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Theme: HARBINGER

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A SIGN IN THE SKY

by Joel Curtis Graves

“We can’t have them expanding willy-nilly into the solar system, much less the galaxy, and who knows where else!” Goreg’s voice rose as he spoke, emotions obvious, his white neck feathers flaring outward on full display.

A long pause followed. Tipscore stood slowly, scanning the council chamber’s dour faces. She was a type of humanoid: tall, thin, with very large, reflective golden eyes and a soothing voice. Her gown shimmered like liquid chrome. “I think we all agree on one thing; they must go.”

The hum of conversations grew, but Tipscore continued standing. As the group noticed, they quieted.

JeePorg2 spoke first. “We’ve been watching them for a long, long time. Over the course of one hundred centuries, their claws became shorter, the opposable thumb gave them more options, and they became incredibly smart. In another society, in another time, they might have been an asset, perhaps if we were at war. But those carnivores would become a scourge to our way of living. Their unchecked aggression just can’t be tolerated.”

Tipscore sighed. “Yes, yes, Jee, we know all that. We have debated the arguments—pros and cons—ad nauseam. But is it right, is it fully justified, to annihilate them? To wipe them from memory, to end them once and for all?”

Another long silence followed. Everyone knew where the debate was going. For over two hundred years they had batted the problem around, as the Dugs pushed against natural boundaries—first steam power, oil, splitting the atom, then space travel and a moon base. But the new spaceport, sitting proudly on Baarmin Island on the water planet Shume—fourth planet from the star—was alarming. The consensus was to stop them now or make preparations to flee as this new civilization advanced.

“Perhaps we can send another ambassador?” Wik-spor said in a loud whisper. She was a sentient, crawling plant species and already knew the answer.

Goreg laughed derisively. “What? And have them eaten too? The Dugs have no interest in discussing the future, and no interest in friendly relations. They are a warrior race and proudly xenophobic.”

“They do have a lot of teeth,” Furny said, barely holding back a giggle. A few joined him in the brief levity, although what they were proposing weighed heavily on their spirits.

“Well, they are reptilian after all,” JeePorg2 noted dryly. “On that planet, they have been one of the apex predators for over a million years.”

“Technically, that should not matter,” Befolly said. “We, the Vitch, are reptilian after all.” He looked like a great blue snake with two long arms, and six long fingers with a thumb on each hand.

“Yes, but you don’t eat our ambassadors,” a voice in the back said. Scattered giggles.

Three different negotiators had volunteered to meet with the Dugs to try and work out an arrangement of cooperative, peaceful expansion into the universe. In every case, when the ship opened, they were met with savage brutality, as witnessed on the horrible videos. The intrepid souls had been eaten raw, on the spot, despite precautions. They had even dropped leaflets all over the planet, in different languages, explaining their intentions and purposes. All to no avail.

Tipscore walked to the podium and held up her arms. The room grew quiet. “What we are proposing here is the most serious action we have ever taken. I understand that it seems to be a last resort—is a last resort. But let us go forward with trepidation, with a spirit of contrition. For to destroy an entire world, although within our ability, demands a thoughtful pause, a hesitation. Because once the decision is finalized, once the act has taken place, the guilt and regret will rest fully on those of us chosen to gather here, and our descendants, forever.”

“Shit,” Goreg muttered. “When you put it like that...but we have not arrived at this decision lightly—or hastily, I might remind everyone.”

Purgwell spoke for the first time. She wore a light-weight space suit to accommodate her peculiar atmosphere and temperature requirements. Her voice sounded mechanical. “No. Rather, long, thoughtful deliberations. Negotiations. Pleadings. I will act reluctantly in this matter, but I will not be weighed down with guilt or regret. What we do is best for the galaxy. To do nothing would be a crime.”

“Why don’t we just destroy their bases and then the spaceships as they enter orbit?” Eglerk asked. It had a sing-song delivery of lilting tones, which carried extra meanings.

Soosh moved to the balcony rail above to be heard clearly. She was an insectoid, one of three in the quadrant, resembling a five-foot-wide green stink bug. Despite appearances, her secondary mouth was quite humanoid and could enunciate all words clearly. She sighed dramatically. It seemed they would have to rehash all arguments one more time, before they made the final decision.

