

Meet the Press

Even without runway lights, the jet touched down safely at Dulles; taxied to the private hangar area. The fires they had seen from the air burned in the distance. A limo waited just like Blackstone promised. Known for the many beautiful hotels and conference centers in the D.C. area, the driver dropped David with the rest of the team at one of the finest – the Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center on the Potomac, about a half hour drive from the airport, south of Washington D.C.

Scheduled for Friday night, the awards ceremony and reception comprised the two social events of the 223rd meeting of the American Astronomical Society conference. The big day to present papers came on Saturday. Anybody except Astrophysicists or those who write for science magazines would be bored out of their minds. Most considered it an honor to present their research.

A couple of people in the foyer had David wondering where everybody had gone. A sign on the Potomac ballroom notified them the Friday get-together had moved to the Prince George Exhibition Hall, scheduled for tomorrow's activities. David wondered why the change? The small group made their way to the other side of the hotel.

A formal, stuffy affair by any standards, this time it could not have been more chaotic. David and the others approached the hall, which held up to ten thousand people. The noise of the crowd roared, even from the outside. David started to sweat. This was no good.

He caught his breath when they walked in. The place crawled with reporters. TV cameras with their bright lights focused everywhere. It seemed anybody who had ever published a paper or appeared on a science program now stood in an interview somewhere in the hall. The

broadcast vans parked outside should have given him a clue. All the networks had arrived, many from other countries. Not there to tape a show, this broadcast went out live all over the world.

Lucky for them, nobody greeted them at the door to check Manny's credentials. Their little group walked right in the front door, onto the floor of the large hall. It looked like the committee organizers all went inside to listen in on the interviews, first one then another. They appeared to be searching for someone, anyone who could explain what the hell was going on.

David spotted Blackstone up front where the largest group of reporters gathered. David, Manny, Cynthia and Elena made their way around the edge of the room.

"There he is," someone shouted. All eyes turned in their direction. David froze. For a moment time stood still. They had come direct from the airport. The conference should have started twenty minutes earlier. He felt underdressed, a mess compared to all the people in black ties or jewels who stood or walked around them.

The city must have suffered a tremendous amount of the red dust. While they landed, they witnessed several places in the city that suffered the results of the hail that burned. That same dust had delayed David's party for hours earlier that day in Denver. In spite of the disaster, Washington put on their finest. They knew they performed this display for the world.

The first reporters to reach them spoke French. David managed to wave them off. He held their little group together, pushed them toward their goal. Every step of the way became more difficult. Reporter after reporter accosted them. Each wanted to get the first comment ahead of their peers.

It seemed to David he saw more reporters than scientists on the floor until they reached an area below the podium. They could not get through. He looked out over the throng, the place perfectly packed with politicians, always to be expected at most any kind of Washington event.

Blackstone broke off from the gaggle of reporters that surrounded him; waved David's group up to the podium. Manny's presence with David did not seem to register with Blackstone. The man seemed relieved to see David.

Blackstone grabbed David, almost dragged him to the microphone. He brushed off the others in the group, pointed them to a few chairs at the rear of the podium, some twenty or thirty feet behind them.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," boomed Robert Blackstone's voice over the PA system. "Please take your seats. We'll begin immediately." He did not have to repeat himself. A hush fell over the room, like they practiced for this moment.

The reporters with their crews and bright lights moved to the sides or to the isles where they staked out their spots. David noticed a group up front, just below the podium. They crouched before the front seats. No fire marshal would approve this kind of crowding.

The room couldn't have been more crowded tonight. The agenda got all messed up. Scheduled for a "meet and greet" after the awards ceremony, someone had turned this black-tie affair into a last-minute news conference. Not a normal convocation of the AAS.

David thought of all that had happened since he left the University at Boulder this morning. Had it been just twelve hours ago? It felt like days.

"Thank you ladies and gentlemen. We appreciate your patience with our late start. I am Dr. Robert Blackstone, Division Director of the Geosciences Directorate for the National Science Foundation." He paused, looked around the room. The scattered applause died down.

David sensed Blackstone relished the moment. "If not for the...unusual ...atmospheric events all around us, you would hear from the President of the AAS tonight. The ongoing global emergency has brought us together under difficult circumstances for this press conference."

The reporters in the room seemed a little confused, even anxious. “Get on with it,” one of them said. A few others chimed in, “We want some answers. Let’s hear them.”

