



Leviathan '99, Ray Bradbury

Leviathan '99

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

“RADIO DREAM”

In 1939, when I was nineteen, I fell in love with the radio dramas of Norman Corwin.

I met him later, when I was twenty-seven, and he encouraged me to write my Martian stories, thus causing The Martian Chronicles to be born.

Along through the years my dream was to one day have Norman Corwin direct one of my radio dramas.

When I returned from my year in Ireland, after writing the screenplay for John Huston’s Moby Dick, I was still deeply under the influence of Herman Melville and his leviathan whale. Simultaneously I was still under the spell of Shakespeare, who had entered my life when I was in high school.

After I’d been home from Ireland for a while, I began to consider taking the Melville mythology and placing it in outer space.

NBC had recently encouraged Norman Corwin and me to collaborate on a one-hour radio drama. When I finished my first script of Leviathan '99, about spaceships instead of sailing ships, mad astronaut captains

instead of seafaring captains, and the blinding white comet replacing the great white whale, I turned in the script to Norman, who then sent it on to NBC.

At that time television was increasing in popularity, diminishing radio, and NBC responded to my script by saying, "Can you break this down into three-minute segments, which we can broadcast over a period of days?"

Stunned, Norman and I withdrew the script and I sent it to BBC Radio in London, who produced it, with Christopher Lee playing the lead of the insane captain of the spaceship Cetus.

The radio production was excellent, but of course my dream of having something produced and directed for radio by Corwin still remained unborn. Suffering from what I now call my "delusions of Shakespeare," I dared to double the length of my Leviathan '99 script and staged it as a play at a Samuel Goldwyn studio soundstage in the spring of 1972. Unfortunately, adding an additional forty pages to the script destroyed my original intent. The essential story was lost. The critics' reviews were unanimous in their vitriol.

In the years that followed I produced Leviathan '99 here and there, gradually whittling away extraneous pages in an attempt to get it back somewhere near the original one-hour version done for radio.

Thirty years later this novella is my final effort to focus and revitalize what began as a radio dream for Norman Corwin. Whether or not it deserves to appear in this incarnation is for you to decide.

DEDICATED WITH GREAT ADMIRATION to Herman Melville

Chapter 1

Call me Ishmael.

Ishmael? In this year 2099 when strange new ships head beyond the stars instead of merely toward them? Attack the stars instead of fearing them? A name like Ishmael?

Yes.

My parents flew with the first brave ones to Mars. Turned less than brave, gone sick for Earth, they returned home. Conceived on that journey, I was born in space.

My father knew his Bible and recalled another outcast who wandered dead seas long years before Christ.

And I being, at that time, the only child fleshed and delivered forth in space, how better to name me than as my father did.

And he did indeed call me...Ishmael.

Some years ago I thought I would ride all the seas of wind that roam this world. Whenever it is a damp November in my soul, I know it is high time to brave the skies again.

So I soared up among bird cries, bright kites, and thunderheads on a Saturday, late summer in this year of 2099, borne upon my own jet-packet power. I flew over and away toward Cape Kennedy in my wild journey hung upon the air, a fledgling bird among the memories of old da Vinci's antique aircraft dreams. I was warmed by the real fire of great birds of steel, and felt the floodgates of the vast and waiting universe swing open my soul.

There were great concussions at a distance: the furnace heat of Kennedy and its thousands of rockets, burning in towers all about. When the fires died at last, only a simple wind whispered.

Then, quickly and calmly, I descended into town, where a river flowed for me to walk upon, a moving sidewalk.

Shadows stirred all about me as I glided through architectural arches and doors. Where was I going? Not to a cold metal barracks for tired spacemen, no, but a beautiful, quietly programmed, machined Garden

of Eden. I was to attend an academy for astronauts to train for a great voyage beyond the stars, a mission about which as of yet I knew nothing.

Such a place is a world between: part meadow for mind, part gymnasium for flesh, and part theological seminary, reaching ever skyward in its thoughts. For does space not have the look of a vast cathedral?

So I walked among shifting shadows and entered the reception foyer of the school's dormitory. I registered by pressing my hand to an identity panel, which read my sweaty prints like some modern witch of palmistry, and instantaneously chose my roommate for my coming mission.

There was a buzz, a hum, a bell, and a voice—female, sibilant, mechanical—came from somewhere above: “Ishmael Hunnicut Jones; twenty-nine years; height, five-foot-ten; eyes, blue; hair, brown; bone frame, light. Please attend: floor one, room nine. Cubicle roommate, Quell.”

And I repeated, “Quell.”

“Quell?” another voice cried behind me. “My God, that’s terrible.” Yet another voice added, “God help you, Mr. Jones.”

I turned to find three astronauts of varying sizes and demeanors, all some years older than me, facing me, holding drinks. One was held out to me.

“Take this, Ishmael Jones,” said the first man, who was tall and thin.

“You’ll need it if you’re going upstairs to meet that monster,” he said.

“Drink up.”

“But first,” said the second, holding out his hand to stay my arm, “how do you fly, shallow or deep?”

“Why, deep, I think,” I said. “Deep space.”

“By the timid mile or the great light-year?”

“Light-year, yes,” I thought, then said.

“You may drink with us, then.”

The third man, who had been silent to this point, spoke up. “I’m John Redleigh. This fellow here,” with a nod toward the tall man, “is Sam Small. And he,” indicating the remaining man, “is Jim Downs.”

And so we drank. Small declared, “We give you permission to share our space, and also with God’s permission. Do you go to unravel a comet’s tail?”

“I think I do.”

“Have you searched for comets before?”

“Now’s my time.”

“Well said. Look there.”

The three men turned and nodded toward a vast video screen across the reception hall. As if aware of our regard, it pulsed to life, and displayed an immense photo of a blinding white comet pulling planets in its wake.

“The lovely destroyer of the universe,” said Small. “The eater of the sun.”

“Can comets do that?” I asked.

“That, and more. Especially that one.”

Downs said, “Why, if God should manifest here, He’d come as a comet. Are you one for jumping down the throat of such a holy presence, boy, and dancing in its bright guts?”

“I am,” I said, reluctantly, “if it should be absolutely inescapable.”

“Then let’s drink to him, aye, men? Let’s drink to young Ishmael Hunnicut Jones.”

At which moment I heard a faint electronic buzz, a pulse, at some distance. I listened, and the buzz grew louder with each pulse, as if it was coming nearer.

“That,” I said. “What’s that?”

“That?” said Redleigh. “That sound like a scourge of locusts in flight?”
I nodded.

“A scourge of locusts?” said Small. “That’s a fine way to refer to our captain.”

“Captain?” I said. “Who is he?”

Redleigh said, “Let it be for now, Mr. Jones. You’d best get to your room and meet up with Quell. My God, yes, go meet Quell.”

“From beyond the great Andromeda Nebula, he is,” Downs said, in a confidential tone. “Tall, huge, immense, and...”

“A spider,” the first mate interjected.

“Yes, yes,” Downs continued. “A vast, tall, giant green spider.”

“But...,” said Small, frowning slightly at his companions, “most benevolent. You will like him, Mr. Jones.”

And I replied, “I will?”

Redleigh said, “Get along. We’ll meet again. Go meet your spider roommate. Good luck.”

I tipped back my glass to take a last swallow. And then I turned, eyes shut, and said to myself, Luck. My God!

I touched a button beside a door panel that slid open, and I walked along a dimly lit corridor till I came to room number 9. I touched the identity pad and the door glided open wide.

But wait, I said to myself. I can’t go in. Look at my hands. Great God, they’re shaking.

I stood there, unmoving. My roommate was inside, I knew. He had come from a far world and was a giant spider, or so they had said. Hell, I thought, step in.

I took three steps into the room and froze.

For in the far corner of the cubicle there was a huge shadow. Something was there, but not there.

“It can’t be,” I whispered to myself. “It simply can’t be.”

“A spider,” something whispered from the far side of the room.

The large shadow trembled.

I flinched back into the doorway.

“And,” the whisper continued, “a shadow of a spider? No. Stand still.”

I stood still as commanded and watched as the room was illuminated and the shadow fell away and there before me was a great figure, a creature some seven feet tall and colored the most peculiar shade of green.

“Well,” came the whisper again.

I replied as steadily as I could. “What can I say?”

“Anything,” came the whisper.

“Once,” I replied, “I went to see Michealangelo’s David. It was tall. I circled it.”

“And?”

“You look to be at least as big around as that great work.”

I moved forward and began to circle the creature, which didn’t move. I was, nevertheless, trembling.

The shadows continued to melt, and the shape of the creature became more apparent.

“Quell,” came the whisper again. “That is my name. I have come a long way, some ten million miles and five light-years. Here on your world, judging by your size, I’d say your god has just one half-cracked eye awake. On our world, God jumped with a shout of creation, thus our great height.”

And the creature stood, even taller.

I stared at the face and said, “You—your mouth hardly moves.”

The thing named Quell replied, “But my thoughts move as do yours.

So,” said the creature, “tell me, Jack, would you slay the giant?”

“I—” I stammered.

“I read the beanstalk in your mind.”

“Damn!” I cried. “Forgive me,” I said. “This is my first meeting with a telepath.”

“Let me save you from damnation,” said my roommate. “Once more, my name is Quell. And yours?”

“You know my name,” I said. “You read minds.”

“But out of politeness,” Quell replied, “I pretend otherwise.”

The great creature reached down with one of his appendages. I put forward my hand, and we touched.

“Ishmael Hunnicut Jones,” I said.

“Well,” said Quell. “That name has traveled out of your Bible and into this age of space.”

“Which is much the way you’ve come,” I said.

“Five light-years off,” said Quell. “I was in deep freeze for five whole years, as cold as death. I slept the time away. It is good to be awake again. Am I not strange?”

“Oh, no,” I said.

“Oh, yes,” said Quell, with something like a laugh. “If thoughts fly, I catch them. That must be strange to you. And you must also be thinking that I have too many eyes, too many ears, far too many fingers, greenish skin—certainly strange. And yet I look at you and see that you have only two eyes, two tiny ears, five little fingers on each of only two hands. So then we are both—look at us—quite amusing. And both, finally...human.”

“Yes,” I said, seeing the truth in this. “Oh yes, that is human.”

Quell was provoked to some sort of humor, for he went on and said, “So now, Ishmael, shall I grind your bone to make my bread, or shall we be friends?”

I flinched, prepared to back off, but I caught myself and laughed instead, and said, “Friends, yes friends, I think.”

And Quell repeated, “Friends.”

Later we left our cubicle and went exploring, down into the lower levels of the immense academy.

We walked among the philosophical robots who sat silhouetted among firefly lights to speak in tongues from ancient times.

“Plato,” I said. “Aristotle,” I went on. “Behold us. What do you see?”

And the Plato robot said, “Two terrible and fine, ugly and beautiful children of nature.”

And Quell asked, “Ah, but what is nature?”

Socrates answered, sparks showering, “God surprising himself with odd miracles of flesh.”

And Aristotle, a strange little plastic robot, continued: “And theirs is nothing odder or miraculous, then.”

Quell reached out and touched my forehead with one of his long, finely tufted finger-legs and said, “Ishmael.”

I responded warmly, and touched the downy chest of my new friend.

