

## The Warning Voice

Manny plugged his tablet computer into the podium connection. Displayed on the large screen behind him appeared the sun in the distance, a large planet between then with the earth in the foreground. The perspective came from a space-based telescope, positioned at a Lagrange Point, at the right spot in space to keep it balanced between the gravity of the two.

The image showed a trail of dust. It spewed from the planet toward the earth. David felt vindicated. Any input device plugged into the podium also appeared on the broadcast feeds in the video control vans. The whole world could now see the image if the network engineers selected it, which most of them did. David saw the image on the monitors next to the TV crews.

The scientists in the room quieted down. A moment ago they called for someone to eject Manny. A “nutcase” they called him. David smiled, grateful his assistant pulled off the wireless connection in time. A small digital clock counted down to zero in the bottom right corner of the screen. It displayed less than thirty minutes to go.

Cynthia leaned over to David, whispered. “How...”

“It’s complicated. I’ll explain later,” David said.

Several scientists in the room asked the same question loud enough for those around them to hear. “How does he have access to that video feed?” They understood this technology. After all, they used a similar hook-up every night in their work to access remote telescopes around the world. This image came from a space telescope unknown to most of them.

It appeared obvious to David the first salvo hit the mark. Manny had their attention for at least the moment. “Go,” he whispered loud enough for Manny to hear.

“This is a live shot of the planet that came from behind the Sun,” Manny said. “You can see by the clock we have less than thirty minutes before the tail will envelop Earth’s magnetic field in its embrace.”

“Tail,” one of the scientists said. “What do you mean tail? A minute ago you called it a planet.” Except for this lone scientist the room remained quiet, mesmerized by the image on the screen. David looked at the faces in the room. Mouths dropped open, not an eye blinked.

“Yes, tail,” Manny said. “When a planet gets this close to earth, there’s a magnetic or plasma interaction which flows between the two bodies.”

“Wait a minute,” a second scientist spoke up. “That’s not a planet.” David sensed a break in the momentary spell their feat of technological marvel had created. The doubt of the academic world reared its ugly head once again.

“How far is it from the earth?” a third scientist asked.

Another added, “The Roche limit should tear it apart, whatever it is.”

“Even when you see with your own eyes, you won’t believe,” Manny said. David sensed Manny’s exasperation.

“Keep your cool,” David whispered. “Explain it to them. You helped me understand.”

Manny took a deep breath, let it out slowly, “There are other forces in the universe far more powerful than gravity. The plasma exchange between these planets began weeks ago.”

One of the scientists started to object, shushed by some of the reporters around him. “Let the man speak. Can’t you see we don’t have much time?”

David smiled. He reached over, tapped Cynthia’s shoulder. She looked up at him; eyes round, mouth open. “Didn’t I tell you?” David thought he saw a smile on her face before she turned her attention back to her father at the podium.

Manny continued, “What’s on the display is indeed a planet. It’s not a comet, not a meteoroid, not an asteroid. It’s a planet. It displays many of the same characteristics of a comet. You see the tail.” He let the words sink in. David sensed the professor’s confidence increase.

“Our ancestors witnessed similar sights. They worshipped them, especially when the distance between them grew smaller.” Manny adjusted his stance at the podium, warmed up to deliver a familiar lecture.” The anxiety in David’s gut eased then stopped.

“Do you realize we’re the first generation in thousands of years to see this sight again?” Manny pointed back to the screen with his left hand, kept his eyes riveted on his audience.

David could see some of the monitors used by the camera crews off to the side. One displayed a split screen image of Manny, the planet on the other half. Others showed Manny in front of the screen. He could imagine the excitement in the broadcast vans outside the hall.

Manny smiled. He turned, raised a laser pointer toward the image on the screen behind him. David hoped the wireless lapel microphone Manny wore would not fail. He felt relief. Manny’s voice continued loud, clear. This might work.

“Look at the plasma sheath.” He circled the planet with the pointer. “It began to glow within the last few hours.” David looked at the faces of the scientists in the audience. He knew most understood the basics of plasma physics. They could see the blue-green glow themselves. He felt his spine tingle with the thought, “This planet’s a living thing, filled with energy.”

Manny walked the platform, back to the audience. He seemed enchanted by the image, oblivious to his listeners. Some of the camera crews scrambled to the side of the podium. David imagined the producers in the vans while they barked orders, “Keep on his face. Don’t lose him.”

“Within the next few hours that sheath will reach out toward a similar one here on the earth,” Manny said. “We’ll feel the effects of the plasma breeze when it starts to flow.” He

turned around to face his audience again. Excitement shone on his face. “We’ll hear it too; a distant hum or a purring. It will sound similar to chatter, a rumble, almost a chant.”

The old man came alive with enthusiasm. “You’ll smell it – the burnt ozone of electricity. Animals will sense it.” Manny paced on the podium. “Some of us saw the effects earlier today – the blue glow on the edges of aircraft wings. In a few hours you will see that same St. Elmo’s fire shoot up toward the planet from mountain tops or tall buildings.”

Manny stopped pacing. He turned, looked at the clock in the corner of the display, went back to the podium, a look of intensity on his face. “Soon the air will feel hot. Dry, parched winds will blow. The land will seem ready to burst into flame.”

“I already felt that today,” shouted someone from the audience.

“I did too, when the dust fell,” said another.

“You see,” Manny pointed his finger out toward those who spoke. “Earthquakes will become more frequent. They’ll start small, grow larger, more widespread. The weather will go wild with fierce winds, tornados. Lightning strikes will come out of a clear blue sky.

