



Free excerpt # 1 – Copyright 2013

PROLOGUE

*Jet Propulsion Laboratory
California Institute of Technology*

March 12, 1998

The representative wearing the requisite white lab coat was not a scientist; his selection to address the media was based more on his availability than his public relations experience. Now, as he stepped out of the administration building and into a fifty-four degree Fahrenheit headwind, he wished he had called in sick.

Reporters' side conversations were replaced by a heavy silence as he approached the hastily prepared podium and its entanglement of microphones. He removed a prepared statement from his pants pocket, then paused at the whirring flutter of camera shutters to evaluate the crowd.

Look at all of them. . . a herd of sheep, panicked by a lone voice yelling wolf. Don't let them see you wipe at any sweat beads, they'll interpret the body language. Just read the damn statement, answer a few questions, and get back inside where it's warm.

"Good morning. Yesterday, Harvard astronomer Brian Marsden of the International Astronomical Union issued an *IAU Circular* about a possible very close pass to the Earth of the asteroid designated 1997 XF11. According to Marsden's calculations, the asteroid, which is approximately one-mile-in-diameter, will pass within thirty thousand miles on Thursday, October 26, 2028 at approximately 1:30 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time. Mr. Marsden stated that, while the chance of an actual collision with Earth remained small, it was not entirely out of the

realm of possibility. A mile-wide asteroid, as most of you know, could cause quite a bit of damage.

“Following Mr. Marsden’s announcement, JPL scientists Dr. Donald Yeomans and Dr. Paul Chodas reexamined the data on 1997 XF11. This reexamination was based on orbit calculations made in March of 1990 at Caltech’s Palomar Observatory, seven years before its reported discovery by Jim Scotti of the Spacewatch group. Based on this more conclusive data, we’re happy to report that Asteroid 1997 XF11 will pass at a rather more comfortable distance of 960,000 kilometers -- about 600,000 miles, approximately two Moon distances away, giving it a near zero probability of impacting our planet.”

A wave of arms beckoned for his attention amid a chorus of stated questions. Tucking the statement inside his pants pocket, he scanned the crowd, seeking a friendly face. He pointed, “I’m sorry, I don’t know anyone’s name. Yes, the gentlemen with the red striped tie.”

“Zach Bachman, L.A. Times. How is it that scientists at JPL were able to find this new data less than a day after the IAU’s announcement?”

“If you’re suggesting a conspiracy, Mr. Bachman, you may want to check with the producers of those two new asteroid impact movies.” He smiled at the effectiveness of the rehearsed line, using the interruption of the laughter to casually brush at the moisture beading over his brow. “Actually, the asteroid had been photographed by JPL scientists at Palomar in 1990 but never named. Had it been named I suspect there would have been less of a panic and I’d be enjoying my breakfast in the commissary. Yes? You, with the paisley shirt.”

“Tom Cubit, USA Today. According to Jack G. Hills of the Los Alamos National Laboratory, this is the most dangerous near-earth asteroid ever spotted and its impact would be the equivalent of two million Hiroshima-size bombs. How does this new threat compare with the

asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs 65 million years ago?”

“The asteroid you’re referring to was probably three times the size of 1997 XF11. Again, the chances of it striking the Earth are minimal. We’re not downplaying the danger; we’ve simply recalculated the asteroid’s orbit based on more accurate, reliable data. Yes, the young lady from CNN?”

“Are there any factors that could alter the asteroid’s projected orbit over the next thirty years? For example, could the Earth’s gravitational pull affect the asteroid’s orbit on its next pass, which I believe is on Halloween in 2002, effecting a change in 2028?”

Sweat had soaked through the back of the administrator’s dress shirt. “While it’s true that gravitational interaction with a larger object can alter an asteroid’s orbit by approximately a quarter of one degree, JPL calculations confirm that the influence of the Earth’s orbit on 1997 XF11 on its next pass in 2002 should be minimal. In a worst case scenario, Asteroid 1997 XF11 will come no closer to Earth in October 2028 than a moon’s distance away. Thank you, that’s all for now.”

The JPL representative waved to the crowd as he exited the podium, his thoughts lingering on his last statement. *A moon’s distance away. . . Has anyone bothered to plot the moon’s orbit when 1997 XF 11 passes Earth in 2028?*

Part 1

G.D.O.

(The Great Die-Off)

2020 – 2025

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*“Strong and healthy, who thinks of sickness until it strikes like lightning?
Preoccupied with the world, who thinks of death until it arrives like thunder?”*

–Sutta Nipata II

Discourse collections of the Buddha, 5th century BC.