“Quell, from the far islands of the great Andromeda Nebula. Quell.”

“We shall study together,” said Quell.

“Listen together, learn together, explore together,” I added.

And we did indeed listen to the voice of our robot philosopher teachers, who continued to speak in tongues various and strange during the next days, weeks, and months of our training. No one told us where we’d be going, what would be asked of us, or how long we would remain Earth-bound in these vast caverns of learning.

But finally the day came that the robot instructors’ talk, their babble, their murmurs, faded. We arrived at the lecture hall one morning and everything was still. On the video screen were our names, and the words, “Orders received. Report for duty.”

Quell observed, “Our studies appear to be at an end.”

“If so,” I said, “our life begins. Let us find our rocket.”

We returned to our room, where our orders were awaiting us. We collected our gear and, donning our jet-packs, rose into the air and

flew. The clouds gave way, the birds parted, and at last we landed at the great launching area of Cape Kennedy. We were surrounded by skyscraper gantries, gleaming rockets, the persistent buzz of intense activity.

I stared around me, stunned by the immense size of it all.

“Look, Quell, there, and there! Rockets! At least two dozen. Listen to the names: Apollo 149, Mercury 77, Jupiter 215. And there...”

Quell finished for me. “The Cetus 7.”

I stared at the gleaming cylinder, towering above all the other craft.

“The largest interstellar ship ever built,” I said, in awe.

Quell mused, “I wonder if, in their dreams, your Bach and Beethoven ever built such as these?”

A voice broke our reverie. “They did, oh yes they did.”

We turned to find an old man in a faded astronaut’s suit emerging from the shadow of a gangway. He spoke, saying simply, “Hello, friends.”

Quell must have scanned the stranger’s mind, for he replied, “We are no friends of yours.”

The old man chuckled mirthlessly and continued. “You’re quick to judge me, telepath. Be quicker still. Is the Cetus 7 to be your ship?”

“It is,” I replied.

The old man groaned. “Ah, you tread the rim of the Abyss. Pull back, if you know what’s good for you.”

Quell uttered a curse from his far world and pulled at my elbow. “Let’s go, Ishmael. No need to listen to this one’s false warnings.”

The old man pursued us. “You, young man, do you know that spaceship’s captain?”

“Not eye to eye,” I said, turning back, curious.

“Eye to eye! My God, you’ve touched the nerve. For when you meet him, do not look into his eyes. Be warned—he has none.”

“None?” I asked. “Blind?”

“No, stricken’s more the word. Burnt blind in space some years ago. Ah, but you knew it,” the old man said, turning to Quell.

“No, I did not,” said Quell, tugging at my arm again. “And we’ll hear no more from you.”

But the old man would not be silenced. “You’ve already heard it, my friend, for you have just read the whole inside of my mind. You’ve seen. Now tell your young friend what you’ve learned. Tell him what’s in store.”

I shook off Quell’s hand and stood waiting.

The old astronaut came closer and spoke very clearly. “What burnt the captain blind? Where? When? How? You may well ask. Was he a priest of space, chasing God, and God spun and struck darkness at him in one blow? Is your captain all in one smooth piece, or do the ragged edges show where he was sewn back up? Does midnight still peek out through those raw holes the doctors could not mend? Was he born an albino, or did terror bleach him like a terrible snow?”

I turned to look at Quell to see how he was taking all this, and the immense shadow that was Quell trembled in the sunlight but would not give answer.

The old astronaut, triumphant, moved yet closer.

“Now hear this. Aboard that ship, far out in space, there’ll come a time when you see land—a world on the horizon—where there is no land, find time where there is no time; when ancient kings will refresh their bones and reseal their crowns. Then, oh then, ship, ship’s captain, ship’s men, all, all will be destroyed! All save one.”

My hands were fists. I stepped toward the old man in anger, but he backed off to finish.

“Believe me. The Cetus 7 is no fair ship. It is its captain’s. And the captain is forever lost.” And finally he turned and started to walk away.

“Wait,” I cried. “Hold on. What is your name?”

The old man paused, as if searching for an answer.

“Elijah. Name’s Elijah. Good morning to you, friends, morning.”

He spread his arms and, a moment later, where he had been was darkness.

Quell and I stood, abandoned, as a swift shadow passed over us, and the voice came one more time from above, fading, “Morning, morning.”

Before either of us could say a word, there came an immense sound of thunder as a rocket, perhaps five miles distant, took off shuddering, filling the sky with color; the crimson and white flashes of ascension. As the sound receded, we became aware of sudden activity around us—the stirrings of technicians and robots and astronauts, the sounds of radios and electronic pulses, the shadows of rockets connecting to gantries, ready to lift into the universe.

Quell at last said, “It’s time to go. Our ship is waiting. Ishmael, attend, we must aboard.”

And so we continued on to the Cetus 7.

Chapter 2

Oh, the logistics of the rocket. Computerize the billion and one decisions. Ten thousand nursing bottles filled with super-homogenized gunk for space children. Fresh air produced by glass-enclosed botanical gardens. Sweat recycled into sweet water by machines.

Ring all the bells and klaxons. Flash the lights and prepare the thunders. Men and women run.

Quell and I stood by the gantry, staring up at the giant ship. It had been a week since our strange encounter with Elijah, seven days filled with intense activity as the Cetus 7 crew, of which we were now members, prepared the ship for voyage.

“Quell,” I said, “at no time in the last week, in all the rush and work, upon or around the ship, have we seen—blind or otherwise—the prophesied captain of our ship.”

Quell shut his eyes and cocked his strange head.

“Him,” he whispered.

“What?” I urged. “What?”

Quell murmured, “He is near.” And he turned and pointed up at the gantry. Its elevator was slowly rising and within the cage we saw a lone, dark figure.

“There is our captain,” said Quell.

The spaceman’s chapel. I had come to say a prayer before liftoff the next morning. Quell accompanied me, although I knew not to what god he prayed, if any. The muted light soothed our eyes after the blinding glare of the launching pad. Within the quiet and sacred space we stared up at the curved panoramic ceiling and there we saw, floating, the translucent shapes of men and women long lost in space. Soft murmurs emanated from them, a multitudinous whispering.

“And those? Why?” said Quell.

I watched the floating shapes and said, “Memorials, images, and voices of those who have died and are buried forever in space. Here, in the high air of the cathedral, at dawn and at dusk, their souls are projected, their voices broadcast, in remembrance.”

Quell and I stood and listened and watched.

One lost voice recited, “David Smith, lost near Mars, July 2050.”

Another, higher, softer, said, “Elizabeth Ball, adrift beyond Jupiter, 2087.”

And a third, sonorous, again and again, “Robert Hinkston, killed by meteor swarm, 2063, buried in space.”

Another whisper: “Buried.”

A further sound: “Lost.”

And all the whispers at once, repeating: “In space, in space, in space.”

I took Quell's arm and turned him toward the front of the chapel. "There," I said, pointing. "In the pulpit, at any moment, we will see a man who died nearly a hundred years ago, but so remarkable a man was he that they computerized his soul, tracked his voice, made circuitries of his merest breath."

At that, the lights rose to illuminate a figure that was rising behind the pulpit.

"Father Ellery Colworth," I murmured.

"A robot?" said Quell, quietly.

"Yes," I said, "but more. Before us is the gentle essence of the man." The lights dimmed somewhat as the incredible three-dimensional duplicate of Father Ellery Colworth began to speak.

"Is God dead?" he said. "An old question now. But once, hearing it, I laughed and replied: Not dead, but simply sleeping until you chattering bores shut up!"

There was a soft sound of laughter all around Quell and me, which faded as Father Colworth continued.

"A better answer is yet another question: Are you dead? Does the blood move in your hand, does that hand move to touch metal, does that metal move to touch Space? Do wild thoughts of travel and migration stir your soul? They do.

Thus you live. Therefore God lives. You are the thin skin of life upon an unsensing Earth, you are that growing edge of God which manifests itself in hunger for Space. So much of God lies vibrantly asleep. The very stuffs of worlds and galaxies, they know not themselves.

But here, God stirs in his sleep. You are the stirring. He wakes, you are that wakening. God reaches for the stars. You are His hand. Creation manifest, you go in search. He goes to find, you go to find. Everything you touch along the way, therefore, will be holy. On far worlds you will

meet your own flesh, terrifying and strange, but still your own. Treat it well. Beneath the shape, you share the Godhead.

“You Jonahs traveling in the belly of a new-made metal whale, you swimmers in the far seas of deep space, blaspheme not against yourselves or the frightening twins of yourselves you find among the stars, but ask to understand the miracles which are Space, Time, and Life in the high attics and lost birthing-places of Eternity.

Woe to you if you do not find all life most holy, and coming to lay yourself down cannot say, O Father God, you waken me. I waken Thee. Immortal, together we then walk upon the waters of deep space in the new morn which names itself: Forever.”

The congregation—above and below—softly repeated the word, “Forever, forever.”

There was a swell of soft music from somewhere in the heavens as Father Ellery Colworth finished, his figure went dark, and his silhouette was seen descending silently behind the podium.

In the long silence that came upon us I wept.

I lay awake that night in my berth aboard the Cetus 7.

Quell was already asleep. Rain patterns, simulated to aid slumber, fell on our faces and behind us on the wall.

The voice of a clock repeated, very softly, “Tick tock, two o’clock...tick tock, two o’clock.”

At last I spoke.

“Quell, awake?”

And his mind spoke to me silently from across the room.

“Part of my mind, yes, the rest sleeps. I dream of the old man who warned us.”

“Elijah? Did you believe him, that our captain is blind?”

“Yes. That much is common knowledge.”

“And that he is mad?”

“That we must discover for ourselves.”

“But by that time, mightn’t it be too late, Quell?”

The soothing rain patterns continued to fall on my cheeks and the walls. There was a faint rumble of thunder from beyond.

“Quell? What, is all of you asleep now? Good companion, lie there. Your body the strange color of a world I will never see. Cold blood but warm heart; your mouth silent but your mind, even in sleep, breathing friendship.”

Quell’s voice, within my head, murmured drowsily, “Ishmael.”

“Quell, thank God for you in the days ahead.”

From all around me Quell’s voice repeated, “Ishmael...Ishmael.”

Chapter 3

A voice boomed over the loudspeakers. “The captain is in quarters, prepare for countdown.”

The crew all hurried to their assigned stations, suited up and strapped in. The great doors were shut and sealed, the gantries rolled away, the engines fired up.

“Minus one and counting.”

We lay waiting for the fire-wind to seize and throw us at the sky. And seize and throw it did.

Oh my God, I thought. Help me to shout, “We rise, we rise.”

But silence took us, like penitent monks, to its bosom.

For even the thundering rocket, which rips the soul on Earth, walks silently some few miles high, treads the stars without footfall, as if in awe of the great cathedral of space.

Free, I thought. No gravity. No gravity! Free. Oh, Quell, I find it most pleasant to be...alive.

Safely in orbit, let out of our constraints, I asked, “And now, what do we do?”

“Why, collect data,” said one of the crew.

“Add and subtract constellations,” said another.

“Photograph comets,” said a third. “Which means, capture God’s skeleton in an X-ray.”

