

What Gods Are These?

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The gods have not yet come, but they will.

I believe I am not alone here, though I don't know who is with me. Hanging cockeyed to my uncertain frame of reference, I stare at my Earth with sorrow and hate, wanting to curse it, to destroy it before the gods have it all. My visor fogs momentarily, as though to remind me of my helplessness. I am weightless: orbiting, falling . . . falling. Motionless . . . only the Earth moves. My ruined planet is a cool cheek bulging over my right shoulder, a delicate cloud and water ball, the stage of a hopeless drama against the house-darkness of space. On its dim nightside crescent, I see one or two cities burning, tiny embers. Slowly the planet drifts further around to the right, where it will pass behind me for a little while, behind the station. As I float with my boots hooked on a twisted bit of station girder and stare for hour after endless hour, I have the feeling that Earth is nothing more than an enormous sop, sweeping debris out of space, and grit . . . and mindless, gabbling spacemen.

No. It is the Saviors who will do that. They will not miss a one down there. And on their way back up they will find you here, whispers my soul. Find you waiting, helpless.

The thought sets me on edge. Hiding here behind the wrecked ferry shack on an arm of ruined Spacehome, my radio silent, whisper of spacesuit air for company, I pretend that I am safe, yes, from the preying Savior ships. They will find the others and take them, but I will be safe. And yet . . . to be left here uncaptured to die in peace, what a terrible, lonely end. I float, boots anchored, and watch that great ball against the black sink, now moving slowly out of my angle of view. The sun flares across the girder arm, white against the infinite black, and suddenly the endless, falling orbit of the station steals the breath out of my soul. Has the Earth turned an anesthetic green, or is that merely a distortion of my trembling, leapfrogging mind?

When I turn to follow the Earth, I see near its rim a short flare, a leaping spark: a Savior ship. Then it is gone, and I cannot say whether it was a ship climbing into orbit, or one diving into the filmy atmosphere -- or, after all, nothing. Imagining marvels and dangers and possibilities has become my only pastime. Must I lose that, too, when they come?

* * *

In my Wooster, Ohio home, there was a dream I had, before I left again for the East -- before panic blazed through the human race like fire through kindling. The dream was puzzling but clear, still vivid upon my awakening: Humans filing serenely, by the thousands, through the wards and halls of a great, sighing ship of the stars . . . drinking liquid tranquillity in cool draughts from a communal fount . . . peering, each in turn, through a fabulous viewing-lens at the stars drifting by, and at the star-beacon ahead which would be the new home, after readjustment and reeducation . . . the Saviors, tall and fair and milky-faced,

counseling, teaching the difficult arts of kindness and moral judgment . . . incorrigibles: deftly realigned and then set to work aiding those less fortunate . . . the grave joy of lying together in endless communal sleeping rows, mating at need, with that solemn bliss denied no one . . . _

The dream left me intrigued, but I became uneasy when it recurred, and continued recurring. And then I learned that Jim Pfeiffer, next door, and his wife and young child had also dreamed it; and then MacNamara, and then my cousin Sue and her husband -- and the list grew, until the whole town rumbled about dreams of starships and "Saviors. " Visions of the Saviors, tall and swift and fair, singing: _ "Disturbed children, come this way, we come for you. " _ Inevitably, there were outcries to the coming angels, the Coming of the Lord, the vindication of the Revelations -- but I joined those who felt other feelings in the premonition, who listened for night sounds which turned out to be merely windrush, who jumped at footfalls which were only friends and lovers coming round, who woke from the recurring dream drenched with sweat. A dream of gods, or would-be gods. With (I was sure) many others, I felt a rising apprehension -- but I had no family close by with whom to share my fear, and so I kept it to myself.

