

Bombardment

They felt the first impact before they heard anything.

“Cynthia, get down,” David said. “This is it.”

He crouched behind the seats on the podium, reached up and pulled Cynthia close. She wrapped her arms around him, buried her face in his chest. He held her tight.

The first meteorite fragment crashed onto the grounds outside the still-packed auditorium. David could see it scored a direct hit on one of the television broadcast vans. The uplink had been severed twenty minutes earlier, evidence of satellite destruction some twenty-four thousand miles out. He figured the speed of these things must have been about seventy-five thousand mph when they hit the atmosphere, where they broke into thousands of smaller fragments.

The lights flickered, but held for the moment.

“Oh no,” Cynthia said. “Where’s dad?”

“He’s over there behind the front row of chairs,” David said.

Cynthia lifted her head to look just as another fragment came down, only this time it hit the building. It crashed through one of the large east windows. Most of the remaining audience had moved toward the center of the building, away from the windows.

Several women screamed. The fragments of glass and window structure flew into the crowd, propelled with the intensity of an explosion. The meteorite fragment slammed into the floor of the auditorium at about a forty-five degree angle, digging a hole the size of a soccer ball.

The lights in the auditorium went out at the same time. Another fragment must have hit a transformer on the campus. The street lights were still on. The television broadcast van burst into flames. The eerie glow of red and orange flames danced through the now empty window frame, highlighting a scene of terror and confusion.

“David, some of those people are hurt,” Cynthia said.

“I know, but we can’t move yet. Keep your head down.”

David reached back and put his hand behind Cynthia’s head, pulling her face back into his chest. He felt her trembling. He wished they had something more for protection.

“There’s more?”

“After they break up in the atmosphere, these things come down in swarms of dozens, sometime hundreds of pieces at a time.”

He looked toward the window at the end of the hall, the one over the main entrance, just in time to see another meteorite hit. This one angled more from the southeast, larger than the first one to enter the building. An unusual blue glow accompanied the shock.

Not only did this fragment decimate the window as it entered the building, it also blew out a chunk of the surrounding structure. Glass, rock from the building and the meteorite, now shattered by the impact, sprayed the crowd with devastating precision.

David watched in horror as dozens of people were hit by the flying debris. The chairs behind which they hid were no protection. Pieces of rock and glass ripped through them as if they weren’t there. There was no way even he could comprehend the enormous power of something travelling at the atmospheric drag reduced speed of thirty-thousand miles per hour.

Cynthia screamed, along with just about everyone else in the auditorium. The sound of the crashing glass and rock drowned them out. Pushed by the force of the blast, David rolled

backward off the end of the podium, Cynthia still in his arms. The curtain behind the podium came partially down, enveloping them as they fell the five or six feet to the floor. David winced at the impact, grateful for the falling curtain cushioning the impact.

Like bullets from a machine gun, pieces of rock and glass ripped into the remaining curtain above their heads, right where they had been crouching just a split second before. The rest of the curtain fell on top of them. David didn't dare move.

In the dark, the moans and groans of the injured agonized David's ears. He wanted to get up and help them. These were his colleagues, his friends. But Cynthia needed him more. She had landed on top of him, the curtain covering them both. David felt her body quiver. He heard her cry out, her breathing hard and shallow.

"Will it never stop, David?" He felt her arms tighten around his neck.

David didn't have time to reply. Another meteorite fragment hit the building, again from the east. Although he couldn't see it, David could tell this piece was bigger than the others. His ears rang from the deafening sound of the impact. It must have hit at least one more window, or maybe it was so explosive it blew out all the remaining windows.

Glass and rock rained down on them. The curtain had bunched up in such a way they could only feel the largest pieces as they fell after hitting the wall above them. They were well protected in the small space between the podium and the wall where they had fallen.

Just as suddenly as it had started, it stopped. Sirens wailed from police and fire trucks all over the city. The sounds seemed surreal and unrealistic to David. His ears still rang from the many explosions. He felt something wet on his leg, wondered what it was. His heart beat fast.

"Cynthia, are you all right?"

"Yes, I think so." Her voice trembled, but David was happy to hear it.

“We’ve got to find Dad,” she said and began the struggle to untangle them from the curtain. Pieces of rock and glass were mixed in with dust and, something wet and...fleshy.

“I’m glad I can’t see what this wet stuff is,” Cynthia said.

“Cynthia, don’t get your hopes up. Before the lights went out I saw some awful things out on the floor.” David finally got the rest of the curtain off them. They stood up.

“Don’t say anything. Please don’t say anything. Just help me find Dad.”

“OK, take my hand and don’t touch anything. Do you still have your shoes on?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll go first. Be careful where you step.”

Making their way to the side of the podium was difficult with the curtain bunched up. On the way, they ran into Stan Johnson – literally. He also had fallen behind the podium and had been spared from the onslaught of glass, rock and body pieces.

“David, is that you?” Stan asked. He sounded relieved.

“Yes, and Cynthia is here with me.”

“Are you two alright?”

“We seem to be,” David said. “How about you?”

“If I hadn’t fallen into the curtain, I would probably be dead.”

“I think we were lucky,” Cynthia said. She stepped ahead of David, reached out to Stan.

“Will you help me find my dad?”

“I was talking to him before the first meteorite hit,” Stan said. “He had just walked down off the podium and was talking to someone in the front row.”

“Dad,” Cynthia shouted.

“Professor Volinsky,” David joined in. “Where are you?”

Moans, groans and calls for help emanated throughout the auditorium. It was still dark with only the light from the fires outside to guide them. Even the street lights were out. David could make out the shapes of others wandering around looking for loved ones. Who would have thought such destruction could take place *inside* such a large facility?