“A policing force permanently stationed at the planet was rejected,” she said. “It seems that the Dug’s new technology would allow them to move from the atmosphere to light speed *before* entering orbit. Time analysis projections estimate that within three to four years, they would easily destroy such a blocking force.”

Tipscore huffed. “Final comments complete?” None of the five hundred and seven members spoke. “Then on to the action?” She turned to the engineer section.

Rugnock, the chief engineer, expanded upward, what passed as standing for a Welmontich. “As you know, ten years ago, we chose a large asteroid and pushed it into an orbit that takes it near the Dug’s planet. At this time, it is just passing the largest planet and will orbit their sun soon.”

Rugnock’s spawn, Roofjab, also rose. “We can fit it with a guidance system, which will also generate a stealth mode after passing behind the star, and a simple but powerful thruster. A dust generator will create a local cloud of debris and hide the engine from observation. The inbound orbit will not be altered, but as the asteroid, what we call 239-N passes the innermost planet, the engine will alter the orbit for a collision course with the third planet. By the time it

comes into view on the other side of the star, if the Dugs even see it through the stealth shield, they will not have enough time to respond.”

Rugnock added, “Afterwards, we will dismantle their bases on the moon and the fourth planet.”

“Is it time to vote?” Suklik asked from his tank of murky water. “Should we vote?” Even with the universal translator, his voice seemed to waiver melodically.

Tipcore looked around the vast auditorium, scanning the delegates. “Do we have a motion to destroy the planet?”

The secretary noted that Simlur pushed the green button and raised his bushy eyebrows with a slight nod in the affirmative.

Tipcore smiled thoughtfully in return. “Second?”

Rugnock pushed his green button and raised an appendage. The secretary pointed to it—it is neither male nor female.

Tipcore said, “More discussion?” She looked around. “No? All in favor. Good. Anyone opposed? No? Abstain? Yes, Wik-spor. Then the motion has passed and we can move forward—immediately.”

Over millions of years, the Dugs had slowly pulled away from their peers, until the time came when they began to invent things. The days of hunting and gathering became a memory. Because when they understood the concepts of mathematics, engineering, and scientific methods, nothing was impossible. After millions of years of relatively little change, they exploded onto the world scene. In only seven hundred years, they built marvels of engineering and science, while at the same time, enslaving their peers. Their motto: To not be a Dug is to be food. Or, not Dug =

food. Great reservations of roaming animals and captive breeding programs ensured that the Dugs lacked for nothing in nutrition.

The biggest leap came with the invention of anti-gravity. They already had thousands of satellites in orbit and had established a primitive presence on the nearby moon and fourth planet, but anti-gravity was the game changer. Ten years later, when the parabolic sequential hyper-drive came along and was attached to a zero-gravity spaceship, the first test pilot flew out to the farthest planet, did a quick orbit, and returned in only two hours. And that at a fraction of the velocity available. The stars were suddenly more than pretty, twinkling points of light in the dark sky. They had become potential destinations.

The national government created a colonization department and a centralized shipyard. On the plateau north of the world capital, a great fleet of ships began to appear. The astrophysics consortium chose stars with potential planets, and the people began to prepare. Many leaders preached that it was their manifest destiny. As they reached for the stars, they were going to be explorers and conquerors.

“Hello, Bobbie.”

“Mike.” She looked up from her report and frowned. Something about Mike just put her on edge. He was always so upbeat, bouncy, and happy—it was unnatural and getting old.

“How many last night?” he asked.

“Three potentially new targets. One in the Juggubens star system is a lot like our own planet; I would suggest we go there first. Another planet in the Sprig system, circling the yellow star, is also promising.”

Mike settled into the lounge chair by the window. “I ate with Simpson last night. He said the latest test flight proved they reached four times the speed of light—exponentially. Four! And he thinks they can steadily improve on that. Do you know what that means?” He did not expect an answer and continued, “We can get to your Juggubens in less than a week. Less than a week!”

Bobbie had to smile at his child-like enthusiasm. It did excite her. The idea that as quick as her team found habitable planets, a scout team could be surveying them a few weeks later was astounding.

“Are all of the telescopes and dishes looking into deep space now?” he asked, his right eyebrow rising.