Another crew member said, “I grabbed a flash of those passing comets. From such huge ghosts of suns, I borrow cups of energy to power our ship. Sweet alchemy, my game, but fine fun pumps my blood. All round lies death, but I greet even Death with, look, this grin.”

It was First Mate John Redleigh. I touched a computer screen, which whispered his name, and I saw there his log of the first hours of our journey: August 22, 2099. Out of sight of land, yes, out of sight of the blessed land, which means all Earth and those we hold dear upon it. All faces, names, souls, remembrances, streets, houses, towns, meadows, seas—gone. All longitudes, latitudes, meridians, hours, nights, days, all time, yes, time, too, gone. Christ, guard my soul. How lonely.

And to me Quell set free his thoughts: “Friend, I read minds, not futures. Space is large. They say it curves. Perhaps our end is our beginning. Our destination: far, very far, three mystery comets to be found by us in one constellation. Chart their course and map their routes, take their temperatures.”

“How long will we travel?” I asked.

“Ten years,” came the answer.

“My God, how boring,” I said.

“No,” said Quell, “for see how your God sends His meteors to entertain us.”

“Meteor strike!” a voice cried. “Deck seven. All hands report!”

We ran. All ran to the sounds of bells and klaxons and worked to repair the ship’s hull.

And at last I stood, back inside the hatch, taking off my helmet along with the rest of the crew.

And so it went, day in, day out—our ship hurtling through space, each of us with his assigned task, measuring, scanning, calculating, plotting a safe course among the broken stars.

And yet, with all this happening, still, after forty days out in space, not once did we see our captain. He stayed locked up in his cabin. But sometimes, at three or so in the deep morning, I heard the hiss of the elevator shaft, like a long, drawn-out sigh, and knew he was passing, rising up from the interior living and work levels to the outermost deck of his great ship, restricted to all but our ghost leader.

We all listened and heard.

In private, Downs said, “What does he do, up there? I hear he suits up, goes out alone, tethered by just one line.”

Someone answered, “Fool, he plays games with meteors, reaching out as if to catch them, even though he cannot possibly see them coming.”

And Quell added, “He shows no trust in our radar screens. Blind, he thinks he sees clearer and beyond the human eye.”

“Sees what?” I asked. “Quell, you catch his thoughts. What?”

Quell was silent for a few moments, then said, “My mind hears, but the captain’s mouth must speak. It is not for me to say. When he finds what he searches for, he will let us know. He—”

Suddenly Quell put his strange hands to his face, and from far off we heard the captain’s cry over the intercom.

“No, no!” Quell yelled, and fell to his knees. He collapsed before us, and contorted one of his hands into a fist, eyes shut.

Quell shook his fists at the unseen stars. “Gah!” cried Quell, as if possessed. “No more of this, no more!”

And, suddenly, all was quiet. No sound came from the intercom, and Quell’s arm dropped to the deck. He stood, weakened, shaken by this strange thing that had happened.

I went to my friend. "Quell," I said. "Tell me what just happened. That was not you, was it? That was the captain. You knew the captain's mind, you acted as he did, yes?"

"No," said Quell, quietly.

"Yes," I insisted. "You have no reason to defy the stars. It was he who raised his fist at the universe."

But Quell refused to respond, turning his gaze upward instead.

From First Mate John Redleigh's log: Fifty days out. Correction: twelve hundred hours out from Earth. Student, do your sums. Computer, electro-psychoanalyze my soul. Thrust your finger, First Mate Redleigh, in a computer socket. What would you find? John Redleigh, born 2050, Reedwater, Wisconsin. Father, a maker of outboard motors. Mother, a baker of children, a dozen in all, of which the plainest of plain bread is old John Redleigh. Old, I say.

Old when I was ten, long gone in senility by thirteen. Married a fine plain woman at twenty-two; filled the nursery by twenty-five. Read occasional books, thought occasional thoughts. Ah, God, Redleigh, haven't you more to put in this damn machine? Are you so stale, flat, unbumped, untouched, unscarred, unmoved? Have you no nightmare dreams, secret murders, drugs, or drink in your soul?

Is your heart missing, the pulse spent? Did you give over when you were thirty, or were you ever more than a dry biscuit, an unbuttered bun, flat wine? Pleasantly sensual, but never passionate.

A good husband, fair friend, far traveler, without worry, coming and going so quietly that God himself never noticed. And when you die, Redleigh, will even one horn sound? Will one hand flutter, one soul cry, one tear drop, one door slam? What's your sum? Let's finish it. There, there it is: zero. Did my secret self put those ciphers there? Feed zero, get zero? So I, John Redleigh, sum myself.

“You there,” said Redleigh, as I passed him outside the door to the captain’s cabin.

“Sir,” I said.

“Don’t jump. What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be on the quarterdeck?”

“Well, sir,” I said, nodding at the captain’s door. “Six days. Isn’t that a long time for the captain to be shut in? I can’t help but wonder...Is he all right? I have an urge to knock upon his door.”

Redleigh regarded me for a moment, then said, “Well, then...”

I stepped quietly to the door and rapped upon it lightly.

“No, no,” said Redleigh. “Let me show you.”

And he stepped up and knocked hard on the door with his fist.

He waited a moment, then knocked again.

I said, “Does he never answer, then?”

“If he knew that God Himself were out here, he might venture forth for a chat. But you or me? No.”

Suddenly there was the sound of a bell, a klaxon, and from the intercom a voice spoke: “Hear this! Captain’s inspection. All hands assemble, main deck. All hands, Captain’s inspection.”

And we turned and ran.

All gathered, five hundred strong, on the main deck.

“In line!” called Redleigh, from the head of the assembly. “He’s coming, the captain is coming. Tenshun!”

There was a faint hum, a touch of electrical sound, which wavered like a swarm of insects.

The door to the main deck hissed open, and the captain was there. He stepped forward three steady, slow paces and stopped.

He was tall, well proportioned, and his uniform was completely white. The great shock of his hair was almost white, with faint traces of gray.

Over his eyes he wore a set of opaque radar-vision glasses, in which danced small firefly electric traces.

To a man, we held our breath.

At last he spoke.

“At ease.”

And, as one, we let out our breath.

“Redleigh,” the captain said.

“All present, sir.”

The captain traced the air with his hands. “Yes, the temperature has gone up ten degrees. All present, indeed.”

He moved along the front line, then stopped, one hand out, hovering near my face.

“Ah, here’s one who runs the very furnace of youth. Your name?”

“Sir,” I said. “Ishmael Hunnicut Jones.”

“God, Redleigh,” said the captain, “isn’t that the sound of Blue Ridge wilderness or the scarred red hills of Jerusalem?”

Without waiting for a response, he continued, “Well, now, Ishmael. What do you see that I don’t?”

Staring at him, I pulled back, and from the far side of my mind, in a panic, I whispered, “Quell?”

Suddenly I knew that if I should seize the captain’s dark machine electric lenses, behind them I would find eyes the color of minted silver, of fish that had never been born. White. Oh, God, this man is white, all white.

And in my head I heard Quell, a shadow upon the air: “Some years ago the universe set off a light-year immensity of photographic flash. God blinked and bleached the captain to this color of sleeplessness and terror.”

“What?” the captain demanded, for he had sensed our thoughts.

“Nothing, sir,” I lied. “And there is nothing I can see that you do not.”

I waited for his reply, but none was forthcoming. Instead, he turned and walked back to the head of the assembly and spoke. "How runs a ship in space, men?"

The crew murmured, and one replied, "With tight seams and oxygen suits at the ready, sir."

"Well said," the captain replied, and continued. "And how do you treat a meteor, men?"

This time I gave him the answer. "A seven-second patch and all hands saved, sir."

The captain paused at this, and then gravely asked, "Then how do you swallow a flaming comet whole, men?"

Silence.

"No answer?" thundered the captain.

Quell wrote invisibly on the air. "They have not as yet seen such comets, sir."

"They have not," the captain said. "And yet such comets do come by. Redleigh?"

Redleigh touched a control pad and a star chart descended from the ceiling before us. It was a three-dimensional work of art, a chart-maker's multi-textual dream of the universe.

The captain reached out a blind hand.

"So, here, in miniature, is the universe."

The star chart blinked.

The captain went on. "Will your eyes accomplish what mine, gone dead, cannot? From the regions of the Horsehead Nebula, among a billion fires, one special light burns. Blind, I feel its presence thus."

He touched the center of the screen. At that instant, a vast, long, beautiful comet was illumined before us.

"Do I touch the maelstrom, Redleigh?" the captain said.

"Yes, sir," replied Redleigh, as the crew whispered at the vast beauty revealed.

“Closer. Brighter,” commanded the captain.

The image of the comet brightened to an immense ghost.

“So,” said the captain. “Not a sun, a moon, or a world. Who’ll name it?”

“Sir,” said Redleigh, gently. “That is merely a comet.”

“No!” shouted the captain. “It is not merely a comet. That is a pale bride with flowing veil come back to bed her lost unbedded groom. Isn’t she lovely, men? A holy terror to the sight.”

We stood silent, waiting.

Redleigh, moving closer, said, “Captain, is that not the comet that first passed Earth some thirty years ago?”

And I, half-remembering, spoke and gave its name: “Leviathan.”

“Yes!” the captain said. “Speak up! Again!”

“Leviathan,” I repeated, wondering what was going on. “The largest comet in history.”

The captain whirled away from the star screen and turned his blind gaze upon us. “The brute chemistry of the universe thrown forth in light and trailing nightmare. Leviathan!”

“Was it not Leviathan, Captain,” said Redleigh, softly, “that put out your eyes?”

The men murmured and stared harder at the beautiful beast.

“But to give me great vision!” the captain said. “Yes! Leviathan! I saw it close. I touched the hem of its great million-mile-long bridal veil. And then that virgin whiteness, jealous of my loving glance, rubbed out my sight.

Thirty, thirty, thirty years ago. I still see it on my inner lids every night, so passing strange, so full of Arctic miracles, that huge white thunderhead of God. I ran to it. I offered up my fevered soul. And it snuffed me out! And then it ran, leaving me. Yet look.”

He touched the three-dimensional chart and the comet brightened yet again, loomed even larger.

“Leviathan returns,” said the captain. “I have waited thirty long years, and the moment has finally come. And I have chosen you, men, to be with me on this starship to rush and meet that downfall light, which having once doomed me now cycles round to doom itself. Soon, I will lift my hands—your hands—to make that strike.”

The men stirred, but said nothing.

“What?” the captain said. “Silence?”

“Sir,” Redleigh said, “that is not our mission, our destination. What of our loved ones on Earth...”

“They will know of it! And they will celebrate when we have bled this beast and interred it in the Coalsack Nebula burial ground.”

“But questions will be asked, sir,” said Redleigh.

“And we will answer those questions. And we will complete our mission. After we have dealt with Leviathan. We must learn the stuffs of pure destruction. Look on Leviathan! What is it? Some dread thing torn from out God’s throat when He knew darkness in His sleep? Gone evil with time, gone tired with creation, did God frighten up his bones and mind and lungs in one titanic seizure to cough forth this sickening? Who knows, can guess, or tell? All I know is that old curse and bled-forth wound now terrorizes space and ravens at our heels.

