

## Too Many Disaster Movies

“No, we’re not going to be hit by an asteroid. It won’t even come close.” David Mitchell resisted the urge to do a face-palm. He glared at the reporter who asked the question. “You can get that idea out of your head right now.”

David recognized the man. He should have known who he was—Stan Johnson, the bulldog science reporter for the Denver Post. Stan asked the same stupid question every time they held a public briefing at CU Boulder on the latest astronomy announcements.

“What are you, a prophet or something? How do you know that?” Stan was his usual demanding self. One of the other reporters groaned. Everyone in the room shifted their eyes to their pads or checked their cells. They knew what was about to go down.

Tired of his in-your-face contempt, David scowled and laid on the patronizing attitude a little thick. He knew it would tick the guy off, but right now David didn’t care. Stan had attended these briefings for seven years. This back and forth was somewhat of a joke between them.

“Mr. Johnson,” David said, “you’re not going to make me explain this again, are you?”

David recognized Stan wanted an angle for his next over-the-top disaster story - the kind of stuff that ignored real science in the place of sensationalism. Stan wrote science fiction on the side but his sort of writing did nothing to educate the public.

“What?” Stan looked innocent. “It’s a legitimate question. Our readers have a right to know their tax dollars are being put to good use.” He looked around at the other reporters.

“Besides, we need to know if we should build a bomb shelter or something.” A few smiled.

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David saw Stan perk up earlier in the briefing when he'd casually mentioned the sighting of a near earth object so close to the sun. The announcement didn't fit the regular pattern. NEOs were usually discovered by the observatory in Tucson and announced by JPL in Pasadena. Had Stan guessed why David included this one in the weekly briefing?

David gripped the podium with both hands and looked around the room, hating this part of his job. He only agreed to be the public liaison because it meant a small salary increase. Department heads at research universities should spend their time in research, not lecturing knuckleheads like Stan Johnson. It would be different if Stan really understood this stuff.

David let out his breath loud enough for all to hear and began standard NEO lecture 101.

“Near-Earth Objects are comets and asteroids that have been nudged by the gravitational attraction of nearby planets into orbits that allow them to enter the Earth's neighborhood.” He looked directly at Stan, knowing he'd heard this many times before.

“Composed mostly of water ice with embedded dust particles, comets originally formed near the cold outer planets of Saturn and Neptune. Most of the rocky asteroids, on the other hand, formed in the warmer inner solar system between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter—”

“Well, which one is it?” Stan said.

David hesitated. “What do you mean?”

“Is it a comet or is it an asteroid?”

“Too early to tell,” David said, hedging.

“What? What are you talking about?” Stan played more to his peers than to David. Was he showing off? This line of questioning seemed unusual for a local newspaper article.

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“NASA doesn’t announce anything unless they know exactly what it is and where it’s going.” As usual, Stan was right on the money looking for that hook. “How close will this one come to the earth and when will it get here?”

David replied without hesitating. “Due to its current location in the daytime sky, observations of 2018 MZ12 cannot be made by Earth-based telescopes. Its orbit has not yet been determined to a level where we can confidently project its location or trajectory.” He raised both hands slightly toward the audience, palms out. “But that day is coming soon.”

Stan stood up on his feet, pen at the ready, “When?”

Did Stan smell something? Did he know what David was hiding? He had practiced that answer several times but it must have sounded too rehearsed for the bulldog to let it slide.

“When what?” David stalled and they both knew it.

“When will this ... thing ... be in a position where you can get a good look at it and tell us where it’s going?” Other reporters in the room stared at Stan, then at David. They stopped taking notes for a moment. Stan, always a bit eccentric, was now downright rude.

“You’ll have to take that up with the NEO office.”

“Oh, come on professor. I’m not going to go to Pasadena for this story. You know something about this rock you’re not telling us. Who discovered it?”

David licked his lips, tugged his collar. “I did,” he said in a soft voice.

“What?” Stan stepped out into the aisle and took a few steps toward the podium. He paused, looked around at the other reporters in the room, then back at David. “Did you say *you* discovered it?”

“Yes, I did.” This was not going well. He hadn’t counted on such direct questioning.

