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Pilotman

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As far as he could see, thousands of enormous airships, tethered to the gleaming tops of golden-chrome skyscrapers, shone bright red in the slanting light of a setting autumn sun. They reminded him of giant pumpkin seeds. The ribs of their metal exoskeletons seemed to flash as they clanged against their rooftop moorings, raining down upon the crowds the ominous, echoing tintinnabulation of a thousand tolling bells.

Beneath these many spacecraft, a city swarmed in chaos. Hordes filled the streets, everyone coursing frantically toward a large hangar-like terminal: their sole salvation. They had scavenged what they could of their fleeting former lives. Some carried food, others pets, still others dragged trunks or luggage. They were the ones who took too much; others took perhaps too little.

He walked between his mother and father, the three of them swept forward by the force of mass hysteria toward the terminal

entrance. Perhaps they would be among the lucky ones, he hoped, one of the families to make it through the great gleaming doors and to reach the Arks. But already the terminal was overfull. His mother and father struggled not to lose him amid the swarm, shouting to each other and to him above the cries of the crowd, their words drowning in the sea of screams.

A speaker above the gleaming doors cracked the din with a snap of static. Terrified but eager, the people listened: "Ark 145 leaves from gate C-34 in three minutes." Another loud electric crackle, "--flare will hit in seven minutes. Repeat, the flare will--" and the speaker fell silent. The crowd surged in panic; his parents gripped his hands tighter--painfully tight--trying to pull him forward.

"Don't worry, sweetheart!" his mother cried hoarsely. "We'll make it! We will make it!"

From high above, they heard the metal twangs of moorings being cut. Scores of the blimp-like spacecraft began to rise above the buildings. The crowd stopped and stared up into the skies after the red pumpkin seeds.

At his feet almost, an old man collapsed to his hands and knees. The large trunk he had been lugging on his back broke open, dumping out on the street all his belongings. "They're leaving without us!" the old man wailed, rending his shirt and pulling at his thin, gray hair. "My God, how can-- Come back!"

More and more people began to notice the old man's plaintive cries, and they too looked up to see the craft rising quickly skyward. Many reacted with screams of terror and woeful wails; others trudged forward through the mass with renewed effort, determined to make it inside even if it meant trampling their fellow man.

He strained with all his might to keep up with his parents. They practically dragged him over the others. He could see only the back of his father's head.

"--145 leav...ne minute...Last transport...Ark 145... Gate...Flare to--"

"Goddammit!" his father yelled. "Come on!"

And he watched as his father's grip on his hand begin to slip--as they were forcibly separated by the crowd--he felt the fingers lose their sweaty grip and slide ineluctably away.

"Damon!" his mother and father shouted in unison.

But he was quickly pushed away from them and carried to a shoal along the shoulder of the road--he found himself lost amid the eddies of the crowd. He struggled desperately to reach a lamppost and climbed up on its base. Looking over a sea of heads, he could not find the faces of his family--his mom and dad were gone.

He gazed up the sleek metal sides of the nearby skyscrapers, amid which drifted the many transport craft. His

upturned eyes filled with tears as he clutched the lamppost with all his might. All around him the crowd, sea-like, swelled in reaction to something overhead. Clutching each other in fear, pointing to the brightness churning above them in the sky, they joined together in a deafening scream of terror.

Then a strong wind began to sweep up dust and trash. It started lifting up people then trees and cars. Gusting even stronger, it swept everything off the ground. And then the ground itself began to buckle and break and fly into the sky. The roar of the winds grew unbearable.

Though the whirling dust stung his eyes, he tried urgently to open them as wide as he could. Above the city, the bright red seeds tore away from their moorings with a thousand bowstring-like snaps. Carried off by an upswell of air, they scattered like rose petals across a now black sky.

The world's last whimper--a sigh--then a sudden silence.

As though from a great distance, he saw his Earth begin to pass through an engulfing solar flare. The misty coat of blue and mottled green sprayed off, at once, as though they had been merely a thick coating of dust.

Against the empty blackness he saw innumerable seed-like Arks tossed out through empty space by the escaping atmosphere. As he passed one of them, sliding quickly beyond Mars toward the asteroid belt, he felt his head growing heavier. He opened his

eyes wider, turning back to see the entire solar system in miniature. Jupiter, Saturn, Mars, and Earth... Small balls lost in the all-surrounding darkness.

A rectangle of light appeared, moving slowly, dim against the blackness. Growing brighter, it started moving faster. He saw the small desk beyond the planets, discerned the edges of the bed beyond the mounds of blanket. Swirling, inchoate objects began to tumble into an order: What a moment ago had been the solar system resolved itself into his own bedroom. He watched the glow of headlights from a passing car complete its scan of the room and disappear.