One of the younger scientists stood up, shouted at Manny, “Stop this nonsense. There’s no precedence for any of this.” Cameras swung toward the speaker. “Your talk scares everybody. This is why we threw you out of the conference last year.”

“Ah, yes, last year,” Manny said, “You didn’t have this in front of you.” He turned around, pointed at the planet with his laser pointer, then at the time clock count down in the corner. “In less than twenty minutes, the swarms of meteorites which always accompany a rogue planet will destroy the furthest satellites out in the geosynchronous orbits.”

“Do you realize that this means?” He looked into the cameras. “This broadcast will terminate in eighteen minutes. We’ll have no more satellite feeds to share these events after

that.” David thought he saw a look of desperation cross Manny’s face. “Please let me finish before it’s too late. Our lives may depend on it. We have to warn others.”

“Let him finish,” shouted one of the cameramen.

“I want to hear what he has to say.” A scientist from Germany added his voice.

The first scientist threw his hand up, sat down. All eyes turned back to Manny. The clock on the screen now showed sixteen minutes.

“In a few days,” Manny continued, “the heavens will begin to roar. The interplanetary arcs will continue unabated.” He paused, “It will sound like many waters.” Some in the audience lifted their heads up higher at Manny’s use of that phrase. They looked around, caught each other’s eye. “By this time the intruder will show up in the daytime sky,” Manny said.

“He walked away from the podium again, eyes still riveted on his audience. The large screen showed the planet behind him. The sight must have been impressive to anyone watching. What a moment in history, perhaps the last time for years to come.

“Streamers of electricity will breach the gulf between the two planets,” Manny continued. “We’ll see continuous interplanetary arcs. They’ll look like twisted ropes. You’ll see them whirl on a common axis.” He stopped, pointed, then shook a finger at the audience. “These are all signs of the glow discharge phase familiar to anyone who has studied plasma physics.”

Back at the podium, Manny sighed. “You may have wondered about deaths among all this destruction.” He paused.” What I’m about to relate will describe the largest cause of death of this close planetary encounter.” Nobody moved a muscle. The clock continued to count down.

“As the earth comes to the closest point of the planet, the axis of each will align. The electric forces will overcome the effects of gravity.” He held two imaginary balls in his hands, twisted them one to the front, one to the back. “The heavens will reel. Stars will appear to fall

from the sky. A prolonged night will appear on one side of the earth. The day will seem lengthened on the other side.” He paused. “Many ancient histories document this phenomenon.

“A massive flow of electrons toward the intruder will create a pillar with a continuous glow. A conduit will appear. It will originate at the earth’s north magnetic pole, a huge pillar of fire that glows.” Manny looked tired, sad. “So many deaths,” he said quietly. “Electrical activity within the column will cause it to undulate. It will writhe, spiral in a phantom form. Things nearby will begin to levitate unexpectedly. Nobody has seen anything like it in our day.”

Manny looked at the clock that now read seven minutes. “I wish I had more time to explain. Warn others. Tell them to find some way to get underground,” he said. “Find shelter underground in caves, basements, vaults, sewers, tunnels, anything. We don’t know where the North magnetic pole will end up. It moves faster each hour the planet gets closer.

“The Arc Discharge phase will last a day or two. It brings with it tremendous machining of the earth.” He looked at the scientists with what David thought looks like pity. “For too long we’ve assumed craters on celestial bodies came into existence by impact. Think about what happens when two electrically charged bodies come into close contact.” David saw many heads in the audience bob up then down. They got it. Plasma strikes will chip off pieces of the earth.

“Many of the impact craters we see on celestial bodies are electric discharge craters. Some of you have studied these craters. You know what I mean. They have bumps or spikes in the middle. That’s where the electric current hits.” David saw several groups of scientists who buzzed among themselves in agreement. Manny’s presentation had convinced them.

“The ejecta will fall back down to the earth for many miles around. It may takes days, weeks or months to subside. Death, destruction, even obliteration will accompany wherever the

displaced material lands. They will be huge. That's why it's important to go underground if you can." Manny stopped, seemed unable to go on. The sadness on his face appeared evident to all.

The clock read three minutes. "No more time. Finish quick," David hissed at Manny.

Manny looked up, David sensed anger. "The pillar of plasma will become brilliant for a day or two. A constant cacophony of thunder will roll. The earth's crust will shift in many places. Earthquakes of global dimensions will continue non-stop until the pillar comes to rest." He seemed hesitant to conclude, "Lakes, rivers will fly northward toward the pole. That water will wipe out any object or anyone in its path. Things will come clean off the face of the earth."

Manny stopped. His arms hung down at his sides, a tired old man once again. "I can't say more. There's no time to talk about the volcanoes and firestorms. I've delivered the message I've wanted to share for so many years. I'm sorry I couldn't share my warning earlier."

David walked up to Manny. He put his arm around Manny's shoulders. "Is there anything else you want to say? What if the planet passes us by? Some have claimed it will."

"Get underground. Stay there," Manny said. "It's the main safe place. If the planet doesn't stay in the polar configuration I've described, the process will reverse. We'll then have a few years until our orbits intersect again."

The clock on the screen displayed zero. The image behind them went to a static display. The camera crews packed their equipment. Everyone probably thought of home, loved ones. Blackstone slipped off the podium. What could he do now anyway? David thought. A few scientists came forward to talk quietly with Manny. The reporter Stan Johnson shook David's hand in congratulations he felt he didn't deserve. Stan's eyes looked past David, widened.

"Oh, no, look," Stan said. He pointed out the side window into the darkness. Toward the city came a small army from the sky - meteorites with what looked like long blue streams of hair.