I came east, destined eventually for theSpaceCenter , just days before the Saviors arrived and the skies erupted. But by then the location hardly mattered, because suddenly we were all, every human, foxes before the hounds. We were on our own; the armies had been swept away, the nuclear arsenals silenced, the lasers and missiles unmanned. Not a few cities (I heard) were burning. And through it all was the question asked of the astonished night: _Why?_

* * *

The view of Earth palls in the slow passage of hours blinked away on the chronometer. Once the stunning magnificence of my homeworld caused me to cry; but now the treasure tarnishes, leaves a film of dust across my eyes. No longer can Earth console my gaze, nor can I console myself with thoughts of life gone by, of people and places loved, of deeds done and old joys and sorrows. All of that is behind me now. I have hardly moved, these last few hours -- except for falling in silent clockwork turns about the Earth. The station tumbles slowly. Three times, night has crept over North America since I docked the shuttle; but, two days ago, the station's control system died of cut control wires. Sabotage: therefore, I know I am not alone.

Whoever shares Spacehome with me does not wish to be seen, apparently, and though I have kept my eyes open, I have made no real effort to search. A ruined space station offers many hiding places, and if my companion wishes not to be found, I will respect his privacy. Strangely, I do not fear him (or her) -- though I wonder at the motive for sabotage. What else could he be except a human, and what is one man's irrationality to me in this hour except, perhaps, a small comfort?

When sunlight has crept over northern Africa, over the auburn deserts, it is time for me to replenish my suit. Gently, I disengage my feet from the bent frame of the ferry dock, and with one hand on a girder I float around to face the shambles, gleaming in weightless sunshine. Torn shrouding floats like golden kelp, still attached to the exploded side of the once-magnificent structure. The station has been smashed open like a piata, leaving ruptured skin and a wreckage of cross-members, broken decks, ripped wiring and plumbing. A tiny plume issues from within the wreckage, fuel escaping from some slowly leaking valve or joint. This is how Randall and I, arriving, found the station -- to all appearance lifeless, airless, several vacuum-frozen bodies floating inside which had not drifted off into space. I had known only one of the dead men; Randall had known all three. What could I say, how could I begrudge him his despair when he took his own life to join them, leaving me so alone? There was nothing for me to do but to follow him into death, or to radio Earth, if there was anyone left to hear, and to gnaw my microphone and clench my stiff fingers and sweat inside my stinking suit, waiting to be captured or to die. I listen to the station

whisper to me, and wonder if I shall go mad.

Perhaps there remains some token of usefulness here, something with which to fight. There must be some way to fight. It is hard to believe that the Saviors were frightened of this station, but why else destroy it? Did they think it a threat to their plans? Why did they leave a lurking ghost, my companion? There are no answers -- only nightmarish questions, the stuff of an endless, dark, whispering orbit.

The shuttle orbiter, docked alongside, stares at me with somber eyes. With insufficient fuel and a faulty guidance platform, it will take me nowhere I wish to go; it is no longer my friend. I pass by it in the ferry cradle as I work my way, hand over hand, toward the station proper, irrationally but doggedly conserving reaction-jet fuel. Earth moves behind the body of the station; from over my left shoulder, the sun glares onto metalwork, spilling shadow in disconcerting patterns before me. I float to the undamaged side of the station, where the lock gapes open, perhaps for eternity.

The airlock comes alight at the touch of a switch; my saboteur has not struck here. So accustomed am I to the infinity of space that in the airlock I fight for a moment with claustrophobia. But I need what it offers: the resupply panel. Hoses and cables plug into the appropriate fittings on my chestpack -- oxygen first, a full and luxurious suit flush, cool and indecently pure for my stinking body. Now a battery swap, water and liquid lunch refill, waste bladder dump. The CO2 scrubber I change with great care -- all it takes here is a valve failure to turn me into a bloated stiff like the others. Finally I am finished, and good for another day, if I conserve. God, how I have come to hate the inside of this suit; but the only place I could shed it would be in the shuttle, and I avoid that shuttle, which stares at me, an estranged friend.

As I float back out of the airlock, I am startled by a rough giggle of static in my earphone. Twisting around, banging back against the airlock hatch, I wonder -- have they come? But no, I realize, that was a real giggle, muffled by static. And there: I see my saboteur, a spacesuited figure drifting on a tether behind the telescope array. I stare for a moment, squinting because of the sun, and then I move toward the spaceman. I approach with some caution, because I assume the man to be mad. His face is a golden fishbowl, gazing blankly at me. "Who are you?" I say, stopping just out of his reach. I think of shouting, but my voice comes out quietly, the three days of contained fury still remaining contained.