March 12, 2022

I don't know much about guns. The one I've been gripping in my sweaty palm holds four bullets in its clip and one in the chamber – same as it had when I removed it from the corpse I came across two weeks ago. It's rare these days to find a dead body that hasn't been skinned and stripped of its meat. Thankfully, I've never been forced to consume human flesh, which is why I'm here. . . out in the woods, hoping to shoot a deer before the last deer is taken, before the last of my supplies runs out and hunger drives me to either cannibalism, suicide, or starvation.

I arrived in the woods before dawn, having ridden all night on my motorcycle. No lights needed, thanks to my night vision glasses, no sound since the bike is powered solely by batteries. I've been staked out in this blind for the better part of eight hours. Sweat continues to pour down my face and soak my camouflage clothing, and the bugs are relentless, but I chose this spot because it's only twenty paces from the creek, offering me a clear shot at anything or anyone that ventures by. Truth be told, I've never shot anything more lethal than a BB gun, but desperate times require desperate measures.

When I was younger, my father took me camping with the Cub Scouts. The closest we came to hunting game was roasting marshmallows. A real hunter wouldn't be hunting deer with a handgun. A real hunter probably wouldn't have ant bites all over his ankles or mosquito bites

on his arms, and he wouldn't be so scared.

I'm not scared of the woods. I'm scared of being lost in the woods, unable to find my way back to the main road and the brush where I hid the bike. Mostly, I'm scared about what else might be in the woods hunting the deer hunters.

I call them the "S.S." – Sociopathic Survivors. Rapists, murderers, cannibals – the S.S. are soulless beings hell-bent on enjoying their final fleeting moments on earth. I've never seen them in action, but I've seen the forensic evidence of their depravity and it terrifies me.

The last bullet in my gun's chamber is reserved for my brain should these pack animals hunt me down.

The S.S. were bottom-feeders before the die-off, which is why they survived. They lived off the grid. Same for the fortress farmers, bunker clans, conspiracy theorists, and other whack-jobs who could read the tea leaves and knew the world's oil reserves were running out.

Note to any future generations listening to these audio tapes: The powers-that-be knew the world's oil reserves peaked in 2005; in fact they knew how things would end as far back as the 1970s when Jimmy Carter was in office. And still the assholes did nothing.

My father knew, which is why he left his tenured position at the University of Virginia and moved us to a small rural community in the foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains. No internet connection, no cable TV – we went from being a normal modern-day household to twenty-first century pioneers, gradually inching our way off the grid. None of us were thrilled; my mother contemplated divorce, my younger sisters labeled Dad the new 'Una-bomber' and threatened to run away from home. As for me, if my father told me a flood was coming then I would have been outside with him building an ark.

It was shortly after the opening salvos in Tehran that my father explained his motives.

‘Robbie, life is a test, and humanity is about to face a big one. Unfortunately, when it comes to facing the unthinkable, most people prefer to remain in denial. You saw the movie, Titanic, right? When the ship hit that iceberg, some passengers headed for the lifeboats; while the majority of people were so convinced the ship couldn’t sink they either stayed in bed or went back to the bar to have another drink. When you get older you’ll learn two hard facts: You can’t save people who don’t want to be saved, and preferring to remain ignorant when faced with a catastrophe demonstrates a lack of intelligence.

Dad could have added human ego to the equation.

I grew up in a world of bank bailouts, recessions, unemployment, collapsing economies, and endless wars; my country embattled in a perversion of democracy where corporations had been granted the same rights as citizens. Corruption overruled any sense of justice, the radicalization of the political system preventing the few true representatives of the suddenly impoverished masses from enacting solutions that could have reversed the eventual collapse of society. As my father said, “human ego created these problems, and human ego will drive us over the cliff. The world would be better off if a computer ran everything.

Computers. . . The next computer I own will be implanted in my skull.

A sound! My heart skipped a beat! It was an animal. . .approaching the creek from the thicket to my left.

Quietly, I wiped fresh sweat beads from my already moist brow and palms, shifting my body weight to aim the revolver, my eyes focused on the clearing. It was a deer. . .a young male, maybe eighty pounds, as anxious and as thirsty as yours truly. My hand trembled as he glanced in my direction, my body shook as he turned, offering me a clean shot at his flank.

I hesitated, drawing a breath, suddenly fearful of the gunshot and who may hear it. . .

Thwaap!

The buck collapsed upon its forelegs in silence, the arrow appearing seemingly from out of nowhere, its tip passing cleanly through the startled animal's spine and out its chest cavity.

Leaving my makeshift hunting blind, I approached the dying beast. The angle of the arrow's entry indicates the archer had shot from the trees.