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“Well congratulations, Professor.” The look on Stan’s face was downright hostile. This was not the mild-mannered reporter he had seen in the past. “Were you looking for it? How did you know where to look?”

“You can read about it on the International Astronomy Union’s CBAT website. The details are all there.” David pushed his open hand through the air, as if brushing aside the question. “I’m sure you can find enough to inform your readers who are interested.”

“No...” the condescending tone in Stan’s voice was unmistakable. “NEOs aren’t usually listed there,” he said. “If this was a standard discovery we’d find it on the JPL NEO page.” Stan stood with hands on hips as if to say, “You should know that.”

David looked down, fidgeted with his laser pointer.

Stan continued, a new gleam of light in his eye, “It’s not an NEO, is it?” He pointed his finger at David. “Why were *you* looking for it?” After a pause, an ‘ah-ha’ expression came over his face. “Does this have anything to do with that solar blackout a few weeks ago?”

For a guy who mainly wrote pop science, Stan seemed to know a lot more than he had let on. What was he driving at? David needed to end this briefing now.

“Unfortunately, I’m scheduled to be in a NASA conference call in a few minutes.” He gathered up his notes. “Mr. Johnson, if you’ll contact my secretary, I’ll make sure she gets you all the details you need for your story. Thank you.”

David turned from the podium, hurried off the stage area and out the side door leaving his laptop behind and projector running.

Stan ran out into the hall to catch him, but David stepped into the elevator. “You bet I’m going to talk to your secretary,” Stan said, but the elevator door closed, cutting him off.

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David had his contact in Washington on the phone before he stepped out of the elevator on his office floor. Mr. Keys was annoyed. “Why are you calling me? I told you not to contact us unless it was an emergency.”

“This is not going to be as simple as you said it would be.” David took a calming breath. “Reporters are asking pointed questions. I don’t like it.” He explained his conversation with Stan Johnson at the press conference. “We’re simply not going to have as much time as you wanted. Stan made too big a scene. Got everyone else wondering what’s up.”

“What’s the problem, David? You’re supposed to be able to handle these things on your own. What are you going to do about it?” Tom Keys obviously did not really care how the press conference went. He didn’t impress David as a detail kind of guy.

“Listen you bureaucrat. You don’t pay me enough to lie for you. You said there would be no problem with me putting my name on that object.” He thought a minute, something he should have done long ago. “I think you’re just looking for someone to blame when this thing blows up.” He winced when he realized what he’d just said.

David heard a sharp intake of breath. “What do you mean, ‘blow up?’” David heard the squeak of a chair as Tom sat forward. “What exactly did you say to that reporter?”

“Relax. I have it under control. I’m just telling you that a hundred thousand dollars isn’t enough. I want something more.” David wasn’t sure if this was a good time to add to the deal, but he was still rattled from Stan’s bulls-eye questioning. He had sure misjudged that reporter.

“What did you have in mind, genius?”

David hated when Keys called him that. “Look. Once this thing blows over, I want a seat on the National Science Board and control of all the observatories in the Western United States ... and Hawaii.” He knew it was a lot, especially Hawaii. ATST was Dr. Rinehart’s baby.

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“Oh, come on. You don’t have the experience or the connections to sit on the board. And there’s no way you’re going to get the ATST. That’s the crown jewel of the program.”

Time to play hard ball. “Well, that may be so, but I’m betting you really need someone like me to keep the public under control.” He raised his voice a notch. “I have another reporter friend who would be interested in knowing a lot more about what’s coming at us.”

David swallowed hard. “She and I have an appointment tomorrow morning. That interview could go either way depending on what you can do for me, if you know what I mean.”

He waited. There was a long pause. Keys obviously weighed his options.

“You make that interview go well and I’ll see what I can do. But you had better be the most convincing nice-guy genius ever to spin science on TV. And don’t be a smart ass.”

“I’m not the smart ass here, Keys. Just keep your promise.”

David hung up and looked around. He was standing in his office. He’d been so engrossed in the conversation he didn’t realize he must have walked right past his secretary. The door was open. He had been pacing while he was talking with keys on his cell phone.

Jillian, sitting at her desk, eyes wide with horror, stared at him. How long had she been there? What had she heard? Oh, no.

“David...?”