The trio rounded the front corner of the podium, still calling for Manny.

“Don’t look, Cynthia,” David said. He took the lead, stepped over a dead body.

“I can’t see anything anyway,” Cynthia said. “I’ve got too much dust in my eyes.”

David pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and turned to Cynthia.

“No, don’t. Not now.” Cynthia took a step back, held up her hands. “I’m OK. I’ve got to find dad first.”

“Here. Take it,” David said, pressing the handkerchief into her other hand.

“Doctor Volinsky,” Stan called out again.

“I’m right here. Don’t shout.” Manny’s voice sounded muffled.

“Dad,” Cynthia cried. “Keep talking. We can’t see you.”

“That’s because the lights are out.” His voice seemed to come from their feet.

The three of them bent down. David reached out with his hands but felt nothing.

“Under here,” Manny said. He knocked on the wood of the front of the podium.

“How did you get behind there?” Stan said.

“I have no idea. One minute I was talking to Professor Hansteen about Birkeland’s Currents and the next thing I knew, we were both under here.

“Must have been the same blast that knocked us into the curtains,” David said.

Cynthia pulled at the wood. “Don’t move. I’ll see if I can find an opening.”

“Careful. Watch out for glass,” Stan said.

“I’ve got David’s handkerchief.”

“If you’ll just go a little to your right, I think there’s a broken panel.”

“Here it is.” Cynthia tugged on a handle. “David, help me move it out of the way.”

It took all three of them, tugging and pulling, to finally get the wedged panel unstuck.

Once removed, Manny and professor Hansteen scrambled out. They all stood.

“Oh, Dad,” Cynthia embraced her father. “I’m so glad you’re alright.”

In the absence of light, David and Stan patted Manny and Professor Hansteen in greeting.

A pair of small emergency lights on either side of the hall flickered on.

Cynthia put her hand to her face and stifled a scream.

“Oh, my God,” Stan cried out.

A scene of death and horror met their eyes. There had been thousands of people in the auditorium for the presentation. Very few had left in the twenty minutes after the transmission ended before the first meteorite fragment hit.

Most of the chairs and people had been pushed toward the west side of the hall by the force of the blasts. Severed heads and limbs along with burst torsos washed against the wall. Tables and chairs, flying instruments of death, poked out at crazy angles among the bodies.

The blood ran in rivulets over the crushed and mangled pile of bodies in the corner. It pooled on the dust covering the carpet. David estimated several hundred dead at first sight. Those not killed wandered aimlessly, some with severe lacerations, others hardly a scratch.

Cynthia wept openly. David wrapped his arms around her as she sobbed.

A man with a huge gash on his forehead was trying to punch numbers into a cell phone he held in the hand of his obviously broken arm. A woman pushed a chair in front of her as she hopped and dragged a broken leg behind her. She seemed determined to get to the back exit.

Stan ran to her and tried to grab her arm, but she fought him off.

“Please...let me help you,” Stan said.

He finally convinced her to sit in the chair and wait for help.

“There won’t be any help,” David said when Stan came back.

“What do you mean?” Cynthia said, composed and gathered again.

“There are too many scenes like this all over the city.” David said. “Think of the movie theaters, restaurants and malls. What about the people at the baseball game, in the hotels, the homeless on the streets, the tourists and the private homes? They’ll all need help.”

“He’s right,” Stan said. “There’s little we can do for all these people. “Even if we could get all the injured into the cars and limos, we’d find the hospitals swamped.”

“Besides,” David said, “I doubt we could get through. Too many roads are destroyed with bridges down and chunks taken out of the street.”

Cynthia turned to her father. “Isn’t there anything we can do?”

Manny squinted his eyes, pointed to the far side of the hall. “Is that Elena?”

“Yes, it is,” David said, peering in the dim light. “Look at her go.”

Elena had organized a few of the uninjured men around her. They were digging through the rubble, pulling out tables, setting up a temporary triage area.

“You two go help Elena,” Manny said. “Stan, let’s see if we can find some of the staff. They can’t all be dead. We need more help... and tablecloths to wrap the dead.”

Cynthia and David ran to Elena, hugged when they met.

“Oh, David,” Elena said. “I’m so glad to see you.” She squeezed him tight.

“How did you survive, Elena?” Cynthia said, touching Elena’s arm.

“I was in the restroom, Elena said. “It completely missed that part of the building.”

For the next few hours, David, Cynthia and Elena worked beside Stan, professor Hansteen and dozens of others who were unhurt. They wrapped bodies in tablecloths, dressed cuts and applied splints. There wasn't much else they could do but they did their best.

At nearly 2am David looked up to see Manny slumped on a chair, eyes glazed over, arms loose at his sides. "Cynthia," he called out. She looked at David. He pointed to Manny.

Cynthia rushed over to Manny, "Dad, are you all right?"

"We can't do any more. We have to let someone know there are dead to be picked up."

"It will probably be the military that gets that assignment," David said.

"This is only the first wave of destruction," Manny said. "There's more on the way. When the planet gets closer, the electromagnetic discharge will dig up huge chunks of earth."

"I'm so sorry, Dad," Cynthia put her hand on his arm. "I'm so sorry I never listened."

"Electric discharge machining will excavate the earth's surface in many places, ejecting material into the atmosphere. It then falls back as dust, sand, gravel, and finally boulders."

"How much time do we have?" Cynthia asked.

"It should all be over in seventy-two hours," Manny said.

"Seventy-two hours," Cynthia said. "Where can we go to be safe?"

"To the subways, along with everyone else who thinks of it," David said.

Cynthia looked to David, then back to Manny, who had that faraway look in his eyes.

"And they shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of his majesty, when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth."