



TWINKLE, TWINKLE GIANT STAR

A Tale of the Near Future

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National Space Command woke me up at two in the morning. But as soon as they told me what was going on, I was wide awake. At first the panic was moderate. Anything as big as this was always a potential problem. Still the planet was 70% water, so it had a good chance of not hitting a populated area. The panic level only went to the extreme when the object slowed down. Natural objects don't slow down. DOD launched four F-22s out of Vandenburg. Although what a few peashooters could do against something of this size was debatable.

"Where do you think it's heading?"

"Montana, possibly Alberta."

"What will the Canadians do if the F-22s cross in their air space?"

"Probably nothing."

"Probably?"

"Yea, well, if I was Canadian Air Defense Command, I'd be much more worried about the Object than the fighters."

"Good point."

NSC had taken to calling it the Object. No one wanted to call it a spacecraft, not yet anyway. The whole place looked like a scene from a bad 1950's Science Fiction film. People were rushing so fast it was amazing they didn't trip over their own two feet. The White House wanted updates every ten minutes. Someone told me the President had just federalized the entire national guard. The 82nd Airborne was climbing into planes.

"It still slowing down."

"What do you think it's doing?"

"Landing."

"Now the only question is ..."

"Got it. The target area is 25 miles east of Sunburst, Montana. Our side of the -border."

"There's a town that far north called Sunburst?"

"What do I look like, a geography expert to you? How the hell would I know?"

I ended up in a very uncomfortable seat on a C-5 Galaxy Military Transport Aircraft. Of you think a fat guy in coach takes up a lot of room, try sitting next to a tank. I spent most of the flight pouring over maps of the area. The target site in Sunburst had a name, it was called the Hidden Pool. I had a hunch it wasn't going to be hidden for long. You know all those Science Fiction movies there the government is totally prepared? We were more unprepared than I hope you could imagine. No experts, no scientific team... besides me... but most of all, no plan. Every branch of the government had treated the entire event as a bad joke. But now that it was real... no one could decide who was in charge. Politicians were running away faster than a dog chasing a rabbit. I guess if they aren't registered voters, no one cares. The first thing DOD wanted to do was shoot it down. Fortunately, the F-22s never caught up to it. And

once it was on the ground, they seemed content to cordon the area off. Keeping the gawkers at a safe distance... although nobody knew exactly what that distance was. The only safe place now might be Mars.

In Montana, we transferred to a chinook helicopter. I was a little unnerving riding in a chopper which had been manufactured before I was born, but at least I was no longer sitting next to 60 tons of armored vehicle. They landed us in a field in what looked like the middle of nowhere. The chopper lifted off as soon as we were on the ground. A fellow in military camo gear rushed up to meet me.

“Josh Nichols, Military Intelligence.”

“So, where’s the object? This looks like an open field.”

He pointed at a group of trees, their long branches silhouetted against the moonless night sky. “It’s on the other side of the woods.”

“What can you tell me about it?”

“It’s on the other side of the woods.”

“Great, that’s really helpful. You haven’t seen it yet I take it?”

“No, we’ve been waiting for you.”

“That’s comforting. You guys have the guns and you’re waiting around for the unarmed civilian.”

“Glad you’re here.”

“Yea, thanks.”

The woods were thick with underbrush and I had to work my way over a rise. The place smelled like all the woods I had adventured in as a kid, but I couldn’t tell you what the trees were in the dark. Once I got to the top I could see a bright glow. I would describe it as unnatural, but it would be redundant. Still, there was something odd. It was like a light you see in a fog, only there was no fog. Not even a light mist.

On the other side of the woods, the terrain broke into an open field. The grass was about knee-high, not smashed to the ground as it had been at the landing field. I turned to Lieutenant Nichols, but I found he’d gone no further than the edge of the trees. The Object looked more like it had crashed, although there was no crater. Still, the nose seemed buried in a small mound of earth. The red glow of the sun was beginning to slowly brighten up the sky off in the far distance.