“Let us speak gently now. Wherever God now is, why, spring and sweet winds play. But with Leviathan, all dies and bleeds away. Great God, I worship thee. But thy old ailment comes to winnow me and split my bones and kindle up dead eyes to half an obscene light. So madness gives me strength for this last night. Insanity makes grasp both long and broad. Once clutched and killed, Leviathan, I will turn back to my God.”

We stood, as if spellbound.

Redleigh at last dared to propose: “This hell you speak of...is it quite that Hell?”

“Why,” said the captain, “there’s Death himself come round to even up old scores. God sums Himself on Earth four billion strong. But here’s

the beast to make that right go wrong. Within a month, this light-year creature, mid-Pacific, will submerge and murder all that's living on Earth."

"But our scientists, sir—" began Redleigh.

"Are blind!" yelled the captain. "No, worse! For even blind, I see! On other journeys, Leviathan missed our Earth by a million miles or more."

"And this time round," insisted Redleigh, "the calculations show that it will miss Earth by six times as much."

"Your wise men say Survival? I say Death," the captain roared. "Our funeral comes this way. Changed, pulled, put on new tracks by far dark worlds beyond our sight, put off by gravities of malice, Leviathan now veers to doom us. Does no one see or care?"

We in our ranks shifted uneasily. What our captain spoke seemed madness, and yet he was so sure, so strong.

"We must take care now," said Redleigh finally, "if what you say is true."

"Aye to that!" we yelled as one.

"Proof, now, Redleigh," said the captain. "Here are my charts." He pulled a slim disk from his coat and held it out in the direction of Redleigh's voice. "Computerize these as far as you or God can count and then beyond."

"I will take your charts, sir," said Redleigh, gravely.

"Quickly," said the captain. "Scan, study, see."

Redleigh turned the disk over in his hands.

"For there you will find Doom," the captain went on. "But, if serenity, sweet peace, and mild excursions are your findings, man...if you discover instead fair Heaven and find green Eden, say your say with graceful data! Play the computer. If your final tune is joy, I will accept it, and turn us back toward stallion and mare meadows and fine frolics; no remorse."

“Fair put, sir.”

“Where’s your hand?” said the captain, reaching out upon the air.

“Here, sir.”

The captain seized it. “Now man, attend. Here’s one who gives his palm on palm to me. May I beg hearts and souls from all the rest?”

“They’re here!” came all our voices.

“And all about!” I added.

“Aye and aye!” cried many voices.

The captain still held tight to Redleigh’s hand, binding him to his compact as he cried out a final oath: “Christ’s wounds swallow comets! Much thanks for that sweet sound. Men! Ours is a holy mission.

There will be none greater in the history of humanity, though our sands run forever through a glass as big as Creation’s landfall in far Centauri! We will save our Earth! Technicians, stand alert! Oh, men, Leviathan is a long white unhealed wound in space, a light that puts out light. Let us heal it forever. Ready the alarms. The first man who spots it gets double his pay for the journey! Squads, disperse. Fall out!”

The crew ran to their stations, all but Quell. Sensing that my friend was not with me, I pulled up short, and turned to see Quell, gazing at the captain with a look of terrible revelation. Redleigh, too, took note of Quell’s expression, and stood quietly beside the captain.

The captain, feeling the silence, said, “Dismissed, Redleigh.”

“Sir.”

And Redleigh turned and walked away.

“Ishmael?” the captain said suddenly. “Dismissed.”

“Sir!” I saluted to those blind eyes, and started to leave but hesitated to look back at the captain and Quell.

The captain sensed Quell drawing near. And yet Quell would not look at him. The captain raised a hand to touch the air near Quell’s strange green face. He seized his hand back as if it was half-burnt. Then he

turned and stepped back through the door leading off the main deck and the door whispered shut.

There was a long moment in which Quell's face gathered shadows of his own future. I could not bear to witness it.

And then I heard the voices of the crew, coming from all around, one by one.

"The comet Franciscus 12."

"Halley's comet."

"The comet of Pope Innocent the Third."

"The Great India comet of '88."

"The comet of Alcibiades."

And on the great star screen, one by one, I saw gigantic manifestations of comets, meteors, star clusters, all of "What is a comet, anyway?" I heard myself say. "Who knows, really," I answered myself. "Universal vapors. The mighty indigestion of our creator. Quell?"

Quell's thoughts touched mine.

"On my world, such comets are known as pilgrim visitors, far-traveling specters, haunters of the feast. You see? Our history has as much romantic nonsense as yours."

"Well, then," I said, "the captain has his reasons for seeking his comet, and we have ours. There's nothing like a riddle."

"A riddle," said Quell. "Let us sleep on that tonight. Perhaps in sleep, we'll dream, and in the dream, find an answer. A riddle. A riddle."

And it was in the midst of the night, while I slept, that I heard something stirring. Quell. I felt his mind move in mine and then, at last, his voice: "May all the men rise up and listen."

Then, not only in my mind, but with his tongue, Quell said the syllables that made "Elijah."

"Quell," I whispered faintly.

And then how strange it was, for it was not Quell's voice that I heard now, in the middle of the night, but the voice that spoke in his mind. It was the voice of Elijah, recalled.

"Oh, listen, hear!" said the voice that I'd last heard in the cathedral on Earth. "Aboard this ship, far out in space, there will come a time when you see land where there is no land, find time where there is no time, when ancient kings will refresh their bones and reseal their crowns."

"What's that?" I heard from some other room along the corridor.

"Shut him off, shut him up," cried another.

"No, wait, wait," I whispered.

And Quell continued with the voice of Elijah: "Then, then, oh, then, ship, ship's captain, and ship's men, all, all will be destroyed. All save one!"

"All?" someone said.

"Save one," said another.

"All will be destroyed," said Quell, with the voice of Elijah.

And then he sank back into silence and slept.

I turned over but could not sleep, and sensed my crewmates in their cubicles, up and down the corridor, sleepless till dawn.

The voice clock in every cabin ticked and named the hours and at last, with no sunrise, in our minds we saw a ghost comet loom in spirit smoke above the captain's bunk, and the captain mourned his own death in his sleep.

From the log of First Mate John Redleigh: Records dating 400 B.C. Rumors have it that Alexander the Great's death was predicted in the appearance of the comet Persephone. The comet Palestrina arrived in the year one; it may well have been the Star of Bethlehem. This much we know, but little more. The main material of a comet's body is methane gas and wintry snow, wintry snow.

Unable to sleep, I arose and left my bunk, drawn to the captain's cabin. From outside that sealed door I could hear his nightmares within. "No," I heard him groan. "No, no, I say. Get off. Go!"

A figure came along the corridor: Redleigh. I pulled back into the shadows as the first mate pounded on the captain's door.

"Captain?"

The captain called out from within. "What? What?"

"You were having a nightmare, sir," said Redleigh.

The door opened and the captain stood there, his white hair wild. "God, I dreamt I fell, I fell, down in space, forever. Let me grasp my soul."

"Ship's log to be signed, sir," said Redleigh.

"At four in the false morning? Good, Redleigh, something to keep me from my nightmares. I'll come with you to sign. How go the star computers?"

"They burn, sir, from overuse."

"You jump to prove me wrong?"

"You have said you were right, sir," said Redleigh. "I would prove that."

The captain stepped out of his cabin, and I moved back further into the shadows, even though he could not see me. They started down the corridor, toward the main deck, and I followed along.

"I know you, Redleigh. You have no heart for this chase, do you?"

"If by 'chase' you mean our proper business of charting stars and exploring worlds..."

"No, no! Here!" the captain said as he emerged onto the vast main deck, nearly empty now, and pointed toward the star screen. The three-dimensional display hung brightly on the air.

"What do you know of the passage of dark planets and bright comets?"

"I think you must teach me, sir," said Redleigh.

“And I will,” said the captain. “Here are a thousand thousand star-charts, stamped, runneled, and humped. Run your hand over this expanse. Touch the long mark of Halley’s comet; feel the heat of the comet of Alliostro Minor.

Here, the deep night plans for all God’s circuitings and maunderings, all his long thoughts. God dreams joy: green Earths appear. God suffers torments: Leviathan issues from the vast portal of His raving eye and mouth. It rushes here! I know a way to meet it head-on, fast, six weeks before it destroys Earth. We must move fast to surprise it.”

“Surprise?” Redleigh turned from the charts that hung so brightly on the air. “You cannot surprise a comet, sir. It neither lives nor cares.” “But I live, I care,” said the captain.

Redleigh shrugged. “And shift the burdens of your knowledge to some great wandering child, some universal accident that prowls the worlds, homeless for eternity. I—”

“Go on,” said the captain.

“Sir, if as the Reverend Colworth says, all space is one flesh with us, all worlds, suns, creatures extensions of one ground, one all-encompassing will, then that ghost you speak of, sir, that comet, that great terror-trailing monster, is but a true outmouthing of God Himself. Not his sickness and despair, but His bright will that lights the universal night. Would you stand against such breath?”

“If it wrenched my soul and burnt me blind, yes! Listen to the sound it makes this very hour, out beyond.”

The captain reached out a hand, touching a screen. A loom of energy wove immense sounds throughout the ship.

Nodding at this, the captain continued. “There’s the breath you spoke of. It is a cold thing. It is all the graveyards of history somehow put to space, and in its light-year shroud, ten billion on a billion men’s lost souls yammer for release. I—we—go to rescue them!”

“That sound is but a dumb thing, sir, mere chemistry born of chaos, now pulled by this tidal star, now hauled by that. You may as well stop your own heart as try to stop that great pale beating.”

“But if both stop at once?” said the captain, “will not my victory over it be as large as its victory over me? Small man, great traveling doom— both weigh the same when the scale is death.”

“But in rending it,” said Redleigh, in quiet desperation, “you rend your own flesh, Captain, which God has loaned you.”

“This flesh offends me!” cried the captain. “If it is all one, God manifesting himself in minerals, light, motion, dark, or sensible man, if that comet is my sister-self come preening by to try my Job-like patience, was it not blasphemy it first tried on me?”

If I am God’s flesh, why was I felled, struck blind? No, no! That thing is lost and evil. Its great face hovers in the abyss. Behind its mindless glare I sense the blood that oils the cogs of nightmare and the pit.

And whether I perceive all this in hellfire man, sweet blood-mouthed cannibal shark, or huge white blinding mask flung down among the stars to frighten men and push them to impulse much less than human, more than bones and soul can bear, I must attack. Talk not of blasphemy to me, sir. It tried me at breakfast. I will dine on it tonight.”

“Oh God,” whispered Redleigh. “Oh God help us, then.”

“He does,” the captain responded. “If we are His stuffs, alive, then we sinew His arm, thrust out to stop that light-year beast. Would you turn away from this greatest hunt?”

“I would,” murmured Redleigh, “and go to check my computers, sir.”

Redleigh turned to leave, but stopped when the captain said, “Why then you’re as mad as me. No, madder. For I distrust ‘reality’ and its moron mother, the universe, while you fasten your innocence to fallible devices which pretend at happy endings.

Lie down with machines, rise up castrato. Sweet Jesus, you'll make the pope's choir yet. Such innocence quakes my bones."

"Sir," Redleigh responded. "I am against you. But don't fear me. Let the captain beware the captain. Beware of yourself...sir."