"Touch the venison and you'll die where you stand."

I turned slowly, my heart racing as she emerged from the forest like an erotic female warrior from a Luis Royo painting. Her ebony hair flowed nearly down to her waist in a curly tangle camouflaged in twigs and leaves, every inch of her flesh concealed in green and brown paint or beneath a skin-tight matching body suit. Ten paces away and I could smell her scent – a heavy animal musk. She looked about my age. The quiver was strapped to her thigh, the muscles of her upper body taut as she aimed the graphite bow's arrow at my heart.

I was as stunned as I was smitten. "The deer's yours. Take it."

"I intend to. Drop the piece."

"The what? Oh, the gun. Seriously, you can have it. I doubt I could even shoot the damn thing straight." I lowered the weapon, placed it on the ground, and backed away. "What's your name?"

"Shut up." Quivering the arrow, she grabbed the gun, expertly ejecting the clip to check the chamber. Reassembling the weapon, she shoved it into a satchel concealed around her waist, hoisted the dead deer over her shoulders, and was gone.

Alone again, I waited thirty seconds, then followed her through the dense brush, losing her trail within minutes.

Who was she? Was she alone? Part of a group? Her attitude dictated otherwise. My

guess? When the lights went out and the grocery store shelves were rendered bare, she had fled to the mountains – or more likely she had mountain folk as family. Whatever the case, she was everything I was not; ruthless, cunning. . .a hunter who showed no mercy.

And yet she had spared me.

Well, dork-wad, you did give her the gun. Practically curtsied as you laid it on the ground.

I paused again to listen to the forest; heard nothing.

By her scent, I knew she lived in the woods, probably a cave. Heading for higher ground, I followed a path of ferns and moss-covered rocks that emptied into a clearing of tall weeds.

To my left, the Blue Ridge Mountains caressed the setting sun between its peaks and valley. With darkness a mere ninety minutes away, I had to choose – the woman or sanctuary?

It had been twenty months since I'd carried on a conversation with another living person. I might be an introvert by nature, but listening day and night to the voice in my head had been maddening, leading to the creation of these recorded journal entries. But seeing her . . . she was a thunderbolt, a goddess. I knew I had to find her, even if it meant risking an encounter with the S.S.

Pausing at the edge of a clearing, I retrieved water and an apple from my knapsack, consumed a quick snack, buried the evidence, and continued my trek up the mountain.

After three hundred feet the woods began anew, the shadows of pine closing in, dusk coming fast. For half an hour I wandered through a maze of trees, until the night was upon me and I accepted the fact that I was hopelessly lost.

Hearing men's' voices, I quickly hid.

There were a dozen of them, more in the cave.

The dogs had found the woman's lair, its small entrance concealed by brush. Now they would stake out the area, waiting for her to return.

I smelled her as she moved through the shadows to join me behind the bushes, the gun pressed firmly against the left side of my ribcage. "I need a place that's safe."

"Get me back to the main road."

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The motorcycle was hidden in a ravine behind Mile Marker 36. Six months ago, I had replaced the engine and fuel tank with an electric motor and rechargeable truck battery, rendering it fast yet whisper-quiet. We waited another hour before heading south, my night vision visor illuminating any nocturnal predators that might venture near the highway.

My family's suburban neighborhood had long since been abandoned. Our house stood alone on a cul-de-sac among burned out foundations. I had cleared the surrounding terrain to expose anyone who approached. Every window was bricked up, the house and matching eight-foot wall that surrounded the backyard's concealed acreage painted to appear like charred cinder.

The lawn was covered in sheets of metal – hundreds of car trunks and engine hoods, planted flat into the grass and welded into a giant jigsaw puzzle. Climbing off the motorcycle, I instructed the beautiful huntress to follow precisely in my footsteps, my night glasses revealing a preset path that serpentine to tall shrubs camouflaging a subterranean side entrance. Once we were inside the house, I bolted the steel door behind the woman, shocking her by turning on the lights.

"You have electricity? How?"

"While other people were searching for food and water, I was busy collecting car

batteries and solar panels.”

“And car hoods. What’s that all about?”

“Security. Step onto my property and you get zapped with ten thousand volts of electricity. By the way, my name’s Eisenbraun, Robert Eisenbraun. Most people used to call me Ike.”

“Andria Saxon.” Dropping the deer carcass on the floor, she roamed the house, taking inventory. “Air conditioning. . .a working refrigerator and stove – pretty impressive, Eisenbrain. What else do you have here?”

“A running shower and soap for starters. And it’s Eisenbraun.”

“Tell you what, I’ll handle the brawn, you handle the brains and maybe we’ll manage to survive this mess.”

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