

Bill Livingston was a happy man. He had just successfully supervised a massive project that resuscitated the extinct humpback whales species. He had dealt with the constant interference and opposition of Bob Plucket the head of WOMEN (World Organisation for the Management of Ecological Niches). That man and the mostly conservative elements that ruled the ecological group -which was a joint effort of the EEC (European Economic Community), UAO (United Americas and Oceania), MESA (Middle-Eastern States Association), FEEC (Far-Eastern Economic Community), and the OAC (Organisation of African Countries) under the jurisdiction of the World Parliament- had tried to deny the massive funds that permitted the use of new time travel technology to go back about forty years and capture two breeding pairs of humpbacks.

On this beautiful early spring day, Bill did not worry too much about past problems. He concentrated on the future. With the new technology available to him, he would be able to reconstruct much of the ecological niches and species that were destroyed in the last hundred years. Before a more enlightened political climate permitted saving the environment on a more global scale.

He just wished that scientists, like himself, would not suffer the constant interference of politicians like Plucket who did not understand that every species and microhabitat had the right to be saved. They always argued that if all species were saved there would be no mechanism by which evolution could work to adapt species to new environments. They could not envision his conception of a perfect balance between Man and nature.

As Bill was ruminating, his eyes slowly took in the glorious scenery that unfolded behind the thick glass of his office's window. The early morning sun created some long shadows on the WOMEN's Institute grounds. Far away over the horizon, the glitter of the sun reflecting on the landlocked sea, where they were breeding the whales, caught his attention. It reminded him of his youth in New England, where his grandfather taught him to sail, in the old fashion way, aboard his motorsailer. During those months spent at sea, his interest for the conservation of the marine habitat grew to the point of determining his future path. Now as head of Marine Ecology for the WOMEN's Institute he could fulfill his lifetime goal of restoring the world to its previous glory. More species would be saved and the world would be better for it.

The chimes of the comlink, on his desk, interrupted his train of thoughts. The basso voice of Greg Fleming, his second in command, erupted anxiously when he acknowledged the transmission.

"Bill...! If you are coming to the meeting with Dr. Osbourne, you're already late. I will wait for you in my office for five more minutes. If you are not here by then, I will go alone."

"Don't worry Greg I will be there. I only have to put on a tie and comb my hair."

"Are you still trying to impress the good doctor?"

Ignoring the question Bill replied. "I'll be there in a minute."

He unfolded his lanky frame from his easy chair and fetched a necktie from his locker. While he was tying his knot he gazed at his image reflected in the mirror. His mop of unruly red hair looked like an abandoned field in need of mowing. His wide set eyes and narrow mouth made his face look unbalanced. His rumpled brown, baggy suit hung on his shoulders like a coat on a hanger. Although he was in his mid-forties he looked at least twenty years younger, a family trait. His mother was in her early seventies but did not look much older than fifty.

With a mischievous grin on his face he passed, with great difficulty, a comb through his hair. The end result was not evident. Bill exited his office and locked the door behind himself. He took the long glass passageway that would take him to the adjacent building across a catwalk hanging fifty stories high, over the Institute's grounds. He always suffered from a touch of vertigo when he used the narrow walkway. Today was no different.

He soon reached Greg's office, where the small-statured man was impatiently pacing the floor. He always reminded Bill of a miniature version of a traditional banker, dressed in his neat blue pinstripe suit. His deep voice contrasted sharply with his four foot ten height. People meeting him for the first time, always had to suppress their laughter when they heard him talk. As usual, when he was under pressure, Greg was in a bad mood. He gruffly

mumbled under his breath.

"Here we are, late again for an important meeting. This man is the oldest teenager that I have ever known. He his totally unreliable." As if not noticing Bill entering the room, he continued. "He might be my boss but he has no reasons to make me look bad in front of others."

"Don't worry..." Bill said. "...Dr. Osbourne will not be mad at you. A specialist in time travel will not mind a little lost time. We can always get it back later if we need it."

Greg gave a murderous look to his boss and followed him to the elevator. The two men entered the glass cubicle and the pneumatic system quickly whisked them deep underground. They each stood silently looking at the scenery during the short trip. Bill was used to his friend's outbursts. He knew very well that everything would be back to normal in a few minutes.

They were greeted by the joyful voice of Marjorie, the building's transportation dispatcher.

"Drs. Fleming and Livingston where may I have the pleasure to transport you."

Before Bill could reply with one of his usual puns, Greg said rapidly. "We are in a hurry. We had to be at the Institute for Advanced Physics, ten minutes ago."

