



OBSERVE ONLY

A L A N M . K I N G

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Observe Only

Alan M. King

A Word From The Author

I believe that science fiction tries to remind us, tell us, that time and place don't matter, and that we are always human, that we will always be human.

- Alan M. King

Observe Only

The siren had stopped working, meaning the main power had finally failed. Bad news. Not only for Captain Miller and his crew, but for the peaceful planet below. They had been sent on an observe-only mission – that was imperative. Under no condition were they to make contact with, or even be seen by, the people below. Well, it looked like ‘no condition’ was about to happen. With no power they could only stay in orbit for a short period without drifting outwards and into a probable frozen death in space, or succumb to the gravity of the planet and fall into the biggest bureaucratic nightmare ever. Of course, they could always die on impact and leave the biggest mystery – and catastrophe – this planet had ever seen. Miller smiled briefly: then at least he wouldn’t have to do the paperwork.

The backup system was now online and telling him that there were still three lifeboats left to launch, nearly sixty crew yet to escape. Why did they need so many people? How was a captain supposed to lead a crew when he didn’t know every single one of them like family? Miller hated the system, how the Space Initiative exploded, how it changed the people in it. Good, honest shippers were now wearing uniforms and towing line, all yes sir, no sir. Not that honest, when he came to think of it. Or that good, really. And you wouldn’t want get on their bad side. Hell, you wouldn’t want to be on the good side of some of them after a drink or ten. Before the discovery of sentient life he had been one of them, a simple transport captain, taking goods or people where they needed to be. Sailing by day, drinking by night: it was a good life. Hell, he even had some money stashed away, and plans to break of from the SI and start his own shipping company. He’d picked out a patch on Mars with a great view, and he’d work when he wanted with who he wanted. But then the call had come out. Any able person with the right license was to be conscripted, and working for the SI got you right on the front line. Why? They’d found something not that interesting, on a dull rock, far from home, and since that counted at an empire-wide state of emergency, human rights were apparently put on hold. Some of his fellow shippers had gone to ground when

the call came out, or been found unfit for duty, apparently having multiple undiagnosed mental or physical conditions. How easy was it to fake paranoia, he wondered. Then there was the case of Old Sideways Cartwright, who had been reported dead after a freak explosion on his ship, coming in to dock at SI headquarters. Now Miller had met Cartwright a few years before and thought he got the size of him pretty much. He didn't look at life from quite the same vantage point as everyone else, or so it was said, and Miller could see that behind those darting eyes was a mind as sharp as a tack. He could have been a renowned surgeon, or a superb mathematician. But he didn't look at life the way everyone else did, and spent his life in the dirtiest holes he could find, shipping whatever he could when the drink ran out. And it was funny; shipments of grain don't usually explode with that... ferocity. That would be like Sideways, and one hell of a middle finger to the SI. When saying no isn't an option, make sure they don't ask twice. He wasn't dead, Miller was sure of it. Almost sure. There was the question of whether he would have gone down with his ship. Cartwright may have been sideways, but was he backwards too? Miller knew a captain's place on a sinking ship, and it was at the helm. The captain's place was at the helm.

The ship broke the atmosphere. Its fiery descent must have seemed like the sun was falling down on the people below – the ship wasn't built for any atmosphere, let alone this soupy mix. Miller felt he was a man of honour, despite any evidence to the contrary. Sure, he reneged on a few deals, and come off a bit worse for wear after a few scraps with other shippers, but he still held the moral high ground. Ground which had been hard to come by, as of late, but he'd fight for it tooth and nail. As societies were becoming self-sufficient, fewer and fewer goods needing moving from here to there, and fewer ships were needed to do that moving. His father had said once: "If you don't have honour in life, have honour in death, and if you can't have honour in that, then the world won't be any worse off for your leaving". Miller had few worries about what he left behind – it was what was coming that worried him. His father had been a poor man, but he'd built up his business to provide