She looked up from the report. “No, we have three smaller scopes and two dishes studying the solar system—a routine scan each night.”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about,” a new voice cut in.

Bobbie and Mike stood quickly.

Bobbie growled, “Director Chum, how nice of you to stop by—unannounced.”

“Same old Bobbie—still don’t like surprises, do you?” But he had walked quietly up the stairs to surprise her.

“Not much, sir.” She bared her teeth aggressively, then closed her mouth and tried to smile.

He ignored her. “Well, that’s why I’m here. Did your team report anything unusual out by the big gas giant—Zill? An amateur astronomer reported a comet to the news and it’s everywhere this morning.”

Mike grinned; that was what he had been leading up to.

Bobbie slowly sat down. “We’ve been watching it for months—asteroid Tobin 2. That’s what we call it for the official reports. Doctor Tobin spotted it first.”

“So, it’s not dangerous?”

Bobbie looked at Mike. “That’s my department,” he said. “It’s really an asteroid, not a comet. I think some ice might be burning off as it approaches, so it has a short tail. Our calculations have it passing us by a comfortable margin, about one million miles, then circling the sun and missing us by about two hundred thousand miles on the outbound. Close, but no worries.” He plopped back down into the cushioned chair. “You know, director, we get five or six big rocks every year.”

Director Chum nodded thoughtfully. “Put it in writing, so the public relations team can appease the news outlets.” He turned to leave and added, “I want it by noon, Mike.”

“Yes, sir. On it.” He jumped up and jogged to his office. He thought, this would be a good job for the new intern.

Two hundred and forty days later.

Bobbie looked up first. “And to what do I owe the pleasure of your company, sir?” Chum had become a frequent visitor, still sneaking up the stairs.

Director Chum shook his head: Bobbie had not stood. “Is Mike in yet?”

“Seems to be running late, sir, sorry.”

Chum walked to the fourth-floor window and looked down. A black sportscar was backing into a parking space below. He recognized Mike and shook his head again. “What are you working on, Bobbie?”

“Sir, we have identified twenty-six potentially habitable worlds, but the new parabolic antenna dishes are gathering more precise data, so we can narrow down the field to the most



likely to work for us. Thirteen seem identical to our planet in all respects. Another seven are acceptably similar.”

Chum was impressed. “To me, what you do here is almost as amazing as the new propulsion systems. Did you accept the promotion and assignment to be the chief astrophysicist on First Ship?”

Now she stood. “I have, sir. Thank you for endorsing my request.”

He waived his hand dismissively. “When do you leave?”

“About three months. They haven’t given us a firm date yet.”

“Odd. I thought they would have had it nailed down months ago.”

“Chief Engineer Smurth said the problem is supplies, not engineering. We’ve never colonized a planet before and there are real challenges to overcome.”

Director Chum shrugged. They could hear Mike coming up the stairs, two at a time.

“What are you working on now?” Bobbie asked, as she sat.

Chum looked thoughtful. Most employees did not care what he was about, but because she asked, he would tell her. “Our next challenge will be developing a communication system that rivals our speed of travel. How do we get instantaneous communications over those great distances?”

“Faster than light quantum entanglement buoys,” Mike said, as he entered the room.

“Faster than light retransmitters?” Chum said.

“I’ve been working on it.” Mike plopped into the big chair. “We need an early warning system of observation posts with telescopes on the solar system edge, but comms are a real challenge since regular communication is limited to the speed of light.”

“Early warning?”

“Those Visitors we had...” Mike trailed off. “Do you suppose they might oppose us in some fashion?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Sir, don’t you watch the vids? There are commentators wondering if the Visitors will oppose us. Since, you know, they are out there ahead of us, and all. Apparently, vastly superior in every way. People feel scared.” He didn’t add that he felt scared.

“Haven’t heard, but I will assume it is a valid concern.” He hated the news shows.

“Maybe,” Mike said. “Probably.” He didn’t sound convinced. “We should assume the worst and be prepared, just in case.”

“I’m sure we can leave that to the military wing,” Bobbie said. “They have scout ships and the new armed cruisers.”

