

# The Onlookers

by Mikko Tirkkonen

<http://www.lilwolf.biz/>

Released under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

The bright flash lit up the sky for a brief moment. It was like a star had let out its last breath before collapsing.

“That was a big one,” Markus said and sipped his beer. The lounge-chair underneath him creaked a bit as he adjusted his position.

“Sure was,” Satu agreed. It was a clear night sky. Away from the lights of the big cities the stars were clearly visible. “Probably a capital ship.”

“Yeah. The small ones don’t go out like that.”

A visible beam of red streaked across the sky. It ended in a brief blue flash. The pair turned their eyes to the TV in front of them. It offered a better view of what was happening. Strictly speaking the governments had banned direct broadcasts of what was going on, but when all it took was a moderate telescope to get a better view there was no stopping the broadcasts on the internet.

The feed they were watching came with a slight delay so they got to see the Alakon Swarm battleship fire its beam and follow it as it struck a Calmar Empire cruiser. The glow of its shields as it absorbed the beam were clearly visible in the image.

Had it not been so terrifying to watch it might have been beautiful.

“Good quality feed this one. Where did you find it?” Satu asked. She grabbed her can of beer from the small table next to her and took a sip. She relaxed back on her lounge-chair and enjoyed the cool breeze of the night. It was still hot enough that a t-shirt and a bikini bottom were enough for her. Save for the two, the patio was empty. The lights in the house behind them were out. The only source of light was the dim glow coming from the TV Markus had set up for them so they could enjoy the show fully.

“It was linked on a watchers website,” Markus replied. He reached for the bowl next to him and grabbed some chips to munch on. More beams of light streaked the sky. The beams were always spectacular. One of the few weapons used that actually could be visible with the naked eye. Mostly the two fleets were slugging heavy kinetic rounds at each other. Only someone with a good telescope could spot those at a distance that was farther than the moon.

The stream they were watching was good enough for that so they got to see ships firing big hunks of metal at each other.

"This has been going on for so long I don't even care which side win," Satu said with a sigh.

"Either way we lose," Markus said. "Still, I'd rather the Calmar's won. At least their intention isn't to eat us all."

"Just to enslave us. If we're lucky," Satu replied dryly.

"Let's hope they'll be fighting for many more years to come. Maybe they can get some good stuff out of that crashed ship so we can put up a fight."

"They can barely make out ten percent of what they're saying over open comms," Satu said. "I wouldn't count on them figuring out anything big."

"Well, they've been at it for three years. Don't see it coming to an end soon."

Satu had to nod in agreement. "Damaged ships warp out, new ones come in. Fighting rarely stops. How long was the biggest gap?"

"Four months," Markus said. "Some poor fools thought it was over and we'd been left alone."

Satu snorted. "They ain't leaving us alone. What we know is that for some reason our solar system serves a strategic point. Neither one is likely to give it up."

"Only good thing is they've mostly ignored us," Markus said as another ship burst into a bright flash on the TV. What had struck it had not been visible, but given the debris it looked to be a kinetic round. The ship's shields must have failed for it to get through. The round had to have struck a weak point in the armour for it to go out so quickly.

"They know we're here, watching," Satu said. "They must. Advanced as they are."

"We're not important enough to worry about," Markus said. "And they're right. What can we do? Our one station in space was wrecked by the battleship coming down. We know the Calmar Empire spans hundreds of systems. Who knows what the Alakon Swarm controls, but given that they're fighting on equal footing, they can't be that much smaller. We're just a single planet. We'd be like a slingshot taking shots at a modern tank."

A moment of silence passed between the two. They looked up at the sky from time to time before returning to the stream on the TV. A slurp as one of them took

a sip of beer and a crunch from the crisps were the only noises.

Another ship went off in a bright flash. This time it was an Alakonian cruiser. It wasn't necessarily the hit that made them go out in such spectacular manner. Often it was the crew that initiated a self destruct sequence. Why they had not done so on the crashed battleship was still a mystery.

There were those that claimed it proof they were not beyond making mistakes. Others argued they had sent it down intentionally. The fact the mile long ship coming down had levelled an entire city there was some credence to that idea.

"Small miracle we're still here," Markus said after a while.

"It got bad at the bigger cities. Made it look hopeless," Satu said. There had been riots, protests, looting and anarchy. Plenty of people had died when the government cracked down. Some religious leaders had gone off the deep end and proclaimed the end of times. There had been a string of suicide cults that had enacted their final plan.

It had been a big mess that had cost a lot of lives.

After two years things had calmed down somewhat. Panic had been replaced with dull acceptance of the situation. Those that had expected the world to end had egg on their face or they had killed themselves. Talking heads on the TV interviewed experts on the effects a prolonged uncertainty of the fate of the world could have and how to deal with it. Reports of heightened suicide rates played right after that. Reports of protests, some demanding peaceful outreach to the alien forces, others demanding a military solution to defend against them.