food and clothes for his family. Countless times he could have taken certain shortcuts, offered by certain men with sharp suits and sharp words, but every time he had refused. He never became rich, not in possessions, but he always said his family and health were his wealth. Right to the end. But he'd made sure each of his children were educated, and that his youngest had enough money to fulfil his dream of becoming a pilot in the Space Initiative's Deep Space program. But things hadn't worked out as the old man had wanted. He never saw dreams of space turn to harsh realities. And now, by some twist of fate, here Miller was, making first contact with strange new life. He hadn't been trained for this. He hadn't been trained at all really, just a stamp on his shipper's licence, a cursory nod, and directions to the uniforms. He absentmindedly pulled at his itchy collar. It seemed a bit like overkill, the full call to arms. Now that he was here, he could see for himself that these people were only just experimenting with radio waves. Not a threat at all, and barely of any interest, especially to Miller. Still, he wouldn't abandon his post and, had it been possible, he would have tried to steer the ship away from civilisation. The scenario would be that if an emergency landing was necessary, it be done quickly and discretely, and another ship would be along soon to clear up the mess. No chance of discrete now. He just hoped the hole he made wasn't a big one.

A young man came running into the room, a smear of blood on his cheek. In his current state Miller didn't recognise him, so simply barked "Report".

"We've just about patched the hole, sir. Wilkinson and Jenne went in without suits. There was no time. They- It was a tiny rock, sir, just a tiny rock. But it cut right through the main circuits."

"Will we make it through atmo, Engineer?"

"I think so, sir. But I can't say for after that, sir. We still have air."

"Good. Round up anyone still not on a lifeboat and bring them here, ASAP. No one's getting off now. "

The young engineer rushed off, eager to help, or simply relieved to have something to do. Mickelson, he thought. That was the name of the engineer, and a good kid too

according to his file. No parents, but one younger sister barely older than Miller's own daughter. God, he thought, I'd hate to have the job of telling that girl if he doesn't make it.

Things were getting bigger down there. He could now pick out a river, a city, a road. They have roads, he thought, even streetlights. Well, even aliens must have places to be, he mused. By now, the remaining crew were huddled round. This space wasn't really designed for more than five people, but at the middle of the ship, it was the safest place to be. All oxygen pumps had been redirected to this room, and food was stockpiled in the corner. They could last four days in here, or a week if they were sparing on the supplies. Any longer than that and they'd have to risk suiting up and exploring the rest of the wreckage. Looking around he saw Jensen, a slight girl with sand coloured hair, curled up in a corner. When the call went out she didn't hesitate to answer. She was planning a career with the Initiative anyway, and the special circumstances allowed her to be on active duty at seventeen. Christ, Seventeen. He had spoken to her a few times in the canteen. She was as bright as anything, and would probably be one of the high-ups someday; she had a good head on her, unlike many of her peers. From North something, keeps bees? There were just too many people on this ship. Now she squatted, shivering in a corner. He went over and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Jensen."

She didn't respond.

"Jensen. Come on, get up" he said as kindly as he could manage.

She tried to speak, but she faltered over the first word, repeating incomprehensible sounds. Miller recognised a panic attack when he saw one, and neither he nor Jensen needed this right now. He could let her get over it herself, but no matter how uncaring he made himself out to be, he had to try.

He crouched to her level, placing his hands on her shoulders, and quietly asked her to look at him until she finally raised her wide eyes to his.

“Okay, good,” he said. “Now I’d like you to do something for me Jensen, okay? I’d like you to breathe in and out with me, match my speed. Do you think you can do that?”

She nodded. She was shaky at first, but after seconds that felt like hours, she seemed to regain some composure.

“Jensen, I- I can’t keep calling you Jensen. Could you tell me your first name?”

“A- Abigail,” she managed.

“Abigail. I had a dog named Abigail; never stopped farting. I swear that dog could have powered a city with the gas it let off.”

She let out a mirthless laugh, something stupid to ease the tension, to contrast the dire situation.

“That dog creaked with every wag of its tail,” he said, getting something close to a smile.

“We’re doing fine, Abigail. Most of the crew got off and are being collected by our friends in orbit. We are in the centre of a very sturdy ship, and could probably survive a thousand impacts. We are going to be fine. Okay?”

Jensen put on a brave face and smiled. Her breathing was more normal, her eyes clearer. It’s not what he said, it was just being there.