He giggles again and says something, but the words are smothered in static. I adjust my receiver, and the next time his voice is a little clearer. "Nevermore," he says, and suddenly he rolls, like a man turning over on a mattress. I see my own golden-visored helmet framed in his. "Hah," he says, apparently enjoying himself. "Nevermore. "

Something evil slips out of its containment in my soul, and I struggle hard to suppress an urge to assault this man and strangle him through that steel collar. What has brought me to such a pass, to have a lunatic for a dying-companion? Forcing myself to be calm, I say, staring at the blank golden face, "All right. I get it, mister. Nevermore -- you're a raven, right? Shall I call you the Raven?"

He chokes, gasping, laughing. "Oh perfect!" His voice hisses in my helmet. "Raven! Yes, I am Raven!" He bursts into a coughing fit, and I grab a girder to support myself and club his helmet furiously with my fist. He falls silent. Then he says, mutedly, "They will find us here. You know that -- don't you, Grum?"

"Uh -- " I say, my stomach reeling at his words. "Yes -- I know. " I swallow and glare at him. "And how the hell do you know my name?"

He answers with silence, and we look at each other, one fishbowl mirroring the other; and I think, yes, they are coming, and I must think of something to do about that.

* * *

The sound of footsteps died away in the night. I had hesitated, to see if they were human feet, but it no longer mattered; they were gone. Everyone was gone from the city, it seemed -- escaped or captured, mostly captured. Taken by the enemy. _Taken._ The word echoed in my mind as I crouched in darkness at the end of the second floor corridor and fumblingly counted the shells remaining in the revolver. Four -- no, only three. Three shells? Yes. I didn't even know what building I occupied, but then, no building offered real cover. The handgun was hard and moist in my palm, in a hand which had never known such an instrument. My hand itched, tingled, clenched and unclenched the butt of the gun, palming it, fingering the grooved metal, seeking the feel of death in its hard form. Resisting an impulse to hurl the gun away, I grasped it carefully and curled my finger about its trigger.

The day before, the Saviors had come down again from the sky, sweeping up great numbers of people who had escaped their first assault. In this city, there were now only a few holdouts, and we would not be forgotten, I was sure. Exactly what was happening in the world at large, I couldn't say -- there had been no radio since yesterday. But it was clear that the rest of the world would fall soon if it had not already; Savior ships had come down in every nation, and the lights moving in the night sky suggested that there was virtually no end to the Saviors' capabilities. Our forces had perhaps scratched the enemy's face, but the military ranks had been the first to vanish. I had heard no report of successful resistance. But I had heard the Saviors' voices: _"Come with us, children, to a place where we will be safe! Come and worship your gods and learn to give up your quarrels! Come in peace!"_ Yes, I had heard the Saviors' voices, their god-talk -- as much as I could stomach, and more.

After that, they took John and Cath, my friends in the city, and they nearly took me. So silently they had followed us in the streets, as we fled -- they did not seem to need to see us or hear, they just knew where we were and where we were going, and they followed with impossible speed. Gangling figures, the Saviors followed as stealthily as cats with see-through eyes, their minds everywhere singing: _"Come, dear disturbed ones, come and be made whole."_ They followed relentlessly, and each time they reached forth with sinuous arms another person shimmered and was gone.