The young woman replied. "You can take capsule number four. It has just been overhauled, it will get you there the quickest. Dr. Livingston..., I presume that you are the one that is late, as usual. You should stop daydreaming. A man in your position should not waste his time like that. "

Grabbing his confrere by the sleeve, Greg dragged him to the waiting capsule before Bill could reply. He shouted over his shoulder, his voice making the windows tremble.

"That is what I always tell him. But this big kid does not want to listen to me. I am so misunderstood."

Marjorie looked on, as the two men entered the capsule. When the door closed and the capsule silently sped away, she shook her head and a smile crossed her face. There went two of the most respected scientists at the Institute, and they were always acting like Mutt and Jeff.

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The rapid transit capsule sped through the grounds of the Institute. A procession of microhabitats was observed by the two scientists. Both were very proud of the work that the Institute had done to restore the environment. Greg turned toward his boss and said.

"Do you think that Dr. Osbourne has good news for us? I doubt that we can maintain our funding. Especially with that old fuss-budget of Plucket around. A lot more interest in time travel is shown by other branches of the World Scientific Commission. I don't understand how they could have appointed somebody who does not like to save species, as the head of the world's largest ecological organisation."

"You know politicians, they always want one of their own in power. It is much easier to control us that way."

"Why can't nobody see that we have only the good of this world as our goal?"

"Amen."

Both men looked at the rapidly growing buildings ahead of them. They were approaching the Institute for Advanced Physics, a massive complex of large concrete structures studded by a jungle of antennae, dishes, stacks, power feeds and collectors. Their capsule smoothly slowed down and entered the administration building. They were greeted by Phil Redbird, one of Dr. Osbourne's lab technicians.

"Good morning, gentlemen." The large Amerindian said. "Dr. Osbourne instructed me to meet you and escort you to the conference room personally."

"Hello Phil. How is the good Doctor?"

"The good Doctor is doing fine, Dr. Livingston. Even though Mr. Plucket is in a rotten mood, as usual. He never likes to part with any of his precious budget. Especially if it is going to a competing Institute."

Bill turned toward Greg. He said. "You were right. Old fuss-budget is here and there is trouble."

Greg silently shrugged his shoulders. They silently followed Phil to the conference room. All three were admitted by an efficient looking secretary. The young man lead them to their seat and quietly exited the room. Bill looked around the room.

Behind the long conference table, a holowall displayed the likeness of an antique super-collider. The other walls were a grim institutional green. He observed the people seated around the table. He grudgingly acknowledged the presence of the elegantly dressed Robert F. Plucket. With all the bad feelings between the two men, Bill had to agree that Plucket cut a dashing figure. The highly intelligent man, Harvard educated, from a wealthy society family did not look his fifty plus years and was the most eligible bachelor on the West coast. No wonder a gangling bachelor like himself resented the man so much.

Next to Plucket, was seated Alfred "Rudder" Rudigast and his first officer Gina Lesage. The congenial man was the time capsule's test pilot. Bill waved his hand in his direction and said.

"Hi Rudder..., how's the wife and kids?"

"Very good, Bill. Amanda is still upset about you missing her birthday dinner, I hope you will be able to

join us soon. How about this coming Saturday?"

"This sounds fine. I will be there at 8 o'clock."

After this exchange of pleasantries, Bill noticed that Dr. Osbourne was staring directly at him. Bill blushed immediately. Sheila Osbourne was a stunning redhead in her mid-thirties, with all the right curves in the right places. Bill had a crush on her since the first time they had met, six months ago, to coordinate the "whale" project. Before he had met her, he never had been tongue tied in front any woman. His sudden shyness made him the butt of many jokes around the office.

The young woman's face brightened when she noticed his embarrassment. She said to him in a sultry voice.

"Good morning Dr. Livingston. I am very glad to see you." She emphasized the last word and noticed that it had the anticipated effect. Bill blushed even more. She liked the tall boyish man very much, but she was waiting for him to make his own move. She had been hurt before and did not want to speculate about his real feelings toward her. She doubted that he knew about them himself. She did not want to rush him too much for fear of losing him.

At the other end of the table Robert Plucket cleared his throat. He said in his elegant voice.

"I am glad that all of you are present. The decision about further projects utilizing Dr. Osbourne's time travel technology, in conjunction with the Women's Institute as been taken by the World Parliament's Commission on Scientific Research. No further funds will be allocated, as the resurrection of extinct species is not a priority goal when there are many species that still need to be protected from extinction in the present time. This decision is final."

A long silence greeted this statement. The assembled scientists looked at each others still stunned by the news. Suddenly Bill Livingston's face reddened in anger. He stood up straight unraveling his long, thin body. He looked straight into Bob Plucket's eyes and said, barely controlling his rage.

