

*This is incorrect, of course. The first life discovered outside the solar system was on Genesis, a world orbiting Alpha Cephei. Because life there however is microscopic, it tends to get overlooked.

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Dedication

*For Robert Dyke
The ultimate time traveler*

prologue

ORDINARILY, JERRY CAVANAUGH would have been asleep in his cabin while the AI took the ship closer to the Sungrazer, the gas giant at Beta Comae Berenices. A world on fire, as the public relations people referred to it. And there was no denying it was a spectacular sight. This flight marked his eighty-eighth visit, and he never tired of looking at it.

The Sungrazer was a Jovian, four times more massive than Jupiter, with a tight orbit that took it literally through the solar atmosphere, where it burned and flared like a meteor. He marveled that the thing didn't explode, didn't turn to a cinder, but every time he came back it was still there, still plowing through the solar hell, still intact. The ultimate survivor.

It orbited its sun in three days, seven hours. When you got the angle of approach right, got black sky behind it, it became even more spectacular. Of course, the view on the ship's screens didn't reflect the view from the ship. In order to get the kind of perspective management wanted, that gave Orion Tours its reputation, the *Ranger* would have had to approach much closer to the sun than was safe. Instead, when the dramatic hour arrived, he would put the Sungrazer chip into the reader and people would look through the viewports and see images taken from the satellite. It was breathtaking stuff, and if it was a trifle deceptive, who really cared? Orion did not keep the method secret. Occasionally someone asked, and Jerry always told them, yes, the view they were getting was not really what it looked like from the bridge or through the ship's scopes. Too dangerous. This is what you would see we could get in sufficiently close. But of course you wouldn't want that.

Of course not, they always replied.

That would not happen, of course, until tomorrow morning, when they made their closest approach. The tour was timed so that the visual changeover happened during the night, when the passengers were—usually—asleep in their cabins. At around seven or so, when they began getting up the first thing they saw would be the Sungrazer, and it was probably the most dramatic moment of the entire flight.

He had thirty-six passengers, a full load, including three sets of honeymooners, seven kids fourteen or under, one clergyman who had saved for a lifetime to make the trip, one contest winner, and two physicians. The contest winner was a young woman from Istanbul who had never before been outside her native country. He wasn't clear on the precise nature of the contest, and his language skills did not allow explication. But she sat wide-eyed near the main display all during the approach.

JERRY HAD BEEN enduring sleepless nights on recent flights. He'd resisted going to see someone about it, but the condition had worsened this time out. On this last night before starting home, he hadn't been able to sleep at all, so he'd dressed and come up to the bridge, where he sat, paging listlessly through the library. The AI was silent. The navigation screens gave him views at several magnifications of the sun and the gas giant.

He heard muffled voices in one of the compartments. Then the ship was quiet again, save for the

vents and the electronics.

This would be his last flight before retirement. The kids were grown and gone now, so he and Mara had thought about taking off somewhere alone, an extended vacation to Hawaii, but in the end they'd decided it would be nice to stay home. Jerry had lost whatever passion he'd had for travel. He settle for going down to the bridge club, and maybe eating dinner at the Gallop—

The AI's voice broke in: "*Jerry, we have activity at one eight zero.*"

Jerry looked up at the screen carrying the feed from the after scope. The sky was brilliant, the Milky Way trailing into infinity.

"*Sensor reading,*" said the AI. "*Objects approaching.*"

"On-screen."

"*They are on-screen. If you look closely, you can see them.*"

Dark objects moving against the stars.

"What are they, Rob?"

"*Unknown.*"

"Asteroids?"

"*They are artificial.*"

"Are you saying they're not ours?"

"*I am merely saying I am not familiar with vehicles of this type.*"

"Moonriders."

"*Are there such things?*"

"Right now I'd say yes. They aren't on a collision vector, are they?"

"*No. But they'll come close. Within twenty kilometers.*"

That was enough to scrape the paint. What the hell were those things?

"*Range is twenty-two hundred kilometers and closing.*"

He counted eight of them. No, nine. Flying in formation like a flock of birds. Coming up his tailpipe.

Flying in formation. What natural objects fly in formation?

"*They'll pass on the port side,*" said the AI.

~~“Anybody else supposed to be out here, Rob?”~~

“Negative. No other traffic scheduled.”

“How fast are they coming?”

“Fifteen kilometers per second. They will reach us in two and a half minutes.”

“Nothing on the circuit?”

“Not a sound.”

“Okay. Let me know if anything changes. Meantime, let’s get a close-up. I’d like to see what they look like.”

The AI focused on the lead object. The others vanished off-screen. It was a sphere. Not much reflectivity. That was odd so close to the sun. *“Do we wish to alert the passengers?”* asked Rob.

There was no reason to believe the objects were dangerous. But he didn’t like things he couldn’t explain. He woke Mysha, his flight attendant, and told her what was coming. Then he flicked on the allcom. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “I’m sorry to disturb you, but we may have to maneuver. Please secure your harnesses.”

The objects were in precise formation and, as he watched, all nine began to turn to starboard. Jerry delivered a string of expletives. “They’re on a collision course.”

“Not quite,” said the AI. *“If they maintain present heading, they will still pass to port. The closest of them will approach to within two hundred meters.”*

He thought about easing away. But it was probably not a good idea. The first law of successful navigation was that when somebody else was close by, make no surprise moves. “Hold steady,” he told Rob.

“They are ninety seconds away.”

He’d flicked on the bank of harness status lamps. Two of his passengers were still not belted down. “Rob?” he said.

“I will see to it.”

Moonriders. He’d never taken their existence seriously. But there they were. “Rob, give me a channel.”

“Jerry, I have been trying to contact them.”

“Let me try.”

“Channel is open.”

The last two warning lamps winked off. Other lights came on. Some of his passengers wanted to talk to him.

Jerry took a deep breath. “This is the *Ranger*,” he said. “Is anybody there? Please acknowledge.”

He waited. But heard only static.

“*They’re slowing,*” said Rob.

BLACK GLOBES. HE could make out devices on the hulls, antennas, other equipment that might have been sensors, or weapons. They re-formed themselves into a straight line running parallel to the course he was traveling. Still to port.

“*Distance between units is four kilometers.*”

The first one passed.

“*Antennas are pointed in our direction,*” said Rob.

And the second. They blinked quickly past, one every couple seconds. Then, as quickly as it had begun, it was over, and the line pulled well ahead of him. He watched them settle back into their vee.

“*Phenomena of this type,*” said Rob, “*have been reported here and in several other locations over the past two years.*”

“We have everything on the record?”

“*Yes, Jerry.*”

Ahead, the globes were becoming hard to see. He got on the allcom. “Anyone on the port side will have seen unidentified vehicles passing. I don’t know what they were, but they are gone now. However, I’d like you to stay belted in for the moment.”

Moonriders. So named because they’d first been reported as dark shadows moving among the moons of Pollux IV. That had been forty years ago.

They were gone now. Like the tour ship, they seemed headed toward the Sungrazer. Sightseers from somewhere else?

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