I stumbled, and I sprawled in the street. Faster than I could recover, John whirled and fired upon our two pursuers, but a third appeared from nowhere and entangled Cath. She shrieked and clawed futilely, and I leaped to her aid, only to be flung aside by an arm I couldn't see. The pavement slammed into my face, and I came to a halt against a lamppost, stunned -- and I witnessed the end, half-aware, as though watching a movie from a groaning, dying projector. John's gun _crack_ed, and a Savior crumpled face-up under the streetlight. John turned to free Cath, but there was no clear shot for him, so he assaulted with his fists. In a moment he, too, was ensnared by the Savior's arms, and he struggled like an impaled fish, mad confusion in his eyes. Cath was beginning to glow, her face becoming translucent and yellow, and her plea soundless but clear: _Don't let them take me alive!_ The gun _crack_ed again, starring her forehead like glass; and the crystallized, dying Cath shimmered and vanished in the yellow transport glow. The gun clattered across the pavement, knocked away by an indignant Savior -- and John glowed, shimmered, and was gone, too, to whatever Heaven awaited him. The Saviors gathered their fallen companion, murmuring, and together they disappeared.

A shocked, staggering survivor, I retrieved the gun and slipped on down the street, moving with the shadows. Eventually I took shelter where I could find it, in this abandoned apartment building. My adrenaline courage was gone, replaced by frightened exhaustion, and I rested without sleeping. There was food in darkened cupboards, and I wolfed down a sickening cold can of stew, washed with lukewarm orange juice. Grief was beyond my reach; my thoughts and emotions were locked up like a bound engine. The darkness ticked, rattled huskily with the breath of night. Vaguely, I wondered what was becoming of the rest of the world.

A pat-pat of footsteps sent me scurrying to huddle at the end of the hall, eyes moving constantly. In the predawn hour I made myself more familiar with John's gun, with the smooth, darkly gleaming steel, the three cartridges. The second patter of feet set me into a crouch. I glared down the corridor, weapon aimed. A movement -- I squeezed, the gun flashed, crack. Through smoke and momentary deafness, a pitiful cry tore my nerves, echoing down the corridor. A fallen, wounded enemy? I took an uncertain step forward. No -- not an enemy. A dog, whimpering in agony. A hideous knot seized my throat, and tears rushed fiercely to my eyes, carrying the grief I had been unable to summon for my human friends. Creeping, stumbling forward, I tried to whisper comfortingly to the animal, and my voice cracked as pathetically as the dog's. His whimper quieted; he struggled to rise from the shadow,

then fell. I could not leave him. "Still, boy!" I cried hoarsely, trying to whisper. "Still!" Shakily, I knelt a few feet from him, aimed through blurry eyes, and fired again, crack. And again, crack.

Silence. Dark, hopeless silence.

Shuddering, I took my eyes from the stilled animal and slowly regained control of myself. The gun was empty. I had not wanted that; I'd meant to save the last bit of death for myself, if it became necessary.

I threw the gun, clattering, down the hallway. If I faced the enemy now, it would have to be with empty hands.

"Crazy as bedbugs," Raven keeps saying. We are in Earth's shadow now, and we've both tipped up our sunvisors so that we can converse eye to eye. His face appears scarred, unfamiliar; he says we have met before, up here at the station, but I cannot remember. I have learned how he knows my name, at least. It is stenciled on the front of my left shoulder: Grumman Anders, Pilot, Shuttle Team. The tag on his own suit is much smaller, but I think it says, Leonard Reevin. I still don't remember him.

"Loony as lice," he says.

"Will you stop?" I explode. My head is ringing inside my helmet with his inanities. "They're crazy, yes -- they left you here!"

"My point, exactly," he says, stretching his weightless limbs. "They're not thorough. They're supposed to be gods, but they're incompetent. Okay, they've got power. They're invincible -- to us, anyway. So why hit us up here? They must have been scared of us, but there's nothing we could have done to them. Some saviors. Stumblebums."

"Sure," I say, sipping tiredly at my chin spigot. "Stumblebums. That's why they've had so much trouble knocking off the whole world. Raven, they've taken everyone -- or almost everyone, and killed the rest."

"Didn't say they weren't big and tough. I saw part of their fleet in the scope -- hell, they could clean up six planets, and maybe that's what they're doing. Maybe they're cleaning out the whole sector, taking six new races to their galactic happy home."

"So --"

"So, they're mad --"

"Yeah?"