And once more Redleigh turned, and this time he walked away.

Chapter 4

I backed off and returned to my cabin, deeply distressed. I barely slept the hours remaining till dawn, instead tossing and turning in my bunk, while Quell lay undisturbed, dreaming who knows what alien dreams.

At the first bell, I rose and made my way to the communications deck. There I found crewman Small, bent over his console.

"Do you know that a rocket feeds itself in space?" he asked.

"Feeds? What do you mean?"

"It wallows," he explained, "like a great fish in currents of solar vibration, cosmic rays, interstellar X-ray radiations. Ever hungry, we—this ship—search for banquets of shout and shriek and echo. I sit here, day in and day out, tuned to the great onrushings of space all around us. Most of the time, all I hear is variations of anonymous sound—hum and static and vibration. And once in a while, by accident...listen!"

He touched a contact and from the console speaker came voices—distinct human voices. He turned his face to mine, a strange light shining there.

As we stood, we heard broadcasts that had been made to crowds on Earth, to the listening ears of people two hundred years ago. Churchill spoke and Hitler shouted and Roosevelt answered and mobs roared; there were football and baseball games from long-ago afternoons. They rose and fell, moved in and out, like ocean waves of sound.

Small said, "No sound, once made, is ever truly lost. In electric clouds, all are safely trapped, and with a touch, if we find them, we can recapture those echoes of sad, forgotten wars, long summers, and sweet autumns."

"Mr. Small," I said. "We must trap these broadcasts so we can hear them again and again. Is there more? What have you found?"

"We have come upon a fountain of Earth's younger days. Voices from centuries past. Strange radio people, ghosts of laughter, political charades. Listen."

Small fiddled with the console dial again. We heard the moment the Hindenburg went up in flames. Lindbergh landed in Paris in 1927. Someone named Dempsey fought someone named Tunney in 1925. Crowds screamed in horror, mobs cheered. And then, it began to fade away.

"We're beyond them now," said Small.

"Go back!" I cried. "That is our history."

Another voice sounded from the console: "This afternoon at Number Ten Downing Street, Prime Minister Churchill..."

The captain strode onto the deck.

"Sir," said Small. "We have found a fountain of Earth's younger days. Voices from centuries past. Strange radio people, ghosts of laughter, political charades. Listen!"

The captain said, most sadly, "Yes, yes." And then, suddenly, "Small, Jones, leave that now. They speak but to themselves. We cannot play, nor laugh, nor weep with them. They are dead. And we have an appointment with the real."

Small reached again for the console dial, as a final voice announced: "Line drive! Mantle safe at first!"

Then, silence.

I touched my cheek to wipe away a tear. Why do I weep? I wondered. Those voices were not my people, my times, my ghosts. And yet once they lived. Their dust stirred in my ears, and I could not stop my eyes.

Suddenly, over the ship's intercom, a voice boomed: "Blue alert. All scanning stations. Visual sighting. Star sector CV7. Visual sighting. Blue alert!"

Quell and I stood before his viewing screen, stunned at what we saw there.

"Great God," I said. "What's that?"

"A moon," said Quell.

"Yes," I said. "But what a moon. It looks so old. Much older than our own, covered with towns, cities, ancient gardens. How long do you think that moon has been spinning in space alone?"

Quell consulted his instrument panel, and zoomed in the picture.

"Ten thousand times a million years," said Quell. "Oh lovely, lovely...the spires, the jeweled windows, the lonely and deserted courtyards filled with dust."

And then we heard Redleigh's voice: "Stand by! Diminish speed."

And then the captain's voice cut in: "Mr. Redleigh!"

"Sir, this moon! It's very old and fine. Our mission is to explore, to find, to report."

"Yes, Redleigh, I can hear it in your voice. It is a lovely lost and wandering world, an ancient beauty, passing strange, but pass it we must. Resume course."

And over the intercom came the order: "Resume full speed. Blue alert canceled."

The image of the lost moon, which had been projected on all the screens throughout the ship, began to pass away.

"Lost again," said Quell.

And once again, the ship was surrounded by black space.

Chapter 5

From Small's console came dim voices, cloaked in static, from untold miles away: "Lightfall 1 calling Cetus 7. Lightfall here. Inbound from twelve years out. Cetus 7, do you read?"

My God, I thought, another spacecraft.

Quell's voice touched my thoughts. "Impossible. In all these billions of miles of space. What are the chances of meeting—"

"Another spaceship?" I asked aloud.

"This is Lightfall 1," came the voice again. "Shall we hang fire, Cetus 7?" Men were running to the main deck from every direction, crowding around monitors.

"Cetus 7, request permission to approach, link, and board."

"Yes!" cried the crew.

"No!" thundered the captain.

"Cetus 7, please respond."

The captain instructed Small to open a communications channel to the other ship. "Lightfall 1, this is Cetus 7. Permission denied."

"Cetus 7— please confirm: permission denied? Do I read you?"

"You do," our captain replied.

"But my men, Captain, listen to them!"

And over the open communications channel we hear a grand clamor from the other ship, a few thousand miles off.

"Damned fools at nursery games," said our captain. "There is no time. No time!"

"Time?!" said the voice from Lightfall 1. "Why, for Christ's sake, that's all there is in space! God has a plentitude of time. And I? I am full of long years wandering and news of strange stars and terrible comets."

“Comets?” our captain cried.

“The greatest comet in the universe, sir!” said the commander of Lightfall 1.

“Stand by, then,” our captain said. “Permission to come aboard.”

We watched on the viewscreens as the Lightfall 1 approached. Both ships reached out mechanical arms and grasped each other as friends. There was a dull thunk as the linkage was complete, and within the hour the Lightfall 1’s captain stepped aboard the Cetus 7 and saluted.

“Jonas Enderby here, of the Lightfall 1.”

He stepped out of the airlock, and from behind him came a dozen or so crew members of the Lightfall 1—dark, light; male and female; short, tall; human and alien—glancing about them. We smiled in welcome, eager to hear their story.

Later, in the communal mess, Commander Enderby raised a glass to our captain, with whom he sat at the center table. “To your health, sir. No, mine. My God, it’s been nine months since I’ve had an honest-to-God drink. I’m with child! And that child is thirst.”

The Lightfall commander drank.

“More!” he demanded.

“More, yes,” our captain said. “And then speak.”

“Would you like to hear of comets?” said Enderby of the Lightfall 1.

“I am tuned to that,” replied our captain, a bright light glinting in his eye.

We all inched a little closer, as close as protocol would allow, to listen.

“God sickened in my face,” said Enderby. “I am not clean yet. For it was the greatest, longest, brightest—”

Our captain cut in. “Leviathan?!”

Enderby gasped. “You know it?”

“You tracked it then?”

“Tracked it, hell, it bled me white and cracked my bones!
I only just escaped with my life.”

“Ah,” the captain cried. “Do you hear, Redleigh?”

Enderby continued. “I do not mean to stretch the joke. It tried me, sir. It swallowed me, my ship, and crew in one great hungry gulp. We lived in Leviathan!”

“In! Hear that, Redleigh? In!”

The Lightfall 1 commander went on. “You do make it sound jolly, sir.” Our captain stood, all stony silence. “I meant no offense. Of all people, I well know...”

“And jolly it was!” Enderby continued. “What else can one do when stuck deep in the belly of the beast? We danced a rigadon in Leviathan’s gut!”

“And yet—you’re here!”

“Sir, it could not stomach us! We poisoned it with laughter. All round within it we rose, we fell, we rose again, mystified by Fate, hysterical with chance. We fired our laughs like cannons at its heart!”

The captain shook. “Laughter? Dancing?” he wondered.

And Enderby of the Lightfall 1 touched his right eye. “Yes! Though before it took us into its maw, it spoiled my sight and killed this eye. See? Pure forge-cast Irish crystal. Glass! I swear. Shall I pluck it out and play at marbles?”

“No, no. Let it be,” our captain said with a sigh. “I believe you.”

“I see you do,” Enderby replied. “Leviathan did blind me once, but completed only half the job. It would have destroyed my other eye, if it’d had the chance. But we raised such a riot that Leviathan suffered sickness and spat us out back unto the stars!”

Our captain seized Enderby’s arm. “Where?”

“Ten million miles beyond the outermost circumscape of Saturn’s transit.”

“Do you hear that, Redleigh?” our captain cried. “It is still on course!”

“Course?” The Lightfall 1 captain laughed. “What course? Do you think it knows what it is doing, where it is going? How can chaos be plotted, planned, coursed? Where is that gin? I need another drink.”

Redleigh stepped forward and doled it out.

“My charts are right and true,” said the captain, grabbing Redleigh’s arm and spilling gin in the process. “I will go to meet that ghost!”

“On my recommendation?” Enderby said, astonished. “Did I make it sound too bright? Hell.” He shook his head. “Here’s to caps and bells and rollicking tunes. Here’s to Leviathan and you, sir. May you cap its bile as it spits you out. God will that it may spit you out.”

“We must be away, and now,” the captain said, his brow glistening with sudden sweat. “All hands, on deck!”

Enderby stood and said, “But Captain, can we not stay a bit longer? My crew would do well for some more time with new faces, new friends, news of home. We are weary, and dry as sand.”

“My thirst is greater,” the captain thundered. “We must be off.”

Enderby drained his glass and slammed it on the table. “To hell with you, sir! Go on your fool’s mission, if that is what you choose.”

Enderby stood, and motioned for his crew to follow. They wound their way through the corridors to the airlock doors, donned their suits, and left.

In moments, Lightfall 1 and all its crew were gone, lost again to soundless space.

Chapter 6

Deep in the false night, our captain walked along the sleeping quarter corridors. Quell scanned his mind and spoke his words to me in whispers: ““What, pretending at sleep? Do that, and bite your bitter tongues, which hate me for spoiled games. But if Christ Himself walked through space this night—””

And Quell, speaking in his own voice, added: “Not Christ. But one of His lost shepherds.”

The next morning, Redleigh summoned Quell and me to Small’s communication console. There we met crewman Downs.

“This communication occurred last night,” Redleigh said, nodding at Small, who touched a contact on his console. We listened, and heard at first the usual static and pulses of space, and at last a fine voice began to speak.

“This is starship Rachel,” a far voice said. “Theological starship Rachel, the spacecraft of Pius the Wanderer, calling Cetus 7. Answer, Cetus 7.” And the captain, switching on, said, “Cetus 7 here.”

The mournful voice of Pius filled the air. “Have you seen a small life-rocket adrift? A space storm carried it away. Fine priests were in it, pacing that comet—”

“Leviathan?!” asked the captain.

The Rachel’s captain responded, “Yes! My son, my only son, good child of God, was on that rocket. Fearless, curious. The Great White Bride, he called it. He went to search the White Bride’s wake, with two other good men. And now I search for him. Will you help?”

“I have no time, sir,” said our captain.

“Time!” the Rachel’s captain cried. “Why, I’ve lost my whole life. You must help me.”

The captain spoke again. “Away! I go to redeem your son. God help you, Captain.”

The Rachel's captain, voice fading, said, "God forgive you, master of the Cetus 7."