Political leaders wiped sweat off their foreheads every time a camera was pointed at them and questions were asked. They rarely had a good answer to anything.

"Well, neighbour Bill had the right idea. Dig a deep hole in the ground, gather supplies, weapons and ammo and hole up." Markus raised his beer and took a sip.

"Ain't no way to live that," Satu said.

"Beats being eaten or enslaved," Markus reminded her of the possible outcomes of the aliens turning their attention from each other and towards the

lone planet.

“Makes you wonder if there are any good aliens out there,” Satu sighed. It was an often repeated wish. Everyone knew Earth stood no chance on its own. The only hope was finding another equally powerful race to assist in the inevitable fight against one of the races fighting in the sky above.

Scientists had beamed messages into space in the hopes someone would hear. There had been no reply. Whether there would be in time was unlikely given how slow radio waves travelled.

“If there are they might well have been killed off by either of the two up there,” said Markus and pointed to the night sky with his beer. He then took a sip from it.

“A grim view,” Satu said. Not that she was surprised. Her husband had never been an optimist.

On the stream it looked like the two fleets were drifting further apart. The fire being exchanged was starting to slow down. Then ships from Alakon Swarm seemed to be turning around and running for it.

“Well, that seems odd.” Markus finished off his beer and looked up. Right as he did that the sky above changed. The stars disappeared.

“Markus?” The distress in Satu’s voice was thick. She was looking up just as he was, but she was pointing at something. Markus followed her finger and found what she was so worried about.

It was a massive ship that had blocked the stars.

In the darkness it was hard to tell what shape it was or what it was doing, but it was obvious it was moving. Taking position above the planet.

“That’s not good,” Markus said. He turned his attention back to the stream on the TV. It had focused on the massive ship as well, but it couldn’t get much better pictures of it due to lighting. It did show four pillars moving apart at the bottom of the ship. As they opened a light was revealed. Minute by minute it grew brighter.

“I guess this is it,” Satu said.

The two sat in silence and waited. After ten minutes they started to grow restless. The light had reached a constant brightness and didn’t seem to change

at all.

“Maybe it isn’t the end?” Markus asked as they looked on up at the massive vessel in the sky.

“Put on the actual news. They must have something running on this,” Satu suggested.

Markus did as told and switched the TV off from the less than legal stream and turned into a reputable news channel. They were showing footage of the vessel as well while they had newscasters in a smaller image at the bottom right.

“Turn up the volume.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Markus replied, but did as told so they could hear what the official truth was at the time.

“Whether to launch a nuclear attack is currently being discussed by the world powers,” the news anchor said. “Some argue it hasn’t worked before so why bother? If the vessel leaves and doesn’t harm us then we will be left with a planet that has radiation falling to the ground from the skies above.”

“I’d argue that’s better than getting eaten. Bet those swarm things won’t like irradiated meat,” Markus muttered.

“Hush,” Satu said. She was glued to the screen.

The newscasters seemed confused. They were clearly receiving some new information from the production team.

“One moment, please, we’re receiving some new information,” the news anchor said and looked focused on listening to what ever voice was whispering in his earpiece. “We are being told that the vessel is broadcasting a message on various frequencies. Unbelievably, the message is in English. We hope to have the audio for you in just a moment.”

“Is there anything about that on the site?” Satu asked.

Markus had pulled out his phone and was already searching. Someone must have posted the frequency already. The news were always behind on the internet folk. Still, they were ahead of his phones internet speed.

“We have the audio for you now. This is live and unedited.”

There was a brief silence before the audio started playing. The voice that came on sounded like it was being generated by a machine. Some words had odd

pronunciation and it lacked the natural pauses a real person would have taken.

“..of Earth. We received your plea for help. Your enemies are our enemies. We are here to help. The struggle the galaxy faces has stretched us thin. We only have a brief window here. We have sent our most powerful weapon to secure your planet. An unbreakable shield will be put around your planet. No one will be able to touch your planet, but you will also be cut off from the rest of the universe. It is our hope that some day the threat will have passed and we can work on bringing the field down. In the mean time your species will survive. That is the best we can do right now. We hope you survive the isolation. It will take one rotation of your planet for the weapon to fire. May the light guide you.”

The audio went silent.

Markus and Satu exchanged looks. The look of utter surprise and shock was obvious on both of them. Markus looked like a fish out of water as he tried to form words, his mouth opening, then closing and opening again and then deciding the words weren't right.

The newscaster on the screen looked as surprised as the two did, but he had a measure of professionalism to him so he kept talking and telling the viewers they were reaching for comment from various governments.

“Being confined to this planet isn't so bad,” Satu managed to say. “It's how things have been so far.”

“But we've gotten a peek beyond the door,” Markus countered. “Things aren't the same they were before that.”