"-- cause if they just wanted to conquer, or pillage, well, they could have done it a lot quicker, don't tell me they couldn't. But no -- they aren't conquerors, they're _saviors,_ they're here to save us from our sins, they're here to take us off and _heal_ us!" He is laughing so hard as he finishes that I think he must be in pain, maybe too much stale air in his suit, or he's overheating. When he keeps laughing, I start to worry, and then suddenly he cuts off. Silent.

"Uh," I say, "yeah -- but maybe they really _are_ God, did you ever think about that?"

He snorts. Well, it was a stupid thing to say. But I add, not even meaning it myself, "You know, we could have used some help. We weren't doing so well by ourselves. " He snorts again.

Dayside is creeping around the rim of Earth behind Raven. Flashy sunrise. We both flip down our sunvisors, and all either of us can see of the other is a curved golden mirror. He says, "Take you, Grum. You're here. Didn't hit you, didn't hit Space Center. Call that smart?"

I back up against a telescope shroud. "Yeah, well, they did hit the Center, they just didn't finish it. There were some people they missed, and the shuttle was already set to go, and it doesn't take that many people to launch, once she's ready. "

Raven seems to be looking at me, but he doesn't speak. So I just go ahead, even if I'm only talking to myself. "We felt so damn helpless down there, and we were all going to be caught anyway, we thought we should do _something._ _ So we came to rescue Spacehome. " I chuckle sadly, then think of Randall's suicide after our arrival in the orbiter. Mist gets in the way of my vision, and it's not on my visor. "There won't be any more shuttles," I say, just talking to make conversation. The crescent of Earth is blazing in cinemascope against space.

"Glad you came up" Raven asks, without sarcasm.

I think for a minute and say, "Yes, all things considered. " And it's true; at least I took _some_ action. The Raven's voice is a comforting rasp in my fishbowl, what with the thought of those aliens storming our world down below. Isn't there something more we could be doing?

Earth moves around behind me, as the station tumbles in its orbit. "Hah," says Raven. "They meant to get the whole planetful of us, I'll bet, and they'll be lucky to get half the people alive, from what I heard before the radios cut out. I wonder what they do with dead people. "

"Maybe we'll see," I mutter.

"I won't," he answers. At that moment, the sun rounds a corner of the station and glares full onto Raven's golden visor. He appears almost godlike himself in the stunning glow -- a god awaiting a greater god, and not friendly about it. The shadow line moves off his left arm, across the telescope shroud, over my right arm, and then I, too, am floating in full, streaming sunlight. "I'll never see the inside of their ship, not from this side of death," he says. He pulls in his tether and starts to move toward the airlock. "They'll be here soon. "

Following, I ask, "What are you going to do?" I ask with some hope, but not much, that he has a useful idea.

By the time he answers, we are at the lock, and Earth is growing to ripe fullness. "Only one thing I can think of," he says, and his voice sinks cold into my heart. "Gonna take a good deep breath of space, Grum, and if I live that long I'm gonna spit in their eye. Also," he says, swinging into the open lock, "I am

going to make an obscene gesture. "

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Man by the name of Reynolds gave me a lift much of the way south from D. C. He drove like a madman, figuring that safety lay in speed. The car radio hiss continuously, but he never gave up twirling the tuner in hopes of finding a broadcast. Sometimes he asked me to do it, and invariably he repeated the operation after I had finished. We heard nothing but static over the engine. "They've gotten every city by now, I guess," he shouted over the noise. "But it'll take them a while to clean out the whole countryside, if they're doing it all over the world. "

"Making fast work of it," I shouted back. "They must have thousands of ships. More than that. "

Reynolds twisted his head to stare at me. He was a heavy, fat-browed man, and he squinted curiously at me. To my relief -- we were flying down the highway -- he turned his eyes back to the road. "Me, I'm heading for the Georgia hills," he said. "I know some folks there, and I've got a feeling there's a pocket of resistance there's going to last a while. " He looked at me again, as though defying me to doubt the grounds for his belief. "You?"

"Trying to make it to the Cape," I said, gazing out the window. "If there's anything I can do, that's where it'll be. I'd rather be on the job, I guess. "

"You work there?"