Mike shrugged, but Chum frowned, thinking about the idea. He had been unexplainably anxious lately. Chum started to speak, when they heard someone slowly climbing the stairs. General Woog entered hesitantly, cane in left hand.

“Greetings, esteemed sir,” Bobbie said, jumping up.

“Yes, good to see you, sir,” Director Chum said, coming to attention.

“How can we help you, sir?” Bobbie asked.

The general looked around the room, nodding. “It is *that* asteroid.” He sat in the chair by the desk, sighing with relief. his left leg bent at an odd angle. “I wanted to get the information first-hand, so I am here to see the three of you,” he said, pointing at each of them. “Why didn’t the asteroid come out from behind the sun as scheduled?”

“The asteroid disappeared?” Chum asked. “How is that possible?” This was the first he had heard about it.

Mike squirmed. “My team and I have been focused on other things, and I don’t think anyone here has been tracking the asteroid. I assumed it…”

General Woog frowned and shook his head. “Two weeks late. The military has its own people watching things, so my visit is a routine double check. I want to verify everything with you. We sent out three scout ships to investigate—should have done it sooner,” he said. “Some of my people think it might have impacted the second planet on the far side of the sun. But I am telling you today, because we need to find that asteroid and launch the colony ships as soon as absolutely possible.”

Bobbie frowned. “Launch Director Marcus said in an emergency, First Ship could launch as early as next week. That is the absolute earliest.”

“Yes, Director Marcus also told me six days.”

Bobbie looked out the window. “He said we can launch First Ship next week, and the Starships Two and Three in a month. The consortium believes we can then launch a ship every two months until we are done, although they may not be fully supplied. That gets the first ten ships away.”

Mike smiled and snorted. “When we decide to do something, we go after it with no reservations, nothing held back.”

“Indeed,” General Woog said. “The Visitors…well, they concern us. We had assumed they would leave us alone; then after the third visit, we assumed we would go to war. Instead, nothing happened. More ominous in my opinion.”

“Sir, why have you been so candid with us today?” Director Chum asked. General Woog had never actually spoken to him before.

General Woog leaned back and looked at the ceiling tiles. “I am not sure. I just have this foreboding—a deep sense of dread. I am not sleeping well lately. Or, worse than normal.”

Bobbie shifted uncomfortably. “Sir, I must confess, I have felt something also.”

Mike and Director Chum looked at each other, knowingly.

They could hear someone running up the stairs. Intern Arch burst into the room. “The asteroid!” He leaned over, hands on knees.

“What!” Bobbie said.

“Just fifteen minutes ago on the radio, the scouts reported that the asteroid is *here*. An emergency broadcast; it’s on all the vids and radio. Photos the scouts sent show an engine mounted on the back side, and the whole picture seems fuzzy, out of focus, like it is scattering light waves somehow, which they say is why it has been invisible to our telescopes and scouts until now.”

Mike walked over and turned on the television. The screen was full of static.

“The Visitors,” General Woog whispered. “The Visitors. It was a grave mistake...”

Chum dropped into the soft chair usually used by Mike. “How much time...do we have?”

Arch dropped to the floor by the general’s chair, head in hands.

“How much time, Archie?” Bobbie cried.

He looked up, tears in his eyes. “It is here. Right here.” His head dropped back into his hands. “Entering the atmosphere—now.”

“Already here,” General Woog said flatly. “Yes, of course. Our arrogance has killed us.”

Chum stood slowly, a faraway look in his eyes. “Then we do not have time to launch anything. It is over.” He walked to the window, opened it and dived out.

Sixty-six million years ago, an asteroid slammed into the planet at what we would call the Yucatan Peninsula. The impact crater became the Gulf of Mexico. Oceans vaporized. Shock waves circled the planet, wiping out all traces of the intrepid Velociraptor civilization, burying most of it under miles of dirt and debris.

“It is done,” Tipcore said, her voice quavering with emotion. They had gathered to watch the collision on the large view screen. “I hope we did the right thing.”

The others simply looked on, some obviously sad.

“It is a beautiful planet,” Goreg noted. “I am sure that someday another species will ascend, and when they discover the ability to move between the stars, we will visit them also, and find out if they want to join our peaceful society.”

Furny stood to leave and sighed. “I only hope they are peaceful, like us.”