“What we saw is terrifying,” Satu reminded him. “Being cut off from all that, safe on our own planet, it feels like a great deal.”

“I bet there are still people who want to nuke that thing out of the sky,” Markus said and looked up again. The light had not grown stronger, but it was obvious the vessel was gathering up energy for the shield deployment. He wondered how that even worked. How did you put a shield around a planet and claim it unbreakable? There had to be some machine that kept it running. If that was the case then the machines could break and the shield would come down.

Admittedly, such things were far beyond what his mind could comprehend. He suspected that would be the case for many of the brightest scientists on the

planet. The relatively simple ships shooting at each other were beyond their current comprehension, after all.

“You think a race powerful enough to build a machine like that would be able to fight those two on even terms,” Markus said.

“Maybe they’ve tried and lost,” Satu suggested. “Maybe they have other things to worry about as well. The message did say there was an galaxy wide struggle. Something more could be going on than what we see in our tiny window.”

“Fuck this situation,” Markus muttered.

A silence came over them. The news kept playing. Politicians were looking like deer in car headlights as they were being questioned by reporters. The answers they were giving told they didn’t know what to do. The nuclear option didn’t seem that popular amongst them. Some looked relieved about the prospect of being locked away from the rest of the galaxy. Others worried the talk about a shield was just a cover to keep the planet from using force. Some pointed out, rightfully, that if the vessel was capable of deploying such a shield, what would a couple of nukes do to it? Nothing. Of course it would be protected.

Neither Satu nor Markus envied them for being in positions of power.

“Going to be tough to sleep tonight,” Satu said and looked up at the sky.

“Might be better to just sleep through it all,” Markus said. “Just wake up. Or not wake up.”

“I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep at all with that thing in the sky,” Satu said. She was focused on the news. There was a constant flow of new information, new comments and takes on what was going on. It was addicting to stay on top of it all. She also had her phone out and when the news on TV entered a lull, she was browsing various discussion forums to see what regular people were saying and thinking of the situation.

“I guess I’ll go put some coffee on,” Markus said when a lull came on the news.

“Oh, yes, please,” Satu said, looking down at her phone.

The pair continued to keep up with reactions around the world. A hot cup of coffee gave them energy to stay awake far into the night, right up until the first

rays of sunlight started to creep over the horizon. It was then that Satu fell asleep. Markus just pulled a blanket over her and let her sleep in the lounge chair. Looking up at the sky it looked like it would be a cloudy day. It was surreal to see the huge vessel peek through the holes in the cloud cover.

Keeping up with the news had become a chore and the lack of sleep was making his vision blurry. Markus decided to lean back in his lounge and close his eyes for a moment. It wasn't his intention, but within minutes he was fast asleep.

He woke up to Satu poking his cheek with one finger.

"What's happened?" Markus asked, sleepy and blinking furiously to try and shrug away the remnants of sleep.

"We fell asleep," Satu said and smiled at him. Her hair was a mess and she looked like it had not been that long since she had woken up herself.

"Shit. What time is it?" Markus asked and sat up. Looking up into the sky he could see the vessel was still there. The light was much brighter now, easily rivalling the sun that was setting down.

"Five hours until the moment of truth," Satu said. Her stomach growled.

"Shit. We slept most of the day. What did we miss?"

"Not much it seems," Satu said. "They decided not to try nukes. They decided it was too much of a risk in case it failed and they still shielded us. Not a good start to our prison if we irradiate it for nothing."

"True that," Markus agreed.

"Plenty of panic still. People hoarding food and supplies. More so than usual. I don't really know why. Either we'll be dead in five hours or life will go on."

"Panicked people don't think straight," Markus noted. "If the shield goes up pretty much nothing will change in practice. The only thing will be the knowledge we're not alone in the universe, but we can never go out and explore it. This planet is all we'll ever get."

"Yeah, there's going to be food on the shelves tomorrow too," Satu agreed.

"I could sure use some in my stomach right now," Markus said and stood up. His knees let out a pop as he stretched, as did his shoulders. He could feel the soreness of sleeping outside on a lounge.

The two went inside the house to do just that. A meal later, a shower as well as some time following news they still had a few more hours to kill. Sex ate up an hour of that. They figured one last hurrah would be worth it just in case the alien weapon would annihilate the planet instead of protecting it.

With twenty minutes left before the moment of truth they were back out in the lounge chairs. Markus had a cold beer in one hand and his other was in the bowl of chips that sat on the small table between them. Satu had a glass of sweet white wine and her phone in one hand. The sky had cleared, giving them a good view of what was about to happen.

“People online are getting nervous,” Satu said. She scrolled through messages on a forum that had been very active in following the situation.

“Can’t blame them,” Markus said. “I’m feeling nervous too.” He took a sip of his beer. “This helps, though.”

