

## Planet put under the gaze of Damocles



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THE first arrival had appeared as a steadily brightening light in the eastern sky, and had approached with an increasing intensity over almost two weeks. To the general population it had seemed, at first, nothing more than the usual amount of activity within the solar system caused by space debris which would inevitably burn out in the upper atmosphere as it approached. There would be a brief and spectacular light show, and then everyone would go back to whatever it was that they had been doing before its arrival. This time, however, it was different.

The object slowed its rate of approach and came to rest at a distance of about 1,000 miles from the surface. It was still too far away for the amateur astronomers to make out any details, but all governments' resources had been trained upon it since surveillance satellites orbiting the planet had detected its signature more than a month earlier. At a hastily convened conference, leaders of the major powers met to decide upon the best means of approach to an alien vessel which had clearly come in response to a variety of mechanised probes launched throughout the previous millennium.

Amidst growing concern, and a disturbingly agitated set of demands from the hawks amongst the gathering, a decision was taken to step up the global security level to 4, one mark short of a war footing alert. Those members with positions on the Security Council were more cautious in their approach, and a proposal was carried to increase communication attempts on all of their known channels to the "visitor". Initial radio messages had gone unanswered, but experts in universal language techniques had been working night and day to refine all programs in order to widen the range. For the moment, all inter-racial disputes were forgotten, and weaponry of every kind was on the move to positions of maximum effect.

As more and more attempts at reaching out were seemingly ignored, a sense of panic began to spread insidiously. Like some airborne viral infection, it afflicted everyone but the fanatically religious within days. Those sects took to the mountains in celebration of the fulfilment of ancient prophecies laid down in all of the sacred texts. All differences now forgotten, they proclaimed the return of the messianic being promised to them millennia before.

The disappearance of the vessel was sudden and unexpected. The initial outpouring of general relief amongst the global population was shared by neither those of a religious persuasion, who saw it as nothing more than a delay in the inevitable, nor the government leaders attending the initial conference. Amidst all the general rejoicing there was an ominous calm along the planet-wide corridors of power, and despite repeated media requests for comment, no leader could be persuaded to voice an opinion. All global satellite surveillance equipment remained on full alert and focused in the same direction as the first approach. They waited.

After the initial frenzy had died down, a period of something approaching apathy descended across the globe. It was not until the end of the sixth lunar cycle that alarms began to sound around all continental defence databases, now internationally linked in anticipation of further incursions. High-powered radio telescopes, situated outside the limits of the atmosphere, had

been upgraded to scan even further out into space. Without the distorting effect of atmospherics, their sensor arrays were able to pinpoint the approaching fleet, accurately determine its distance, and provide an ETA for surface defence installations.

This armada consisted of over 100 vessels of varying size and type. Once again all attempts at communication were, apparently, ignored. Governments on the surface, now ready for a repeat of the earlier visitation, were less inclined to be patient a second time around. Broadcasting a message on all of their available frequencies and in all then known languages, both verbal and electronic, a warning was delivered to the fast-approaching flotilla. When it too went apparently unanswered, an alert was issued and all nations went to war readiness.

The fleet deployed itself outside the atmosphere and at equidistant points around the globe, forming a network driven from a large "mother ship" some further distance away. Many hours were spent in surveillance on both sides and, as yet, there had been nothing from the visitors to indicate any kind of hostile activity. Once more the population of the planet held its collective breath as their leaders pondered the most effective way to alleviate the threat without involving total annihilation.

Hours turned into days, and days into weeks, as both sides studied each other. Then, a call from a mountain-top observatory in the southern hemisphere reported a type of scanning beam moving across the entire planet. There did not appear to be any threat contained within what appeared to be a type of sensor sweep, but a volley of missiles left their bunkers from another location and headed for the nearest vessels. They never got there. At a distance of around one thousand metres they disintegrated harmlessly against a protective barrier around each ship. There was no retaliatory action.

The sweep continued for two further days and, as before, the vessels departed the solar system, leaving leaders and governments alike in utter bewilderment. Without effective means of defence they would have been an easy target for a hostile force, and yet this seemingly superior race had simply gone away. This time they did not return, and as all defence systems were given the directive to stand down, an international period of thanksgiving was declared amongst a now unified race.

Analysis of the data from the fleet's central computer system had been started as soon as the command for departure had been given. Admiral Johnson, commander-in-chief, chaired a meeting of senior staff officers aboard the flagship Damocles to discuss the findings of both the initial scouting mission and its subsequent follow-up.

"So, what you're saying, Captain Hancock, is that we had no choice in the matter."

"That's right sir. They are clearly far too dangerous a race for us to even consider as neighbours."

"Pity. We need another site and the fourth planet would have suited our requirements. Terraforming would have been essential, of course, but that would not have taken long, and the effects on the third planet would have been negligible at worst."

"So there really was no alternative, sir."

"Indeed, it would appear not. Sad as it is, our needs outweigh theirs in the final analysis. We gave them every opportunity after the initial shots had been fired. Are you certain that there were no signals from the surface?"

"Yes sir. Our computers were monitoring all of our known frequencies and languages – there was nothing. It is just possible that their atmosphere could have been blocking signals, but our science team discounted that eventuality."

"And yet they chose to open fire on us without the slightest provocation."

"Yes sir. The dispersal ray was the only answer in the end. We could not justify the risk to our own people in either a landing party or a violent conflict. In 60 days their ozone layer will be completely removed and the ultraviolet effect of their sun will carry out the job for us."

"And how long before the planet is inhabitable again?"

"Left to its own devices, our best estimates are between five and ten years, but we can reverse the effect of the dispersal artificially in around six months. In that time we can commence the terraforming of the fourth planet. There are traces of primitive plant life, so we should be able to generate a breathable atmosphere within a relatively short time."

"Good. Report back to Earth that we have been able to find a suitable home. They'll be more than pleased; how long until the sun goes supernova?"

"Best case scenario? Ten years but we need a complete migration well before then."

"All right, set course for home. We'll come back in two months to complete the job. This will be the Damocles' legacy for the future of mankind."

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