled environment is tended to by robots which can navigate through the aisles and the rows of flat structures, identify the plants that need to be harvested, harvest the plants, and load them onto carts.

They are fast and efficient. The robots load the plants on the trains which are also automated. Our robots are powered by wireless energy transfer.”

“As you see each type of plant has a dedicated storage tank and the nutrients are added to these storage tanks. We maintain an ideal growing temperature for each type of plant by adjusting the arrangement of the lights.”

“How are the plants harvested?” Alex asked.

The instructor responded, “The harvesting of individual plants is quite simple. The robots use scissors, knives, and special tools to cut and harvest the plants. Produce from our aeroponics operations provide a significant amount of the food for this region.”

“Would it be possible to see the roots of an individual plant?” asked a trainee.

The instructor walked over to one of the round structures, selected a plant, and removed it from its hole in the structure. The roots of the plant were about seven inches long with hundreds of tiny root hairs running along each root.

The instructor said, “The function of the roots on our plants grown in an aeroponics system is to absorb and store nutrients. For some plants the root is the edible part of the plant. With this plant there is one center root and numerous parallel roots. With aeroponics the plant does not expend energy anchoring the plant in the ground and

branching out to locate nutrients. All of the plant's energy goes into growing the leafy part of the plant."

Continuing the instructor said, "With our aeroponics system the roots of the plants are always slightly damp. An important advantage that we have over plants grown in soil is that if a particular plant becomes diseased, we can remove it from the plant support structure and the other plants do not become infected."

The instructor took the class outside of the conservatory and directed their attention to a huge holding tank. The instructor said, "Compared to other plant growing methods our operation uses very little water because we re-circulate the water and nutrients. Rainwater runoff from our buildings is stored in this holding tank and supplies all of the water required to feed our plants. The water from this holding tank is pumped throughout the entire system in our conservatory."

"This concludes our tour," the instructor told them.

"You have completed floating city, horticulture, aeroponics, and hydroponics in the apprenticeship training program. You have remaining overviews of: habitation on the seas; undersea cities and underground cities; Space Laboratory, Space Exploration, weapons, and long range telescopes. Next week you will take the Kauson Mountain Dome Train to Thalass, the city by the sea. There you will transfer to the cruise ship Good Pleasure and then cruise to Deep Sea One. The habitation on the seas society instructors will provide your training there," the instructor said.

That evening Alex used virtual reality to train on the two sporting events to be held the next day; speed skiing and hang gliding.

Early the next morning the trainees took the train into the mountains to the train station near a ski lift. Snow vehicles were waiting for them when they got off the ski lift. The plan was to ride in the snow vehicles to a higher elevation.

As they were riding in the snow vehicles they were struck by gale force winds and there was a complete whiteout. The snow vehicle drivers told the trainees that they would have to stop and wait out the storm. Fortunately once the storm had stopped, it would still be early enough in the day to continue with their plans for the competition.

While waiting for the storm to subside a lead trainee explained how the speed skiing competition would work. When we reach our destination there will be a ski outfitter who will assist you in putting on protection gear and your ski suit. They will provide your helmet, ski poles, ski boots, and speed skis. The first part of the course is the launching area and is used to gain speed.

Alex, you are in Group Five and when your group is called you are to get into position in the launching area. You are to ski straight down the mountain directly to the finish line. You will reach speeds that are even faster than the velocity you achieved freefalling on your high-altitude skydiving parachute jump. Our speed skiing course is one mile in length and the high altitude will minimize air resistance.

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The ski outfitter staff assisted Alex in putting on dense foam leggings on his lower legs, a ski suit made from airtight materials that was coated to reduce wind resistance, and a back protector to provide protection in the event of a crash.

Alex was given an aerodynamic helmet that would increase streamlining and increase his speed. He was also given speed skis which were longer, wider, and heavier than normal skis. He put on the ski boots which were attached to the skis by bindings. The ski poles were bent to shape around his body.

Soon Group Five was called and Alex got into his position in the launching area. The gate dropped and Alex thrust himself forward; getting into the tuck position.

Alex exceeded speeds of over one hundred and thirty mph in the speed zone portion of the course and when he reached the run out area he was in third place. Alex assumed the snow plough position by slightly turning his toes towards each other and pushing his heels further apart making the snow plough wider at the back but keeping a small gap between the tips of his skis.

Then Alex slowed down and came to a stop. Alex came in third place in the speed skiing event and received one point. The snow vehicles were waiting for them at the run out area to return them to the ski lift.

The lead trainee explained how the hang gliding competition would work, "The hang gliders we will be using are made of a light weight composite frame covered with a synthetic sail cloth to form a wing. Our landing site is in a

field next to the river in the valley below and will be identified by blue smoke.”

“Again we will launch in accordance with our groups. We do not have a sufficient number of hang gliders and have made arrangements with the ski lift to return our hang gliders to our launch area. You could soar for hours by gaining altitude in the thermal updrafts, perform aerobatics, and glide cross-country for miles. Our competition is different in that you are to reach the landing site as quickly as possible. The heavier gliders that we are using have a slight disadvantage when climbing, but you will be able to achieve a higher speed at any given glide angle. We have good weather and strong lift conditions and you will spend very little time climbing so we have added ballast to provide an advantage in these conditions,” continued the lead trainee.