The side facing me was torn open. It was there the light came streaming forth. It was one single light at the breach, but it seemed to break up, like sparks flying up from a fire. Only I couldn’t feel any heat, only the icy chill of the night air. As I approached, the sparks now seemed more like fireflies, only their light never dimmed. I had the impression they had wings, but I couldn’t make any out. Maybe it was just an illusion. My imagination working overtime. Desperately trying to make a connection with the unearthly things I was seeing and something with which I had some familiarity.

I approached them, but they kept their distance. never allowing any contact. What I saw in the hull’s cracked surface gave me pause. This side of the Object had opened like a cracked eggshell. I had to blink

my eyes several times to be sure I wasn't hallucinating. Each time I opened them the images they related remained. There were about a half dozen, I think. It was hard to tell. They kept moving around, but they never ventured outside the object.

They had a raw luminescence, a crude glow to them. This was the only thing that seemed real to me... the rest... well, the rest didn't make any sense. First of all, they were translucent, you could see right through them. They appeared roughly humanoid, in that they had the right number of arms. I couldn't make out their legs if they had them. The best way to describe what I was seeing is to say I had the impression I was looking at an x-ray. There was no flesh, muscle or sinew. What you could see appeared to be a skeletal structure of sorts... if you could call it a structure.

Their heads seemed humanoid all right, with two very distinct sockets where I imagine the eyes had once been. They stared at me with those penetrating sockets in wonder and amazement ... and not a small amount of despair. I got a flood of emotions... either telepathically or just from their expressions. It was a deep ocean of sadness mixed with a feeling of achievement.

Shaking my head, I tried to clear my thoughts. "Focus," I told myself. Scientists are supposed to be dispassionate observers of the truth, seekers, discoverers, not emotional disasters. Even as I fought to remain unemotional, I was filled with a sense of comradery. A sense of belonging. Now each one of them seemed to have a smile-less grin on their faces. Even though they didn't appear to have anything you could effectively catalog as a face.

One of them reached out with what I imagined was a hand. Five, perhaps six fingers, it was hard to tell. It was the first movement they had made outside their broken container. Without any realization on my part, I extended my finger to reach them. It was massively dangerous, but I was no longer in control of my movements. Our fingers, one human and another not from this world were separated by only a few millimeters when the first rays of light from the rising sun closed the gap first.

Now the Object and its passengers seemed to be leaking mist, sublimating in the dawn sunlight. Were once the Object had seemed substantial, it now appeared to be boiling away. They if anything, I felt colder. I stepped back as if I had regained my own will. My own objectivity. Or perhaps mentally I was desperate to avoid the same fate. As the seconds passed, and the light grew, they seemed less and less substantial and more dreamlike. More an illusion, a trick of the dark.

It was completely gone by the time even a sliver of the sun had peaked its way over the horizon. Part of me was pleased. There would be nothing to deal with at all. It was all an illusion. A trick of the light, perhaps an elaborate hoax. Congress would be delighted. I felt a wave of relaxation fill me like a warm, gentle breeze. That is... until I looked down.

There was a long, ugly gouge in the earth. The kind I'd seen as the result of a large aircraft attempting to make a belly landing without landing gear. The grass as flattened and torn up around it. A large pile of earth stood silently at its tip, where a ship's nose would have come to rest. Only there was no wreckage, no solid material of any kind. No remains. Only the marks left on the earth. As I watched in astonishment, a small dap of soil... which would have rested atop the nose... fell to the ground, unsupported. There was no longer anything to keep it from resisting the effects of gravity.

I turned and walked back to the woods as the light grew in intensity. It would be a clear, sunny morning in Montana. At first, I didn't see where Nichols was, his camouflage was so effective. I could only see him when he moved.

"What the hell was that?"

"You saw it?"

"I don't know," he verbally backtracked with the skill of a trapeze artist. "I guess it depends. What the hell was it?"

"Travelers, Mr. Nichols, travelers."

"What the hell are you talking about? Where did they go?"

"They went exactly where they wanted to go, Mr. Nichols. They overcame the final obstacle getting here."

"What obstacle?"

"Death, Mr. Nichols, death."