"Pilot. "

He absorbed that silently for a moment, jiggling the steering wheel back and forth just enough to scare me. "Maybe you know something about these things, then. Where are they from? _Why are they doing this?" _ His expression was filled with pain and anger.

"I don't know," I said softly.

He didn't hear me. "What?"

I shook my head. What did we know, really? They were from the stars. They were gods of some kind, or they were playing god. If the dreams had meant anything, it seemed that in their minds they were capturing us for our own protection. I could not help being put in mind of some of the worst of our own "protective" institutions. Had the Saviors come to help us in our "sickness" -- to take us and "heal" us under their own precepts? Or had they come to prey regardless of what they had seen in us?

"I don't know anymore who's crazy," I said to Reynolds. What a way to fulfill my dreams of alien contact. What would my final choice be -- if I had one? The end Cath had taken? I didn't want to die. I wasn't ready.

Countryside of forest and water-carved clay rushed by the window. What state was this -- Georgia? The last time we'd stopped for gas (our fifth try, when we'd finally found a station with electricity to run the pumps), we'd been in South Carolina.

Reynolds pounded gloomily on the steering wheel. The Ford started to swerve, but he cleared his throat and steadied the car quickly. He frowned and concentrated hard on his driving, and I said nothing, though he had made me nervous. The radio hissed, a reminder of our isolation. Angrily, I snapped the

damn thing off. I was suddenly in mind of the Savior who had been felled by John's bullet -- his ruined face staring up into the streetlight, a sad, milky face without a trace of anger. The hideous creature, dying, had pitied us! The thought wrenched me with nausea. I poked tears out of my eyes and looked up.

"Watch out!" I snapped, with a stab at the windshield. A Savior Spaceship was landing on the highway, and a car coming the other way had swerved across the median and was skidding across our lane, smoke and dust spurting from its tires. Reynolds hit the brakes, and we skidded, too, tires shrieking. I bounced back up, held by my seatbelt, and watched the other car burst through a guardrail and vanish over an embankment.

"Hah!" cried Reynolds, his hands white on the wheel. He floored the accelerator.

"NO!" I cried -- he had forgotten the spaceship -- and now he braked again and we swerved onto the berm and skidded past the bright yellow ship. The wheels rumbled as he struggled to get us back onto the road, but it was hopeless -- we were over the shoulder and bouncing in the weeds. The moment lasted forever, and I had time to be grateful that my seatbelt was snugly latched, and then an embankment rose and the world slammed into me and pinwheeled and finally halted, dizzily.

For a moment I was aware only of a crimson blur, and then my eyes focused somewhat, and I saw that we sat tilted, the car smoking and twisted. Reynolds' head was a bloody wreck in the shambles of the windshield. Hesitantly I took his wrist; my own heart was thundering, but I could feel no pulse in Reynolds. I clicked out of my lap and shoulder harness, head spinning, heaved the door open with my shoulder, and lurched out of the car onto my knees.

Tall figures hurried toward me, crying into my mind: "Do not flee, do not fear! We bring life!" I stumbled to my feet and ran, not knowing where, just into the woods, down into a gully, tripping, sliding finally to a rest in a jumbled gloom of branches and decaying leaves. Time passed, no time at all to me; and when I became aware again and made my way painfully back out to the road, both Reynolds' body and the Saviors were gone. I brooded, shaking, and walked south along the road.

The rest of the trip blurred, played in some disjointed time sense. A driver stopped, hurtled south with me, and other motorists took the relay, and then I took a car. Only after I reached the Cape did my eyes and my mind focus to a common range. The Space Center was in chaos, damaged but alive. A shuttle was still intact, fueled though not topped off, and there was enough organization left to try to put the bird up. Probably there was no point in it; but everyone was desperate to take some action, however futile, and Commander Randall couldn't have been happier to see a second pilot, groggy and thrashed about though I was. So we were going. Perhaps we could do nothing but make a last stand with the crew of Spacehome, in orbit -- but if that was our only option, then that was what we would do.