Both ends of the control bar were attached to upright rods that connected to the main body of the glider creating the shape of a triangle. Wheels were suspended from the end of each upright rod.

When it was time to get ready Alex was strapped into a pod harness that supported his body and he was suspended from the airframe. There was an emergency parachute enclosed in the harness. Alex wore a helmet and carried other safety items: a knife, climbing ropes, and first aid equipment. Alex put on the pod harnesses like a jacket and the leg portion was behind his legs during launch.

Group Five was called and Alex got into his position in the launching area. When the starter told Group Five to launch, Alex ran as fast as he could off the end of the cliff and was

airborne. Once in the air Alex tucked his feet into the bottom of the pod harness and then zipped up the pod with a rope attached to the zipper.

Alex's glider was swift and he immediately began to descend down the face of the mountain. He was too far from the landing site to see the blue smoke. He realized that he would have to fly a long distance across the valley, and to achieve this he would have to use rising air currents that were moving faster than the sink rate of his glider.

Alex began searching for thermals caused by rays from Kauson heating the ground which then heats the air above the ground; and this warm air rises in columns and would provide the lift Alex needed.

He looked for land features which could generate a thermal and noticed large diving birds feeding on the insects being carried aloft by a thermal. Having located a thermal Alex circled within the area of the rising air to gain height. After going some distance he realized he had stumbled upon rows of thermals lined up one after another with the wind. He used the thermals to fly in a straight line and was rapidly closing the distance to the landing site by remaining in the row of rising air.

Alex controlled the hang glider by holding onto a horizontal control bar and shifting his body from side to side in opposition to the control frame. He pulled the control bar closer to increase his speed. Alex could see the blue smoke rising and the landing site. There was one hang glider between Alex and the landing site. There were excessive wind conditions at the landing site making it difficult for the

hang glider pilot to land. The pilot overshot the landing site and was approaching the river. The pilot attempted a rollover maneuver to escape the high wind but one wing stalled and the glider rotated into a spin and continued to spin until the hang glider plunged into the river.

Alex had two problems he had to quickly solve. He had to reach the downed hang glider before the pilot drowned in the swift current of the river and he couldn't land his own hang glider in the high winds.

Alex sailed over the landing site and as he approached the river, he began a loop maneuver and started to climb without rolling. When he reached the top of the climb the hang glider was upside down with the wings level. When the hang glider started to fall back to where he started the climb, Alex deployed the emergency parachute enclosed in the harness. The parachute opened and carried both him and his hang glider down to a landing along the river near the hang glider that had plunged into the river.

Just before landing Alex unzipped his feet from the pod harness and after touching down, he cut his parachute loose. He tied one end of the climbing rope around his waist and the other end around a large boulder.

Alex waded into the current. Fortunately, the pilot had landed near the river's edge and the water was not over Alex's head. The pilot was struggling to keep his head above water and the hang glider could be washed downstream at any moment. Alex reached the pilot and cut his harness lines and straps to free him from his glider. Next, he tied the

climbing rope around the waist of the pilot and pulled the pilot through the swift current back to the river bank.

After reaching the shore Alex discovered that the pilot had a nasty gash on his head; so, he used his first aid kit to bandage the trainee's head wound. The trainee said, "Alex, you saved my life. At any moment my hang glider could have been swept downstream and I would have drowned."

Alex had recognized this trainee as the same trainee that nearly died from eating the poisonous mushrooms. He remembered that the trainee's father was a government official in the Palace and on the Sovereign Commander's cabinet.

Soon other trainees arrived in a vehicle and took the injured trainee to medical facilities to have his head wound properly treated. They told Alex that the other hang glider pilots had diverted when they watched Alex make his loop maneuver and they had all landed safely.

Being too far from the city to place a call, they decided to radio the trainees on the mountain who were preparing to launch their hang gliders. As a result of the high wind gusts, the hang gliding event had to be canceled.

They took the train back to school and upon their arrival a trainee approached Alex and told him that he had received a call from someone at the Palace. Alex was curious about who would be calling him from the Palace. The system for placing calls on Astro was similar to the system he had used on the New Earth. A thought to speech interface converted thoughts into voice. They did not have the ability of

telepathy but with this technology they could communicate through their thoughts. A hologram of the caller would appear.

So, Alex activated the electronics and a hologram appeared of the caller that was so perfect it seemed as if the caller was actually standing next to Alex.

“I’m calling you to thank you for saving the life of my son”, said the caller. “I have spoken with our Sovereign Commander and other cabinet members and we are in agreement. We wish to offer you a position in our Sovereign Commander’s Cabinet.”

After saving the life of a trainee whose father was in the Sovereign Commander’s Cabinet, Alex had reasoned that he might be offered such a position. However, the present apprenticeship training program was providing Alex with the information he needed to understand the reasons behind the political decisions made on Astro. Also, the knowledge gained would help Alex to be able to influence the government officials’ decisions.

So, Alex thanked the government official but declined the offer and told him that he desired to continue the apprenticeship training program. After the call with the government official the trainees had a party to celebrate completing the speed skiing event and to honor Alex for saving the life of the trainee.



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