"You never wanted to give us a chance. Most species on the verge of extinction can be easily saved by our method, often at a lesser cost than by traditional ones. I demand that the Institute reconsider its position. If not, I will be forced to resign from by post."

Robert Plucket calmly stood up and took his briefcase from the floor beside him. While still looking straight into Bill's eyes, he said in a monotone voice.

"Then I accept your verbal resignation. Please vacate your office and leave your cardkey at the front desk by next Monday. Your last wages will be credited to your account." He briefly looked around the room and continued. "This will be all."

The distinguished man exited silently from the room while the group of scientists assembled around a flabbergasted Bill. They all wanted to comfort him.

Bill was too stunned to realize that he had just destroyed his career with his sudden outburst. He did not even hear the rumble of the voices from the people trying to soothe him. He finally came back to reality and looked around him in astonishment. With his voice still shaking from his anger, he said.

"Don't worry, I was planning to quit anyway. I never could work for that man. Now, I will be able to accomplish my lifetime goal. With my severance pay I will be able to buy myself a motorsailer and travel around the world."

Grabbing him by the elbow, Greg dragged him away from the group. He said in a hushed tone.

"Don't worry, I will help you to get your job back. When you calm down, you should go and see Plucket. I am sure he will agree to take you back. I will tell him a good word on your behalf in the meantime."

"I will be fine. I need a rest anyway. I have not taken a holiday in over seven years. I will go home now."

As he was walking towards the conference room's door, Bill was accosted by Sheila. She put her hand on his arm and gently squeezed it. She timidly smiled. She leaned forward toward him. She stood on tiptoes to whisper in his ear. In the process her breasts brushed his upper arm. Bill felt embarrassed by her closeness. She said breathlessly.

"Dear Bill, I feel sorry for you. Please meet me at home after work, tonight. I have a proposition for you. I hope that you will consider it. Here is my address."

She slipped a hastily folded piece of paper into his hand. She kissed him lightly on the cheek and left the room holding back some tears with difficulty. Bill looked at her leave with a new fondness in his heart. He said goodbye to the group and left the room whistling softly.

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Later that afternoon, Bill was pacing the floors of his apartment. He was impatient to know what Sheila wanted to tell him. He already had changed clothes four times in anticipation of the meeting. He had finally selected a comfortable sport suit that fitted his body better than what he usually wore. It actually flattered his silhouette.

When the time had come to leave for his appointment, he felt uneasy. He doubted that Sheila wanted to meet him for himself. She must have a business proposition for him.

He entered the travel link at his apartment and programmed it to reach the posh section of town where she lived. As the small private capsule sped soundlessly, Bill nervously twiddled his fingers. He felt as if he was a teenager going on his first date. He knew that he did not have any reason to feel nervous, but knowing this did not help the sensation.

Soon the scenery changed from the endless agglomeration of massive residential buildings where he lived, to a scattering of luxurious residences on the side of a knoll overlooking the sprawling extent of the city. The dazzling array of emerging lights starting to battle the dusk, fascinated Bill. The thought of millions of people living so close together always unsettled him. Though he did live in a apartment complex where upwards of twenty thousand people lived, he barely knew any of them and felt strangely isolated, when he was not consciously thinking about it.

Bill's daydreaming was interrupted by the slowing down of the capsule. He had finally reached his destination. Sheila's house was of modest size and stood in the middle of a small but impeccably maintained garden. The house's lights gave it a cheerful look. When the capsule stopped on the small landing pad, Bill exited with a purpose in his walk. He had finally decided to ask Sheila out, whether this was a business meeting or not.

He walked the narrow path to the front door. He rang the old fashioned brass bell. His new found confidence was quickly shattered when a tall, handsome, blond man answered the ring. He said in a thick Swedish accent.

"Dear Dr. Livingston, Sheila and I were waiting for you. Please come in."

In a quivering low voice, echoing his hurt spirit, Bill answered. "Thank you. Are you not Dr. Sven Blomquist, formerly of the EEC's ecological council?"

"Yes, I am. Please call me Sven. May I call you Bill?"

"Please do."

The tall Swede took Bill by the shoulder and dragged him towards the living room. Bill finally noticed the cheerful surroundings. Sheila's house was brightly decorated, in keeping with her sunny disposition. When they entered the room, Sheila greeted him with a warm embrace. Bill's heart started pounding at her sudden closeness. She was dressed in a loose fitting, silk blouse and a pair of tight jeans that enhanced her figure. With a smile on her face she said.