Only . . . we were too late. Except for Raven, the last stand had already been made here. And by the time we arrived here, Space Center was no longer answering on the radio.

* * *

We prowl through the station, through what's left of the control and instrumentation room. I am thinking about various ways of dying, and deciding that Raven's plan is not to my liking, though I wish him well in it. "Raven," I say, "why are you still alive? Why didn't they get you the first time?"

Raven is off in a corner, fooling with the radar. For a moment, I think he's going to ignore my question, but then he says, "Missed the whole fight. I was on a scooter, couple of kilometers away, when they hit. Taking pictures. Something told me to keep quiet, keep my thrusters off -- and I was right, they left

without paying any attention to me. " He says all this without looking away from the radar.

"Funny," I say, "that was just how I missed getting caught. I was sort of stunned, two different times when they might have gotten me, but they didn't get me, they just left. " And I go silent for a few minutes, thinking about that. Could be that that observation would be useful to someone who was alive and captive. But that isn't important to me now -- what's important is what am I going to do this time, not what did they do last time. Don't let them take you alive, I think. But suicide has never appealed to me, in any form, and my heart doesn't accept it even now. Is it less honorable than giving myself up for enslavement?

Raven calls to me. He has his helmet face pressed to the padded eyepiece of one of the telescopes. "Look," he says, checking the radarscope, checking the telescope again. "Look. " There is casual urgency in his voice.

I float over and look. At first I have trouble situating myself in front of the eyepiece, but then I peer in and see it: a bright point of light, brighter than the stars. I cannot tell if it's moving. "It's accelerating," Raven says, looking at the figures chucked out by the radar computer. "Too fast for a shuttle -- could be aiming to match our orbit. " With a sinking feeling, I look up at him, then look back into the scope; but now the station has tumbled too far, and the telescope has swiveled to its limit.

They're coming, then. It's real, it's happening; time is almost up. The evidence presented to my eye steeply slowly to the core of my mind, swells into my tissues like heady wine, bubbles downward like a fiery probe into my sternum. I grasp for support on a panel but slide away like a novice spaceman, tumbling, choking back nausea, knotting my stomach muscles to contain a spitting primitive animal which claws for freedom. Thoughts rearrange themselves like bits of sand on a helplessly sliding cliff. I finally bring myself to a stop, facing Raven upside-down. In the half-light, he looks like a costumed Savior reaching to take me . . .

"What are you going to do?" he hisses.

The question shimmers, dies. Yes, what? Will I be taken by these madmen who think themselves gods, or will I deny them their victory, as Raven plans to do? No choice seems acceptable. A chronometer ticks in the back of my mind: how many hours, how many minutes? They are accelerating toward us, and they know we are here. I move away from the telescope and seek the airlock; whatever else, when they arrive, I want to be outside to face them in the open clarity of space.

Stopping in the airlock, I notice the rack of signal rockets behind a protective window. I pry open the window and run a gloved hand over the launcher tubes. "Raven --"

Instead of finishing the question, I remove two of the rockets, perched in their bazooka-launchers. Trigger-fired. I release them to hang weightless, while I think this through; I haven't much time. The rockets would make excellent weapons of self-destruction if I butted their exhaust tubes against my stomach before firing them. Perhaps I could treat the Savivors to a show of fireworks when I die. Or --

Though quaking with contained excitement, knowing I should hurry outside to greet the enemy, I stay where I am, studying the rockets, feeling the grip of the handles -- very much like the grip of a revolver. Last time I was given a weapon, I failed to do anything except murder a lonely dog.

Raven appears in the airlock and looks at me holding the two rockets. "Do it!" he says, and hurries outside through the open exit port. He drifts out of my sight, a silent fish in an infinite black sea. He's right. I've got to do it. I grip the two launchers and follow him outside. "Hurry," his voice hisses in my ear. Can

they be coming already? I turn and find him, waiting among the stars.