“I have to go, but I’ll be right over there. Take your time, breathe slowly, and come up to the viewscreen when you’re ready. Don’t rush yourself.” He looked around briefly.

“Looks a nice place; like home. This should be something to tell the grandkids about, eh?”

Sitting back in his chair, he heard Jensen stand and move behind him.

“I hope you’ll omit that from the official report, sir” she sniffed.

“Jensen, we’re about to crash into an alien civilisation in a giant red hot-tin can. Do you really expect me to know exactly what each and every one of my crew is doing at such a time?”

“Thank you, sir.”

He smiled to himself. She would go far in the SI, that girl.

They crashed. Such a word doesn’t do justice to the majesty and destruction caused when screaming metal hits earth, hits buildings. Hits people. The first building was clipped, causing it to fall like a concrete tree. Next was a shorter,

squat building. They went right through the middle of it. Miller had to turn the screen off after that. He wasn't exactly sure what he'd seen, but he could take a good guess. These people didn't need their last moments broadcast to their accidental killers. Great plumes of fire and smoke rocketed from the back of the ship, adding to the dust spewed out by the collapsing buildings. Whatever this world was before, it would be a darker one for their coming.

The jerks and clangs were getting more frequent, and less jarring. Thank God the inertial dampers were on the backup system. He hadn't installed any on his own ship yet. A waste of money, he'd thought. If he came out of this though, he was definitely going to invest in some. More than once had he sprained his wrist on a hard landing, or his neck during an unplanned space collision. Now came a longer period of shaking. By Miller's guess, they were skating along the ground now, and hopefully slowing down. One last jolt and the ship stopped.

All around there was creaking. The hot metal now cooling in the cold air. The occasional *plink* could be heard, but that was all. Miller could barely see anything. The floor was at an angle, but at least it was in the right place. He could barely navigate through the ship normally, but if it had been upside down, or even worse, sideways then he would have had no hope. He stood, or tried to – the gravity here was slightly above Earth's norm, and meant everything was just that little bit more difficult. There was a shriek from somewhere above. Miller didn't have to be a scientist to know that when metal cools, it shrinks, and that the hull had undergone a lot of stress lately. Almost thirty years of flying in and out of atmospheres and he'd thought he'd heard all the noises a ship could make. Though until now, he hadn't been in a dead one. There was probably a large rip in the side somewhere. But it didn't need to be large, he thought, even a small rip could mean... But they were safe in here for now, and they had food enough for a while. The lights flickered back on, casting that sickly light over his bridge and revealing that none of his crew were seriously

injured. They sat in the half light, waiting for their clean up-crew.

Miller woke to the sound of hammering on the hull. That was odd. Wouldn't the Initiative have sent some kind of signal before coming, just a courtesy call, to let them know what was happening? Then he realised it was the natives coming to find out what had crushed their city. Think of the explaining I'll have to do back home, he thought, I'll be stuck doing paperwork for the rest of my life.

"Captain Miller, sir, what are you doing?" asked a crew member.

"I think I'm about to have a bit of fun," he said, putting on the enviro-suit he'd been issued.

"Jensen, suit up - I might need someone with a brain for after I've had my fun."

A crowd gathered around the wreckage, watching as officials tried to dissect it where it lay. A different rumour spread through the crowd every other minute. It was a new military ship, it was a badly failed publicity stunt, it was a piece of the moon. Some of the fantasists in the crowd even insisted it was galactic whale, or travellers from distant stars. As an official started to cut into the thick outer shell, a loud but short-lived raucous noise emanated from somewhere within. This caused the officials to clamber down as fast as possible, disregarding their dignity, and the crowd to increase its mutterings. Nobody saw the opening on the top. What they did see was something rising from the stricken form. It was bulbous, but very much like themselves. It raised a limb across its uppermost protrusion, as if shading its eyes from the morning sun. Then another creature rose from behind it, as now the entire crowd had decided that this was indeed alien, and these may actually be the Spacemen of their burgeoning science fiction. As the first figure moved slowly forward, the crowd, as one, stepped back. It spread its arms, hesitated, and then lowered them again. Then it spoke.

"Er... Hello?"