And the recording went dead. We five looked at each other, stung by the exchange. I said, "So the Rachel, mourning her lost children, fell away and we move toward what, annihilation?"

My companions looked away, uneasily.

Quell spoke. "Mr. Redleigh, you sent for us?"

Distantly, an airlock door opened and somewhere, above, out of sight, we felt the captain's strange magnetic tread.

Downs looked upward and said, "Is it about him?"

"Him, and more," said Redleigh. "About clouds of old radio time that spoke in tongues, which we let pass. Fellow spacefarers travel-weary and lonely. Priest ships we refuse to rescue. Jobs left undone—"

Downs cut in. "But, sir, the captain has told us that this comet is our job."

"Well, then," said Redleigh, "here are the captain's charts. Leviathan will strike Earth, yes?"

"Yes," we all agreed. "Why, of course, yes."

"Here is Earth," Redleigh said, pointing at the chart. "Now, Downs, light its substance. Now, let us illuminate Leviathan, there. Move both Earth and white light on their ways, here, and see how they travel. The computer sums and keeps the score. There!"

The great star chart took fire. We saw our planet Earth. We saw the comet. Earth moved. Leviathan moved. The universe wheeled.

Leviathan rushed along space and Earth spun about the sun.

"There, see," said Downs. "A collision course! The comet will destroy Earth! Just as the captain said."

"No, it will not," said Redleigh.

And as we watched the unfolding of the great star chart, the huge comet streaked by without striking Earth.

“See, it goes,” commented Redleigh. “The comet continues on, leaving Earth untouched.”

We watched the comet fade.

Redleigh switched off the chart.

Downs spoke up. “Captains don’t lie.”

“They don’t,” said Redleigh, “unless they are mad. Then lying’s all the truth they know. Quell?”

We looked at Quell, who shifted uneasily.

“Quell knows,” said Redleigh. “Quell, these men are drowning. Give them air.”

Quell remained silent with his eyes shut and when he spoke, spoke only to himself. “O fathers of time, forgive me. Here,” he gestured, pulling us close into his spider arms. “Let me gather your minds. So. And thus.”

We felt our souls embraced. We looked up. Quell had gathered us and bound it to the soul and mind and voice of the captain.

From the uppermost deck of the ship, beneath the stars, we heard our captain cry, “I think I see!”

We were shaken, for we did hear him clearly, though he was impossibly far away.

Quell shook his head and pulled back and the captain’s voice faded.

“Quell,” I urged. “Go on! Please. We must hear.”

Quell gathered us to him again. There was fire in his eyes and strange green cheeks. The captain’s voice grew strong again as it moved through Quell.

“Yes, I almost think I do. Far worlds, long dead, break on these eyes with living sights, again, again, again, and say: ‘We live! Remember us! Oh, think on us. Our sins forgive! Our virtues celebrate, though flesh and blood, and blood’s sweet will are gone. And with it that despair called hope, which wakes us at dawn. Remember us!’

“You are remembered, though I knew you not. Your ancient plight inspires, your nightmare’s not forgot...I keep it here kindled with my own; your ghost of outrage I give flesh and bone; your spirit war moves my arm to smite; you speak my noon and instruct my night.

“As you to me, so I to other worlds will one day be when this night’s deeds, the things we say and act out on this lonely stage, one million years on from this hour will break and flower on some far shore, where such as you look up, and behold, and know our loss or gain, life’s wakening or death’s yawn.”

And again, quietly, our captain continued.

“So we, like they, pass on, forever ghosts, knocking at portals, prying at doors, speaking our actions, re-promising old dreams, welcome or unwelcome. Yet on we go, light-year on light-year, and no one there beyond to know. Thus they and theirs, and we and ours will shadow-show eternity, two films projected to opposite screens and nothing and nothing and nothing in between.

“I murder or murdered will be this night. But there, trapped and traveled in storms of light I am not yet born.

“O God I would be that child, to start again and, starting, know some peace on a clean baptismal morn.”

Quell let us go, dropping his arms, his eyes closed.

“Oh, God...,” Redleigh said, touched and anguished.

“God, yes,” said Small. “No more, no more of this. It must be stopped.”

Quell drew in a breath, and then again the captain’s voice came.

“Eternal noons, I asked, O Lord! Eternal midnight, my reward. O whiteness there! My pale and wandering lust. O spirit dread, stand forth! This time I will not swerve. My path is fixed beyond the gravities! Tracked like the worlds that fire about the sun, so runs my soul in one trajectory.

“Blind, my body aches and is one eye! I’ll weave eclipse to darken you who dared to darken me. Your veil will be your winding sheet. Your mindless gossamer I’ll bind to strangle you. Leviathan! Leviathan!”

We felt his hands reach out to grasp and hold and kill.

And, last: “Can I do this and bank my fires?”
Quell echoed, in his own weary voice, “Fires.”

And we were silent, standing there, and the captain said no more.

Chapter 7

At last Redleigh said, “Well?”
And Downs lifted his head and looked straight at the first mate and said, “That was unlawful, uncommon, criminal eavesdropping. We have no right!”
“Upon uncommon dangers!”

“Would you mutiny, sir?” said Small.
Redleigh pulled back, a horrified look on his face. “Mutiny?!”
Quell broke in. “He would...take over.”

And we answered mutely, with our own horrified faces.

Redleigh said, “Have you not just heard what is in his heart, what he intends to do?”

Downs replied, “We have. But those thoughts of the captain’s which we have borrowed...why, how do they differ from ours? All men are poet-murderers in their souls, ashamed to bleed it out.”
Small said, “You ask us to judge thoughts!”

“Judge actions then!” Redleigh responded. “Leviathan comes. We are changing our course to meet it. Someone has tampered with the computer—just twenty-four hours ago it said one thing, now it says another.”

Downs said, "And so it goes with machines. Astronomical sums are nice, but blood is best. Flesh is easier. Mind and will are excellent. The captain is all these. The computer doesn't know I live. The captain does. He looks, he sees, he interprets, he decides. He tells me where to go. And as he is my captain, so I go."

"Straight to hell," said Redleigh.

"Then hell it is." Downs shrugged. "The comet's birthing-place. The captain has the beast in his sights. I hate beasts too. My captain rouses me with No! And I am his dearest echo."

Little said, "And I!"

"Quell?" said Redleigh, turning to the green alien.

"I have said too much," said Quell. "And all of it the captain's."

"Ishmael?" said Redleigh.

"I," I replied, "am afraid."

Downs and Small stepped away. "Excused, Mr. Redleigh?"

"No!" shouted Redleigh. "Sweet Jesus, he's blinded you, too. How can I make you see?"

"It's late in the day for that, Redleigh," said Small.

"But see you will, dammit! I'm going to the captain. Now. You must stand behind if not with me. You'll hear it from his own mouth."

"Is that a command, sir?"

"It is."

"Well, then," said Small, "aye, sir."

"And aye, I guess," said Downs.

And the three crewmen walked away, Quell and me following, listening for the strange electronic pulse of the captain, near but far.

Chapter 8

"Mr. Redleigh, you have come to mutiny."

The captain had granted us entrance to his quarters and he stood within, facing us, his strange white eyes seeming to stare.

“Sir,” said Redleigh. “The simple fact is—”

The captain interrupted. “Simple? The sun’s temperature is 20,000 degrees. Yet it will burn Earth. Simple? I distrust people who come with plain facts and then preach calamities. Now, Redleigh, listen. I am giving over command of this spacecraft to you.”

“Captain!” cried Redleigh in surprise.

“Captain no more. You will take the credit for the grand destiny ahead.”

“I have no desire for destinies,” said Redleigh.

“Once you know it, you will desire it. You come with facts? Leave with more than that. Who has seen a comet up close?”

“Why no one, sir, save you.”

“Who has touched a comet’s flesh?”

“Again, no one that we know.”

“What is a comet’s stuff that we should run to welcome it?”

“To the point, Captain.”

“The point! We go as fishers with our nets. We go as miners to a deep and splendid mine of minerals both raw and beautiful. That school of fish, which is Leviathan in space, is most certainly the largest treasure of all time.

Dip our nets in that and bring up miracles of fish, pure energies that put the miracles at Galilee to shame. In that vast treasure house we shall unlock and take of as we will. There must be ten billion mines, so vast their glitter would burn your eyes. Such black diamonds fall from space each night, all night, throughout all our lives, and burn to nothing. We catch that rain. We save its most bright tears to sell in common markets most uncommonly. Who says no to this?”

“Not I—as yet,” said Redleigh, warily.

“Then siphon off the very breath of that great ghost. Its breath is hydrogen and mixtures of such flaming vapors as will light entire civilizations for our children’s children’s lifetimes. Such energy, harnessed, controlled, collected, kept, released, will work atomic wonders for our race, and cause such further wonders of recompense. I see rare bank accounts that will retire us all early, on to madness.”

“Madness?”

“The madness of pleasure and the good life and sweet ease. Leviathan’s breath and body are yours to bank for cash and credit. As for myself, I ask a single thing: leave its soul to me. Well?”

“Why, if that’s the sort of shower that falls from space,” Downs said, “I’ll run out in that rain.”

“Yes! As children run in spring showers!”

And I thought, His poetry has won me, but not his facts.

The captain now turned to Quell and said, “Good Quell, you read my mind. Are not fair weather there and rain and minted silver coins lost in a high new grass?”

And Quell had no answer.

“Redleigh?”

“Damn you, sir.”

“No sooner damned than saved,” replied the captain. “Salvation rings me in. Listen to its sound. Small? Downs?”

“Aye, sir!” said both.

“Quell? Ishmael?” A pause. “Your silence is affirmative.” And, turning to Redleigh: “Where is your mutiny now?”

“You have bought them, sir!” said Redleigh,

“Bid then, and buy them back,” replied the captain.

Later, in the privacy of my own bunk, I made the following entry in my personal journal: We have run from old radio voices, shunned lost moons with lost cities, refused to share glad drinks and fine laughs with lonely spacemen, and ignored rare priests searching for their lost sons.

The list of our sins grows long. Oh God! I must listen then, to space, to see what else is there, what other crimes we might commit in ignorance.

Putting the journal down, I touched a contact on the room's radio set. At first there was nothing but cold static and then came music, a symphony stranger than any I'd ever heard. I turned it up and listened with my eyes shut.

The sound of the music caused the sleeping Quell to stir. I switched it off, and from his side of the room came Quell's voice, urgent. "Turn it back on, quickly."

I touched the contact again, and the music returned. It was beautiful, a requiem for the living to be mourned like the dead. I knew it haunted Quell, for his mind now embraced mine.

"Oh, listen," he whispered. "Do you hear? Music from my far world." "Yours?" I said. "Billions of miles off? Oh, Lord!"

"Lord indeed," said Quell. "Music that has traveled all the way from my galaxy, and more. That is the music of my father's father's suffering and death."

The music continued to play, somber and funereal.

I felt tears sting my eyes for no reason, and Quell went on: "The dirge my grandfather composed for his own funeral, his great lament." "Why, listening," I wondered aloud, "do I mourn for myself?"

Then Quell reached out with an unseen hand and an invisible mind and spoke to Downs.

“Downs,” he said. “Can you put aside your ship’s tasks for a while and make me a special space suit?”