Earth has grown ripe with color, lucid ocean blue and wisped cloud white. She is round and beautiful, and I grieve for her. I want to make the best exit for her I can manage. How many minutes away are they, now, those benevolent Saviors? My suit whispers air to me hoarsely, as though knowing that its usefulness to me grows short. My radio mutters static, a death rattle. Shadow envelopes us as the sun passes behind the tumbling station.

The vast planet, wheeling slowly over our heads on this crippled carousel, eventually wanes into darkness. The sun flares blue, gold, crimson at the horizon and vanishes. Our last sunset, perhaps -- a final farewell to our vigil. How many years will Spacehome circle, silent and empty, before blazing its own farewell in the atmosphere? I practice holding the rockets in various position: over the shoulder as they were meant to be fired, under the arms in what seems like a dramatic gunslinger pose, and butted directly against my body, where the blasts would make a pretty crater of my abdomen. Raven watches, not asking which way I am going to do it. I cannot decide. Do I want to die, or do I want to see their faces when I put on my show?

"Raven, their transport beam. Do you think --?" The beam seemed to freeze people and things; would it freeze rockets in motion?

Raven says nothing. No way to know. I'll just have to try.

Morning. Daylight over Asia, and it seems that perhaps the last sunset was not, after all, our last. _Why are they taking so long?_ Raven and I do not talk, but our silence reverberates like muffled shouts, like children giggling in the dark.

A spark, that was a spark!

No. I have seen many things I thought were sparks.

The sun flashes, splinters, and fades: another sunset. I sweat coldly for fear that if I see another I may weary of sunsets. No! Darkness -- and a stab of light drills into my retinas like a welder's arc. A spaceship drops into view like a power-diving airplane and brakes magically, a gleaming yellow spaceship with white trim, mockingly cheerful. I turn to keep facing it, but the station is tumbling, twisting away --

"Back against the wall!" cries Raven. I think he is howling a contemptuous laugh -- but no! -- it is a command, and I obey, wedging myself with my back against the station's hull. The stars wheel slowly, a sparkling panorama of Cheshire-cat grins, watching the carousel . . .

In despair, I stick the butts of the rocket tubes squarely in my gut and disengage the safeties for firing. I don't want to blink; I must time my squeeze at the precise moment of paralysis --

The ship seems enormous as it wheels into view, a hundred meters away. It turns to spot us, and its antenna glitters and emits a smudgy light, which moves . . . _slowly._

"Give 'em hell, Grum!" howls Raven, and out of the corner of my eye I see his right fist jerk up, middle finger stabbing -- and I think there is a puff of air which is his life fleeing, but I dare not avert my gaze to see if he's spit before dying -- _GOOD-BYE, RAVEN!_

Something twists in my gut, and with no conscious thought I change my mind. I jerk the launchers away

from my stomach and wedge them under my arms, holding them tight with both elbows, finger wrapped around the triggers. The light blossoms out from the ship, a crinkling yellow translucence, enveloping me in its glow. My eyes shimmer and smoke inside my skull, and my fingers squeeze the two triggers hard . . .

I am aware of vibration and spurting fire in both launchers, as time freezes . . . becomes discontinuous, then crystalline . . . space as I knew it no longer surrounds me, and in its place is a finite silvery gray sphere, room-sized, and time unfreezes --

-- the tubes vomit fire, and the signal rockets streak out and explode with blinding white light on the far wall. Searing particles ricochet in a sizzling hail, and through the pyrotechnics I see the figures of Saviors dancing and falling like shadows, and then the rain spatters to a halt, and I am aware through the smoke and confusion that I have burned at least half a dozen holes through my suit and into my skin. For a moment, I feel as though I'm going to pass out, but as I stumble and fall backwards I fight to maintain consciousness for another minute. The Saviors, those I didn't hit, are scurrying forward to capture me, _and I want to see their faces before they take me. _ Sinuous arms snake out to grasp me, and milky faces, scored with pity and -- anger? -- peer at me; and for that one moment I know I haven't lost, not altogether.

Raven, are you there? I'll find out for both of us what future they have planned.

But we got them, didn't we? And some damn day I'll get them again.

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