David felt certain Blackstone had engineered this moment. Among the stunned faces in the audience of scientists, David looked around for John Helman, president of the AAS. He wasn’t even on the stand. Nor could David see anyone else from the executive committee.

He suspected Blackstone planned a surprise. What kind of rabbit would he pull out of his hat? It occurred to David he had become that rabbit.

Blackstone must have contrived some sort of power play to move up in the government. David had been a sucker after all. Every event turned political to Blackstone, even this calamity.

Blackstone held up his hands. “I implore your patience, ladies and gentlemen.” He smiled, looked around the room. “Let me take care of some formal announcements before we turn a few moments over to the experts who are here to answer your questions.”

David didn’t like these arrangements. First the surprise press conference, now expected to lie again. He had a rabbit too. The more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea, a risk for sure. Why not? It would tick off Blackstone, something he felt willing to accept. He wondered if anyone else lurked behind Blackstone’s plan. He would soon find out.

Blackstone began. “I think it’s obvious some unprecedented events in space have caused this ... unusual ... weather pattern we’ve experienced.”

A loud voice from the back of the room called out, “You call fire from the sky unusual?” Several other reporters added their comments. The scientists in the room tried to shush them.

“Please,” Blackstone said, held his hands up again for silence. “We will have plenty of time for questions and answers.” He waited for the roar to die down.

He pushed a button. The room darkened. A slide projector displayed a photo of the Mitchell comet onto the screen behind them, the same one in the papers a few weeks ago.

“Some time ago...”

“How long ago?” one of the reporters up front shouted. Someone shushed him.

Blackstone started again, “Around December twenty-first, we observed a large new comet. The comet approached the sun from the far side.” He waited. No more interruptions.

“This is a normal occurrence. Most of you know sun-grazers are common.” He clicked to a new slide. “These sun-grazers are left-over remnants of some giant comet. We believe the large comet broke up into many smaller pieces.” He used his light-pen pointer. “The fragmentation happened on its first passage through the inner Solar System thousands of years ago.”

“Get on with it,” another reporter said, followed by more shushing. “We don’t need a science or history lesson.”

Blackstone changed to the next slide – a picture of David Mitchell.

“Dr. Mitchell filed the report with CBAT first. The newspapers have called this the Mitchell comet in the various reports released over the last few months.”

Dud, David thought. This sounded like a set up for something.

“He has made regular reports to the press on the progress of the comet.”

No interruptions. David felt butterflies. He still stood next to Blackstone who switched to the next slide, a picture of the comet from a different perspective.

“We tracked the comet when it came around the sun. It survived the passage.” Blackstone paused, clicked to the next slide. It showed the latest picture of the comet, taken yesterday.

Blackstone looked around the room, like he wanted to make sure everyone still followed him.

“Get to the point,” David said under his breath.

“As Dr. Mitchell reported yesterday, the trajectory of this comet appeared normal.” He shifted a little bit behind the podium, hesitated. “Comets come between the sun and earth all the time on their way back out to the far reaches of space.”

“Well, this one is different, isn’t it?”

David recognized the voice immediately. Stan Johnson of the Denver Post stood with feet planted on the front row, right on queue with his usual sarcastic attitude. He must have flown out the day before. He never missed a convention of the AAS.

David sensed an opportunity. He shoved Blackstone aside, ignored the surprised look on the man’s face. “Stan, let me answer that question for you.”

He felt Blackstone’s resistance. No time to lose. “This might take a few minutes. Go ahead and have a seat, Dr. Blackstone.” David pushed. Cynthia, Elena and Manny each rose, moved down a chair to make room for Blackstone at the rear of the podium.

David breathed a sigh of relief when Blackstone sat down in the chair just vacated by Manny, who moved to David’s side. Their pre-arranged musical chairs plan worked.

“Stan.” David paused, looked right at him, jabbed his finger at him. “You nailed it.”

The reporter looked stunned; sat down.

“This comet is different from most Kreutz Sun-grazers,” David continued. “In fact, we can now say it is not a comet.” A collective gasp rose from the audience. Cameras flashed.

“What?” David heard Blackstone say, among many others in the audience. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Cynthia and Elena struggled to keep Blackstone in his seat.

“That’s right,” David said, “I confirmed it this morning, just before sunrise.”

The uproar in the ballroom deafened his ears. David waited it out, his mind made up.