“I would, sir, if I knew how,” came Downs’s reply.

“I will draw it,” said Quell, “and give you the plan. Come here now.”

“Quell!” I said, alarmed. “What’s this about?”

I sat up, and saw Quell at his desk, his strange hand drawing a strange shape on the computer screen before him.

“There,” said Quell. “The proper suit, decorated with symbols of my lost world.”

“Is this to be your coffin, then?” said Downs, as he entered our room and looked at Quell’s plans.

“All beings in space suits inhabit future coffins of their own use and shape. This is but a darker thing. Cut it from night, solder it with shadows.”

“But why?” Downs wanted to know. “Why do you want a suit of death?”

“Listen,” I urged.

I turned up the otherworldly music. Downs listened and his eyes trembled and his hands began to move.

“God, look at my fingers. It’s as if they have a mind of their own. That dirge does this. Oh, Quell, good Quell, I guess there’s no way but that I must make this terrible suit.”

“Quell,” I interrupted, “that music has been to the far side of the universe and back. Why does it arrive here, now?”

“Because it is the proper time.”

“Quell!”

But silent, he sat there, staring in a fixed position at nothingness.

“Quell,” I urged. “Listen to me.”

Downs put a hand on my shoulder. “He doesn’t hear you.”

“He must feel what I think!” I replied.

“No,” said Downs. “I’ve seen the like before. Whether among the natives in the lost seas of Earth or the far side of space, it’s much the same. Death is speaking to him.”

“Don’t listen, Quell!” I said, and put my hands over his ears, which was stupid, for as Downs then said: “His whole body hears. How will you stop that?”

“Like this!” I cried. “Like this!”

I wrapped my arms around Quell and held him tight, very tight. Downs said, softly, “Let it be. You might as well try to breathe life into the white marble on a tomb.”

“I will!” I said. “Oh, Quell, it’s Ishmael here! Your friend. Dammit, Quell, I ask, no, I demand—let it go! This very instant, stop! I’ll be very angry with you, if this goes on. I won’t speak to you again! I’ll, I’ll...” And here I paused, for I could not breathe. “I shall weep.”

I was surprised by my own tears and pulled back to see them falling on my numbed palms. I held out my hands to Quell, showing him those tears.

“Quell, look, please look,” I pleaded.

But Quell did not see.

I tried to think what I must do.

And then I turned and stabbed at the radio contact on the console. The far funeral music died.

I stared at Quell and waited. An echo of the music lingered in the room.

“He still hears it,” said Downs.

Suddenly, breaking the silence, a horn, a klaxon, a bell, and a voice:

“Red alert! Crew to stations! Red alert!”

I turned and ran, following Downs along the corridor toward the main deck.

Reaching my post, I brought up the lights on the multilevel screen before me. A pattern of atomic light, many-colored, played before my eyes.

“What is that?” I wondered aloud.

Redleigh came to stand behind me, and posed the question,
“Leviathan?”

The captain approached with his pulsing electric sound.

“No. The great comet’s beyond, still some distance away. It sends a messenger ahead to warn us off. It fires a storm of gravities, atomic whirlwinds, dust storms of meteors, cosmic bombardments, solar explosions. Pay it no mind. That is but a mere mote of dust compared to Leviathan.”

I tuned into the sensors on my console, and it was as the captain said. Somewhere, nearly out of range, far off but approaching fast, was a behemoth of unimaginable size and power. Our spacecraft trembled.

Chapter 9

The trembling became more convulsive, the light on the screen more erratic. The sound grew loud, but, we knew, it was not the immense sound Leviathan might make when it arrived.

“Captain,” said Redleigh. “Permission to turn back. We’ll be destroyed.”

“Head on, Mr. Redleigh,” said the captain. “It’s merely testing us.” The storm on the screen rose and fell and rose again. And then, a sudden silence.

“What?” said Redleigh.

The captain said, “What, what, indeed!”

“It’s gone,” I said, checking my screen again in disbelief. “The storm that ran before the comet is gone. But what of Leviathan itself?” I ran some more scans, searching the vast expanse around our ship for hostile entities. “The comet! It’s vanished, too! It’s gone from the sensors.”

“No!” said the captain.

“Yes,” I said. “According to the readings, all the space around us is empty.”

“Thank God,” said Redleigh, almost to himself.

“No, I say, no!” the captain yelled. “My eyes see nothing. Yet—it must be there. I can almost touch it. I feel it. It is—”

A familiar voice broke in. “Gone,” Quell said, quietly, staring at the emptiness of space on the computer screen. “Gone.”

“Quell!” I cried. “You’ve come back! Thank God.”

Quell said nothing.

“Quell, what happened,” I asked. “Out there?”

Quell moved forward slowly. “The funeral music—it’s gone. Our traveling burial grounds, gone. The comet, the nightmare, all...gone.”

“Yes,” I said. “But why?”

Quell remained silent.

“Out with it, man!!” cried the captain.

Quell finally turned away from the screen and spoke to us. “That storm has wounded Time. We have turned a corner in Eternity. The very stuff of the void, the abyss has been...turned wrong side out...atom on atom...molecule on molecule...particle on particle reversed...I feel it...so.”

And Quell reached out a hand as if his mind had fled.

“It can’t be!” I heard myself say.

“So say I!” said the captain, disbelieving.

“Space says otherwise,” said Quell, calmly. “The storm has picked us up and thrown us back two thousand years. The past has become our present.”

“If this is now the past,” said Redleigh, “what year is it?”

Quell thought for a few moments. “Before Columbus? Yes, certainly. Before the birth of Christ? Most likely. Before your Caesar built his

Roman roads through Britain's moors, or Plato spoke or Aristotle listened? Maybe. That great star, the beast, it pities us."

"Pity?" said the captain. "How can you say pity?"

Quell searched through space with eye and mind. "It would not fight with us. Instead, it would hide us deep, so it would not be forced to war against us. It has given us a chance, a path away from it. That, sir, is pity."

"I will have none!" the captain said.

"Elijah," I whispered.

"What?" the captain turned toward my voice.

"Elijah. The day before our liftoff from Earth. Elijah said—"

"Said what?" the captain demanded impatiently.

"Far out in space, there'll come a time when you see land where there is no land, find time where there is no time; when ancient kings will refresh their bones and reseal their crowns..."

"Is that time now?" asked Redleigh.

And Quell replied, "Yes, now. For look. And...feel."

I finished the memory of Elijah's words: "Then, oh then, ship, ship's captain, ship's men, all, all will be destroyed! All save one."

All save one, I thought, as the captain exploded with rage. "Fools, damn fools!" he cried. "We do not take this past, accept these ancient years. We do not hide in pyramids or run from locust plagues to cower, grovel underneath the robes of Christ! We will stand forth."

He turned and strode toward the lift to the upper reaches. "The airlock, open it! Although blind, I will go forth and find the monster myself!"

Chapter 10

Quell's mind moved outside the ship to find the captain, alone.

And though I could not see, I heard, and what the captain finally said was this: “What? Nothing? All quiet, gone, spent? Is this the end? No more the hunt, the journey, and the goal? That terrifies me most: No more the goal! From here on then, what is the captain for?”

What does he do, if time and circumstance knock all the mountains down to one dull flat and endless plain, one long bleak winter afternoon, not even tea and simple bread to brighten it?

“Oh Christ, the thought of mindless noons that have no ends, or end in maunderings, stale tea leaves in a cup which tell no murders and no blood, and so no life—that breaks my bones. The sound of one leaf turning in a book would crack my spine.

One dust mote burning on a sunlit hearth would smother my soul. The simple things that snug themselves in halls too clean, too quiet, that lie in well-made beds and smile idiot smiles! Oh, turn away. Such peace is a winepress to crush your soul.

“And yet...God, feel...the universe itself fills me this hour with quiet joy. Unseen by me, there one small fire goes out, but yet another freshens itself forth in birth. It is my heart’s midnight, but yet some foundling sun reminds me that somewhere a million light-years on, a boy gets out of bed in cold well-water morn; the circus now arrives, a life’s begun with animals and flags and bunting and bright lights. Would I deny his right, his joy at rising to run forth and greet the show? I would deny, I would!

“But no, ah God, but surely no. It cracks my heart to think of him derelict with age, but would I warn him not to turn the page and let life begin?

“I would! Our very life’s a sin against itself!

“But then again, once more, I’d keep my tongue and let him play. Go, boy, I would advise, on some far world. Start up the day, spin forth your captured joys. O, know delight. Mind not on me. I stay here with my night.”

Suddenly Small was behind me, and reached over my shoulder to adjust some controls on the console. The screen came to life, and we saw the captain out on the hull, tethered to the ship by an airline.

Redleigh, similarly suited for space and tied to the ship by a line, hovered a few yards behind the captain. He had a weapon in his hand, but indecision showed on his face behind his airmask.

Quell's mind moved, searching, and he touched good Redleigh's mind and in his thoughts I read: "When he speaks so, what must I do? Destroy or not destroy? And even as he moves back and forth, from light to dark, his madness most inconstant, so my own sanity wavers. I would kill him. But then again, I would not."

"Leviathan!" yelled the captain at the black emptiness surrounding him. "Stand forth! You must be there!"

I heard his breath rasping in the silent void, as he waited for an answer that would not come.

"Oh, God," he continued. "Give me, oh give me back just one millionth part of all the visions of my youth. Restore my sight. For just one moment in this long night, give me the strength that vision gives to finish out this thing, see darkness with these eyes, know whiteness then for death, do justice with these hands! Give back, oh I beseech, I humbly ask, I do cry out, I pray!"

At this the captain spun around, as if he was about to fall in the zero gravity of space, as if the weight of all he had said was too much.

"Captain!" Redleigh cried out. "No!"

"But yes...it's given." The captain struggled to right himself. "Hold on, it's given back! My vision is clear. The universe stands right. I can see! The stars! My God, the billion stars, the stars!"

At which the captain wept.

Redleigh, seeing those same stars, spoke to himself. "Oh thank you, God, for miracles which teach. But then, I wonder, will he learn?"

"Who is that?" the captain said. "Redleigh? Is that you? My friend's face seen at last?"

He reached out and almost touched the faceplate of his first mate's helmet.

Redleigh responded, "It is the face of a friend. And this friend says, Turn back. There is still time. Time comes back to us. Your sight is healed. What more can you ask for now? It is a sign, a miracle. It is a true gift given you, sir. Now act on it."

"I will," the captain said. "Let me drink first. Let me look. Oh, Redleigh, it is like fresh mountain water. It is a cold, clear thing, this gift of seeing once again. Oh, God, the universe is lovely strange. I have hungered for it for thirty years. There is no bottom to my thirst. Let me stare. Let me truly stand alert. Let my eyes open wide, there, and yet more and more."

There was a soft pulsation of green and yellow light on the monitor before us, a far sound of bells and cries of murmuring waves and crowds.

I listened, close.

"Quell," I asked. "What is it?"

"Time," Quell said, "turns upon itself."

"Look, and feel!" the captain said.

And Quell told all that he felt and saw: "The knot falls loose...great Time unties itself. The years reverse. We have returned. Leviathan gives back our time and years. This is 2099."

"2099," the captain said. "Redleigh, did you hear?"

"Yes, Captain, yes!"