His eyes were open. With sudden fright he realized he was awake.

A solar system mobile spun gently above his bed. His father had given it to him for Christmas that year. He had put it together himself.

Damon sat at the table before a birthday cake with eight candles arranged like stars around a spaceship drawn in brightly colored icing. To either side of the empty china cabinet behind him, stacks of sealed brown boxes stood in the corners of the dining room. The paper plates and decorations, all of which followed the space motif, did little to fill the emptiness of

the room. On the table lay one of his recently unwrapped birthday presents: a backyard rocket kit.

Five slightly older boys, herded together by Damon's mother for a Kodak moment, stood by the table waiting for Damon to blow out the candles. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and got them all in a single attempt--more a sigh than a spirited effort. Everyone clapped and cheered, and Damon's mother leaned over to give him a peck on the cheek. "Happy birthday, sweetheart," she said to him softly. At once, the boys pressed forward. "All right, guys, all right. Birthday boy gets the first piece."

As she started to cut the cake, two of the boys picked up the rocket kit and turned to Damon. "Are you gonna launch it today?" Adam asked.

"Let's go!" Alex urged. "We'll take it out back..."

Damon's mother pushed them aside and handed her son his slice of cake. She glanced at Damon then put a hand on Alex's shoulder. "Maybe another day, huh? How about some cake?"

Damon glared at them and jumped up from his seat. He grabbed the rocket kit from the other boys and ran upstairs with it. Alex wiped some icing off the cake with his finger and licked it off with a shrug.

"What a chicken!" Adam scoffed. "Won't even go outside!"

Damon's mother sighed and watched her son charge up the stairs. She closed her eyes and lowered herself into a chair.

Damon's sheets were covered with miniature planets and his bedside lampshade with quarter moons and stars. His small bookshelf of astronomy books was half packed in a box near the window and his posters were rolled up in the closet, but his mobile of planets was still hanging above his headboard. Damon sat cross-legged on his bed holding the toy rocket he had spent the hours between dinner and bedtime assembling.

His mother tapped lightly on the door before entering. She sat down across from him on the small chair and looked at him silently for a long moment. But Damon was fixated on his toy rocket. "Just-- If you would tell me, Damon. I don't--" She sighed and rubbed her temples. "I just don't understand what it is out there that you find so scary."

Damon remained absorbed in staring at the rocket. "I had the dream again," he said softly.

Tears welled up in his mother's eyes, and she turned to wipe them away with her sleeve. Moving to the edge of the bed, she took the toy rocket from her son and set it on his bedside table. Then she kissed his forehead gently.

"You wanna stay in my room with me tonight?" Damon shook his head hesitantly. "Sure?" He nodded with a little more

conviction. She hugged him and gave him another kiss. "It's gonna be better once we get in the new place," she said. "I promise."

Damon slipped beneath the covers to go to sleep. His mother tucked him in then headed toward the door. She turned back to him before turning off the light. "Good night, sweetheart..." She left the door open slightly behind her.

Damon lay in bed with his eyes open. A thin sliver of light from the hall fell across his face.

In the kitchen, the cordless phone pressed to her ear, Damon's mother paced fiercely.

"You son of a bitch!" she shouted. "He won't even go outside! It's like... God, it's like the whole world is coming to an end for him. And you can't even call him on his goddamn birthday!"

She yanked the refrigerator open and glanced inside absently. Except for a few condiment bottles on the door that jangled noisily and more than half of Damon's birthday cake, it was empty. She flung it closed again. "Sorry's not good enough!" she sobbed. "He needs to see--"

She stopped abruptly.

Damon stood in the doorway in his space pajamas, looking up at her.

* * *

His mother lay curled up on her side, asleep. Damon faced the opposite direction, toward the open bedroom door. The light was still on above the staircase.

When he opened his eyes and looked out into the hallway, he saw a man in a pilot's uniform enter his mother's bedroom.

Damon pushed himself up onto one arm and gazed quizzically but serenely at the pilot's face. The pilot approached and sat near Damon at the edge of the bed. They shared a look of understanding. Then the pilot leaned down and whispered in Damon's ear.

Damon nodded and turned to glance down at his mother.

She awoke with a start: the space next to her was empty. She rose from bed, grabbed her house robe from the clotheshorse in the corner of the room, and then plodded to the window stretching and yawning. A crisp autumn morning, the sun slanting sidewise through the trees.

She turned her eyes down to the fenced-in backyard. Damon stood outside in his pajamas. Not fifty feet in front of him smoldered the shattered frame of a small single-engine plane, standing almost perfectly upright on its nose in a shallow, blackened crater. She gasped and ran from the room to get her son.