“It’s going to be fine,” Satu said as much to calm herself as to try and reassure Markus. She had nothing to back up her opinion, but she refused to believe the world would end in just a few minutes.

The pair sat in silence. The light from the vessel was so bright now that it was hard to look at. It illuminated everything below it in an eerie green light. Surprisingly, the fighting in the solar system seemed to have ceased. What ever the third alien race had done to draw out the other two had worked. Their vessel had been left in peace to do what ever it was going to do. The news had reported that it had several escort vessels, but those seemed to be there just to buy time and not really take on a full fleet of enemies.

The pair waited. The television was on and there was a big counter running. Watching the seconds go down was getting more and more difficult.

“Feels almost like New Year’s eve, doesn’t it?” Satu asked.

“I bet the fireworks will be better,” Markus replied.

The last minute started on the counter.

Both turned their eyes towards the sky. The light grew brighter. Neither one could directly look at it. It grew even stronger before finally it started to shoot down towards the ground. It was a constant beam. For a moment it looked like it would hit the ground and pile right through the planet, but then it hit something

high above. The light spread out across the sky like a wave washing ashore. It flowed like there was a solid surface holding it up. It was a breathtaking sight and some might have even said it was beautiful had it not been so terrifying to witness.

“What is it hitting?” Satu asked. Her voice wavered.

“Not the atmosphere,” Markus noted. “Far too high up for that.”

They watched the green blanket spread all the way to the horizon. It completely blocked the view into space. It looked like it would even block the moon from showing in the night sky.

“At least they didn’t blow us up,” Markus said as the show ended from their vantage point. There were streams all around the world that showed the green blanket wrap around the planet. The pair switched from stream to stream so they could see the shield engulf the entire planet.

“At least there’s that,” Satu agreed. “Still, I have this odd feeling of loss. Like I’ve lost something I wasn’t even fully aware was there.”

“I know what you mean,” Markus said and took a sip of his beer. “I feel it too. I can’t really put my finger on it. Maybe it’s just knowing there’s no chance of us exploring space any more. Not even sending a probe to other planets or moons in our solar system. Completely cut off. Maybe we can still have satellites. The shield seems to be far away enough to allow for that.”

Satu was looking down at her phone. The internet forums were on fire. She had half expected everything to go down when the shield was deployed, but it was looking like the impact was minimal on just about everything. Electricity was still being delivered, water was running and the internet was still functioning.

There was plenty of speculation and she was devouring every last bit of it she could get her hands on. “They’re speculating that the shield hit the planet’s magnetosphere. That it’s somehow drawing power from that. So as long as the planet keeps spinning with its molten core the shield will be there.”

“Internet forums will be full of ideas. Doesn’t mean any of them are correct,” Markus reminded her. “Whatever that thing is and where it gets its power. I doubt we’ll know for certain even decades from now.”

The two watched the now faintly green glowing night sky. There were no

starts to be seen. Their fear of not seeing the moon was alleviated. The familiar object was there, but it had the same green tint that everything else had.

“Looks like it isn’t blocking out all light,” Markus said and pointed to the Moon.

“We’d all die if it did that, wouldn’t we?” Satu asked.

“Yup.”

“Still, looks like it’s not letting all the light through. Wonder what that’ll do.”

“Might actually save us if it does that,” Markus said. “Losing a bit of the power from the Sun might counter all the climate change crap that’s looking to doom us.”

“Well, there’s no more escaping that,” Satu added and sipped her wine. “No escaping to Mars if Earth gets fucked. Those dreams are dead and buried.”

“We’ll make do,” Markus assured her. “This should serve to wake people up. This place is literally all we have now.”

“I wouldn’t count on that,” Satu muttered. She looked up at the sky and sighed.

“What is it?” Markus asked.

“This green glow is going to take some getting used to.”

“Probably going to be a lot of things that’ll get some getting used to,” Markus said and looked up at the sky as well. If the shield really was impenetrable, he had to wonder what would be getting through. Light from the sun? Heat from it? Would the gravity pull of the Moon be lessened? That could really mess with the tides and wildlife. Would the shield let light bounce back into space? So many questions.

He decided to satisfy some of his curiosity and flipped through some streams on the television. He found one where it was daylight. He was relieved to see that sunlight made it through the shield, though the blue sky had turned more cyan.

“That looks so alien,” Satu commented from next to him as the sky filled the screen.

“It does,” Markus agreed. He couldn’t shake the uneasy feeling the sight gave him. He hoped it would dissipate over time.

“Well, it’s what we have now,” Satu said, sounding resigned to the situation.

She offered her wine glass towards Markus. "A toast for the new world?"

Markus smiled and brought his pint to her wineglass. The gentle ding rang out as they collided. "To the new world."

They both took a big gulp of their drink of choice. The sky above cast its eerie green glow on them, reminding them how the world had changed.