"We are once again in our proper hour! Two gifts, Mr. Redleigh. The gift of seeing and the gift of long-returning years."

"God is generous, Captain. He has corrected the calendar and touched your eyes."

“Would that that were true.”

“It is!”

“No, it only seems to be so,” the captain said. “Not God but the beast has made these offerings. It bribes me to stand clear. It sweetens me with banquetings of sight to mend my soul and fend me off.

That stuff is spoiled. Need be, I’ll now sew up these eyes or pluck them out with these two hands. I do not bribe. I do not take. I do not stay. If time is given me, I’ll use it to make plans. If sight is given me, I’ll use it well to mark my enemy’s burial place. Leviathan, thy gifts will be a sword into thy breast!”

“Captain, it says escape!”

“To what? To run to Earth and on the way have time reversed again so we are greeted by the bones of Charlemagne or fall dead with Caesar, bloodied in his forum?”

“Christ’s bones! God’s ghost, oh give me strength to pull this trigger.” The weapon Redleigh carried was now pointed directly at the captain. “You never will.”

“But if I could!” said Redleigh. “How fine to land back home and go with simple cavemen into a cave, live out a life less a nightmare than all this, lie down with saber-teeth, sweet Christ, and rest awhile.”

“We shall rest, Mr. Redleigh, at the dead heart of the comet.”

“I see,” said Redleigh. “Now I am dead. Let me put away my gun. Here comes Leviathan, to pick my bones. Shall I greet it, Captain, with you?” There was a great light, an immense sound, a fantastic approaching dazzle and splendor.

And Quell echoed, “To pick my bones.”

Chapter 11

“Sir?”

Quell came to attention as Downs came on deck.

“Sir, your suit is finished.” The engineer held out a suit made of some stiff black material.

“Much thanks,” said Quell. “It is a fine piece of work.”

Downs tapped on the metal carapace. “I am tempted to die and wear the damned thing myself.”

“Stick around,” said Quell. “You may get your wish.”

“Quell!” I said.

Quell stiffened, alert, turning toward me.

“You heard it all.”

“The captain,” I said, “has been given his sight, but is more blind than ever before.”

“And we shall share his blindness,” said Quell. “Look!”

The dazzling storm of light grew behind my eyes, where Quell had placed it. Likewise, it burst on the screens all around the deck.

“All hands!” the captain commanded. “Emergency life-suits on! Ready and stand by emergency life-craft! Redleigh, inside! All hands! All hands!”

The crew ran with eager shouts.

“Oh, yes,” I said to myself. “The comet approaches. And it is a great white holy terror that fills the universe and swallows every star. And look, my God, oh look! The crew! They run like children run at their games.”

“Listen to their thoughts,” Quell said, gesturing at the people rushing madly around us. “I give you leave. The hot blood rushes in their veins. Hear how they truly run!”

He touched my brow and their thoughts flowed into mine. I felt and heard the shriek, the joyous cry, the glorious wail and shout of men running downhill to doom.

The captain appeared among us, and all hands turned to him, faces flushed with anticipation.

“Have you ever seen the like?!” said the captain. “Oh God, that fire, brighter than ten million suns. Everyone to stations.”

“Aye aye, sir!” the crew shouted as one.

“Now,” said the captain by radio to the crew in their suits, “in each and every life-craft ship, know the engines of destruction. Draw on my hunger to devour this thing—make it yours! In each craft is a beam more powerful than any hell-fire laser ever built. Wider, longer, swifter, surer. Use that power! Fret the beast. Lay him waste. Life-craft One under command of crewman Downs?”

“Downs here,” cried the man. “Life-craft One ready!”

“Launch!”

I heard the first craft blast away, carrying Downs and his companion.

“Life-craft Two!” the captain shouted. “Crewman Small!”

“Small here,” a voice replied. “Life-craft Two...ready!”

“Launch!”

Concussion, and Small and his voice and his crewmate were gone.

“Mr. Redleigh,” said the captain, turning to his first mate. “The third craft is yours. Use it well.”

“Sir!” said Redleigh.

“Quell,” said the captain. And I saw that Quell had donned his black suit. “Quell, you go with Redleigh. Ishmael stays with me, here on the main ship. Stand by for launch of Life-craft Three.”

“Quell,” Redleigh said, as the two prepared to leave the main deck.

“You wear your suit of death.”

“It fits, Mr. Redleigh, it fits.”

“Will there be room for me?”

“Death,” Quell said, “makes a large coffin. We shall not knock elbows.”

“All right,” said Redleigh. “Then, on the double.”

Quell turned to me before leaving, as if to say something.

“Quell,” I said, “let me go with you. Captain? I must ask—”

But Quell cut in. “No. Stay. And live. You will live, you know, to be very old. I, who sees beyond, tell you this. Be old, Ishmael. Be happy. Dear friend, goodbye.”

“Oh, Quell,” I whispered. “Leave your mind with me, so we may be friends to the end.”

I felt his thoughts, his mind did linger in my ears and in my head.

“My mind is yours,” said Quell as he left. “Yours.”

A few moments later, the captain commanded, “Launch Life-craft Three!”

Redleigh’s voice came over the intercom, “Life-craft Three launching!”

Concussion. Quell and Redleigh catapulted into the universe.

“Ishmael, stand close,” said the captain.

“Sir!” I said.

“They fly,” the captain said. “There, see the life-crafts as they go.”

Watching the computer screen, we saw the craft, already far out beyond us, and heard their voices, mingled. And in those lonely craft, Quell, Redleigh, Small, and Downs. The voices said, “Craft One, full speed. Craft Two, full. Three, on target.”

“Oh, Ishmael, look!” the captain said. “That is the whole Antarctic continent, all white, and somehow hurled upon the universal air to shake our sight! Leviathan!”

“It’s too much!” I cried. “I cannot see!”

“Let it burn your eyes, as it burned mine,” the captain said. “We’ll still have hands to put it out!”

“Quell!” I shouted.

For I was hearing music: the music of Quell's ancestors, the funeral dirge of his grandfather. It was in Quell's mind, and somehow it came to me.

Quell's voice replied, long miles away: "I hear you, young friend."
"Oh, Quell, that music!"

"Yes," Quell said. "Leviathan has learned that tune...and plays it well."

And then the music was playing not only in my head, but coming over the ship's speakers—loud, crashing, melancholy waves.

Suddenly the captain said, "I'll stop that sound! I'll kill that thing! Crafts One and Two—destroy! Craft Three—destroy! Redleigh—destroy!"
And Redleigh's voice, in concert with the others, echoed back:
"Destroy!"

The music crescendoed—immense sounds and vibrations. It swelled and rose and fell away.

"Destroy and be destroyed," I said to myself, remembering. To the captain, I said, "Oh, sir, our ships are too small. That comet destroys them! I see the men's bones, as if on an X-ray. The laser-beam weapons they aim are no more than matchstick torches against that great hand of fire that closes in on them like a fist."

I watched as Life-crafts One, Two, and Three disappeared.

"There," I whispered. "I faintly see. My vision fades. The ships, one by one, fall, plucked free of skins, their metal skeletons revealed, the men tossed out in millrace radiation. Flashing meteors...all swallowed...vanishing."

"No, good Ishmael," came Quell's faint whisper. "We are gone, but we have each been thrown to a different warp in Time."

"The men in Life-craft One," I asked, "their weapons stilled, where do they go?"

Quell's whisper said, "Our friend Downs is sent to death, perhaps, and burial with Richard, mad lost king, on his green plain, his crown and blood tossed at his feet."

"The men in Life-craft Two spin further on. They drop, despairing, where?"

"In Illinois. Oh strange," came Quell's mute words.

"In Illinois, near the tomb where Lincoln sleeps. And Redleigh? Quell, what of him?"

"Still here. We know not where we go. This comet steers us. Time is its weapon!"

I turned to the captain. "Time," I said. "The comet has flung them throughout Time. Quell says Time is its weapon."

"As Time is mine!" said the captain. "My crew dispersed, my weapons gone, yet I have one huge weapon left, aboard this ship. Time! Time is all! So I have made an engine that, like Leviathan, can twist all Time like a spinning top. Now, with my vast machine we'll use the comet's power against itself. As in the Orient, we fall and take our killer with us, using all his weight for his defeat.

That mouth which would have swallowed us, we will cause to gape and turn about. What's larger than Leviathan? Eternity! The void! The dark abyss! The stuff between the stars! That is the mouth I use. My engine will open a seam in space and drop Leviathan in."

And in that instant, our captain played some keys of the main computer console and the engines of our rocket throbbed to hysteria.

"Leviathan," cried the captain, "meet Leviathan! Destruction, meet destruction! Comet, see thy mirror image! Annihilation, know annihilation!"

The entire universe around us shook. I heard Quell's voice as it faded among the stars.

"Oh, Ishmael."

“Quell!”

The captain’s voice was loud in that last great sound, and in that final moment he shouted, “What? My ship gone, too? Its flesh ripped free? Its bones strewn forth? Am I blind once more? Then blind, I seize on thee! Dead, I grapple with thee. Where is thy heart? Oh there, now there—I’ll stifle it. Oh damned and dread Leviathan, it comes to this!”

There was a final explosion—a great outpouring of shrapneled ship, lost humans, and wild beams. And I, thrown upward, floated in my life-suit above the wreckage, surrounded by mirages, dreams, motes, shadows, stars.

Gone, yes, all gone, I thought. Down the long black mineshaft of the universe, its bridal veil trailing despairs and woes, celebrating itself, a mindless mystery forever in motion, but...wait...now truly gone?

Gone all the ships, men, large, small, sane or mad, the captain with them, madness maddened. Did he open wide the seam, that strange vast hole in eternity he spoke of, and drop Leviathan in? And are they lost forever? Or will, I wonder, Leviathan return? Will he return in thirty years and bring with him all those who would have killed him?

Long years from now, will the monster and my mates slide down the length of the abyss, return as one at last...the hunter and the hunted, the feared and the fearer, the madness and the vaulting dream of madness, together fused forever through centuries yet unborn?

Will it all be here, will it all pass by when Earth is old and looks up to behold Leviathan, our ships, our crew, our captain—an endless cortege to the specter ghost?

A dark shape floated nearby, turning slowly. I recognized it as Quell’s funeral suit.

“Quell!”

I reached out and seized the suit, and turning it, found it empty. I spoke to empty space. "No, just the chaff, the husk. My good friend gone. Oh, Quell."

I embraced the empty suit and the lost funeral music of Quell's ancestors sounded once again in my ears.

Alone, I floated with the memory of good Quell, who had gone to be with comets and their gods. I drifted so, aimlessly, holding on to the suit, a strange life-raft, knowing the air in my life-suit would soon be gone. How long? I wondered. A day, maybe two...until...?

Above, I see a light, and hear a voice through static.

"Starship Rachel, this is starship Rachel..."

A ship, passing, investigating the wreckage, comes to pick me up at last. The Rachel, who, in her long search for her missing children finds but another orphan. I let the coffin go. I let the memory of Quell go to his light-year burial ground.

The drama's done. Only one remains. I, Ishmael, alone, am here to tell you this.

"Starship Rachel standing by. We see you. Come aboard. Come aboard."

The end