By mid-morning a swarm of policemen and other officials had cordoned off the entire cul-de-sac, and scores of them investigated the wreckage of the airplane and the surrounding area. One official stood to the side of the rest talking on a mobile phone. Damon's mother overheard him: "What about the FAA? So the flight wasn't-- Wait, what?" He looked at his phone and pulled the antenna up. "I can barely make you out. Some kind of, I don't know, bad signal or something..." Through the cockpit window, she saw what she thought must be the badly burned body of a man. She shuddered and drew shut the sliding glass door.

Damon was seated in a chair in the middle of the room, staring fixedly ahead. His mother crouched in front of him, taking his hand.

"Damon... Why'd you go out back?" Damon continued to stare ahead blankly. His mother tilted her head to put herself more in his line of sight. "Yesterday you were afraid. And for weeks... Why did you go out there today?"

Damon seemed to come to. He blinked and looked deep into his mother's eyes.

"He told me it would be all right..." Damon's voice was calm and steady. "He said... He said that if you can see it--if you aren't afraid and you can keep your eyes open--it won't be black as sackcloth. It'll be bright--like a rain of gold... And then it'll be quiet."

"Damon"--her voice quavered as she spoke his name--"Damon, what are you saying? Who told you?"

"The pilot man," said Damon.

Growing frantic, she shook his little hand, asking louder: "Who?"

"The pilot man told me..."

She turned to look out the glass door to where the men were sifting through the wreckage.

"He came to take care of us," said Damon.

Dr. Paterson's strong, warm hand gently pushed Damon out into the reception lounge of his office. Damon at once returned to playing with his toy rocket, as the shadows of his mother and the doctor moved against the frosted glass window of the office door he had just exited. He could hear only the soft murmur of their voices from the other room. Behind the reception desk, the white-capped nurse yawned and turned to watch him play. Damon smiled at her.

Inside the office, Damon's mother discussed the details of the examination with the child psychiatrist. Her eyes were puffy and red, and she looked down as the doctor spoke to her.

"What about Damon's father?" the doctor asked.

"I don't know..." She fidgeted with a miniature soccer ball on her key ring. "He's overseas for the next two months... There

are still some things to sign. And I'm supposed to be moving tomorrow..." She looked away as her eyes filled with tears.

"Jesus, I just don't--"

Dr. Paterson offered her a seat, and lowered himself onto the corner of his desk. His voice was steady and reassuring.

"Listen, this must be very upsetting. Especially with all that happened yesterday morning. But believe me, when I spoke to Damon just now, what I heard was a little boy who's very upset about his parents splitting up. That's all."

"But he says he sees this man, and--"

"I know. He told me. But he's told you about his other dream, right? Children often confuse vivid dreams with real experiences. This business of a... a sun flare that--what's Damon say? It's gonna break the Earth's magnetic field--then something with the atmosphere? I mean, you just said yourself he must have gotten this from one of his astronomy books. It's a coping fantasy, you see, and--"

"I know, I know... I just..." She stopped short. Her keys jangled when she shook them.

The doctor continued. "I'm not saying this isn't an issue. I'm just saying it's one you can work with. Your son is experiencing a great deal of anxiety--that's normal. You just need to continue to work through it with him."

"And tomorrow?"

"And tomorrow... you move." The doctor smiled and handed her a tissue. "I might be able to refer you to someone. But maybe in the meantime you can talk to him about it a little more. Help him to understand it's going to take time, but it'll be all right."

Early morning. The crickets chirring. Damon opened his eyes.

"It'll be all right, Damon," the pilot told him, stroking his hair gently.

"What about--"

"Shh"--the pilot held his finger to his lips. "I'll show you." And he took Damon's hand, leading him out of the bedroom and down the stairs to the front door.

Together they walked outside. It was still dark as they crossed the parking lot of the new development, but the horizon was already tinged with pink. The pilot guided Damon up a dirt work road, which ran behind the development past several newly constructed house frames and freshly dug basements.

The pilot held Damon's hand as they climbed a slope toward a highway. As they crested the hill, the landscape stretching out beyond it was dimly lit, but the cars on the highway in the distance still had their lights on as they streamed past. Damon

and the pilot stood atop the hill and watched the sun rise. The pilot smiled and pointed as it crested the horizon.

"That's the sun's arm, Damon. You see?" From its side, Damon saw a wide arc of bright liquid flame reaching out and curling back upon itself. "It will embrace us all. It will be a shower of golden light, Damon. And when it's over, you won't hear a whisper..."

A strong breeze picked up. Staring down the dawn, Damon opened his eyes as wide as he could.