“I planned to announce it tomorrow but the planet made its own announcement this morning, which we all witnessed with this red dust. Fiery hailstones fell in many places.”

“Did you say planet?” Stan Johnson jumped up again. Several other reporters jumped to their feet as well. All asked the same question. Cynthia and Elena could no longer restrain Blackstone, who shot out of his seat. He tried to push Manny and David aside.

“Wait,” Stan shouted. He advanced on the podium to get in David’s face. “I want to hear this from David.” His face flushed with anger. He pointed a sharp finger at David. “You’ve lied to us. You lied to me.” Except for the scientists, the audience now stood on its feet.

Blackstone doubtless realized how ridiculous he looked as he tried to regain control of the microphone. Red-faced, he sat back down. David noted the look on his face that seemed to say, “You are in serious trouble here when we’re done.” David ignored the look, continued.

He held up his hands to the audience, in an effort to calm them down. “Please let me explain.” He waited. A few reporters sat back down. Stan stood his ground boldly. Most of the scientists in the room remained seated, too dignified to respond to the theatrics of the reporters who jostled for position. Each team vied for the best angle.

David continued, “Yes, it’s a planet. Dr. Blackstone did not want this known yet. Because of the angle of the planet, nobody could get a good a look at it until today.”

David shifted nervously, tried to figure the right time to launch the rest of his plan. “We had no way to know the composition. It looked like a comet until today. It took us by surprise.”

“And you call yourself a scientist?” David had heard that from Stan before.

Many of the members of the society began to boo. “Get that reporter out of here,” someone yelled from the back. Stan stood his ground, surrounded by photographers and cameras from the networks. David knew they had the attention of the world for at least a few moments.

He ignored the taunt. “Other than the size, it had all the features of a typical sun-grazer.” He clicked the slides back a few until he found the one he wanted. “It originated from the same place in space, followed the same path. Without surprise, it survived the transit.”

He looked into the eyes of his fellow scientists. “With our new large telescopes, we’ve witnessed this several times recently.” Gratiated, he noticed several heads bob up and down. Now seemed like the right time.

“You may recognize beside me Dr. Immanuel Volinsky.” David heard Blackstone shift in his seat behind him. “Some of you will recall he visited us before.”

“And you had him kicked out,” said a voice off to one side. David recognized a member of the national committee, one who helped him remove Manny by force last year.

David looked down. “That’s true. We didn’t allow Professor Volinsky to speak. He upset a number of our members with his unusual comments. I helped remove him.”

“David, what are you doing?” He heard Blackstone spit a few words in his direction from behind him. “Don’t you dare let him speak or our deal is off – every bit of it.”

David didn’t turn. He could feel Blackstone’s icy stare. His made up his mind. He must act now or never, even though he knew the uproar his planned comments would cause.

“Professor Volinsky is an invited guest this evening.” He put his arm around Manny’s shoulders, drew him closer to the microphone. “The schedule listed my paper to receive an award tonight for my research of the effects of planetary gravity on comets.”

He took a deep breath, blew it out. “I’m here to tell you the science behind that paper on Krutz Sun-grazers does not include one very crucial element.”

Blackstone sprang to his feet now. David had just enough time. “Dr. Blackstone doesn’t want you to hear the real story of the cause of this red dust, or why we have fire from the sky.”

He rushed on, “If you want answers, you’ll let Professor Volinsky speak right now. I concede my time to Manny.”

David turned. He stood between Blackstone and the podium, the room in an uproar. Every scientist in the audience probably guessed David had just sacrificed his career. Many on their feet yelled, “Don’t let that nutcase talk.” Surprised by his own nerve, David grabbed Blackstone by the arm. He twisted it hard, forced him back to the rear of the podium.

Over the din in the room, he didn’t have to whisper. “Sit down. I’ll stand right next to you. Don’t interrupt again.” He looked over at Elena and Cynthia. Surprise registered on their faces. David thought he saw more. He knew he could count on their support. Would it stand up with all of Blackstone’s political goons in the room?

He turned, looked at Manny, who still watched him. “Go on,” he gestured. “This is what you’ve waited for. Now is your big chance. Don’t blow it.”

Manny blinked. He turned back to the podium, held his hands up toward the crowd. David thought Manny seemed a bit unsteady on his feet. He looked like a very old man. David hoped he’d done the right thing. Manny, you’d better come through in a big way, my friend.