"I am so glad to see you. You look as if the events of this afternoon have not affected you too much. May I introduce you to a good friend of the family, Sven Blomquist?"

The lanky Swede said liltngly.

"We have already introduced ourselves. I am familiar with Bill's work. I hope that he is familiar with mine."

Bill hesitantly answered. "Did you not do some work in radical ecosystem management leading to the salvaging of many important species?"

Sven laughed. "It also led to my dismissal from the EEC council, because my method were not traditional enough. But let's not talk of the past. I am tired of dealing with politicians, as, I am sure, you are. I have an interesting proposition for you that will make all the politicians take notice our cause and ultimately allocate the budgets that we deserve." He smiled broadly and continued. "Remember that at the end of the Secondary period, about seventy million years ago, the dominant species disappeared from this planet almost overnight, in geological terms.

The most common theory, as you well know, is that a large asteroid collided with earth and the ensuing clouds and darkness caused the extinction of the most dominant species of the period. With the help of Sheila's equipment we have confirmed the veracity of the theory and the actual date of the asteroid's collision."

Bill was astounded. His mind was racing ahead of the scientist's words. He interrupted Sven and said. "Are you trying to say that based on my experimental work with the whales and your work on ecosystem management, your are planning to bring back and resurrect one of the ancient giant sauropod? This should get the politicians to take notice."

"This, as you say, would get the entire world's attention. But I want to go one step further by extrapolating on our joint research. I actually want to prevent the extinction of the dinosaurs by intercepting the asteroid before its

impact with this planet. Sheila has a friend that is an expert in electromagnetic containment of black holes. The impact of one such black hole with the asteroid, at a great distance from earth would be enough to deviate the asteroid and prevent the impact. There would still be some radical changes in the ecosystems but I think that the species would have enough resiliencies to adapt. Thus we would have some of the dinosaurs surviving to this date. What do you think of my plan?"

Bill sat in silence for a long time. To bring back an extinct species was one thing, but to actually prevent their extinction opened some incredible possibilities that he had not even thought of. He slowly shook his head and said in a solemn voice.

"Since I do not have a regular job anymore I would be glad to join you in your work. If the world parliament does not take notice after this, there is no hope for mankind. Everybody should see that man should do its utmost to preserve any living organism's place on our world. It is our ultimate duty."

"I am glad that you see my ways. We shall start the final phase of our work, in complete secret, tomorrow. Sheila has agreed to sneak us up to her lab. I now have to leave you for a meeting with Dr. Hillzinger. We will discuss his containment system. I think he also has found a black hole that we can use in the period and vicinity where we want to intercept the asteroid. I bid you farewell and will see you both in the morning."

The tall Swede shook Bill's and Sheila's hands. He showed himself to the door. Bill's mind was so preoccupied by the work ahead, that it took him a short time to realize that he was still standing in Sheila's living room and that she was looking at him with anticipation. He nervously coughed. He said in a quivering voice.

"Have you known Sven for a long time?"

"We go way back. We both studied in France. We have been good friends ever since. His father was an associate of my dad. But enough about him. How are you doing?"

"Well..., I have a new found purpose for my life's works that I hope to share with those dear to me."

"Who might they be?"

Bill blushed at her directness. He reached deep inside himself for courage. He took both her hands in his own and said. "I do not know who they might all be, but I know for sure that you are one of them."

It was Sheila's turn to blush. She had not expected him to answer her question. Loosing his job might have been the most beneficial think that ever happened to him. He already looked more confident and outspoken. She took him in her arms and kissed him deeply before he could move away from her.

For once in his life Bill did not shy from her proximity. He returned her embrace with vigour. After what seemed like a long time they pulled apart breathlessly. They both felt dizzy from their new intimacy. She pulled him by the arm and said.

"Let's go out for a bite to eat. I am famished. We will be able to discuss our joint life projects." She coyly winked at him at the last words.

Bill, for a change, did not feel embarrassed. He followed her out of the house the happiest and luckiest man in the world.

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The next morning Bill awoke in his apartment with a broad smile on his face. Last night had been one of the best of his life. Sheila had been a brilliant conversationalist. They had talked until the wee hours of the morning. He had accompanied her back to the house where they chatted some more. They had made plans for the future. For now they would concentrate on their secret project so that all their energy would go towards its completion. Afterwards they would start a life together. With the celebrity and funding that would surely come from bringing back

the dinosaurs, they would have all the opportunities to do the research that they both wanted. Their common goal was to make earth a better place to live in.

Bill slowly showered and dressed. He met Sheila in a park near the Institute of Advance Physics. They hugged tenderly. Sven was already at work to finalize the details with Dr. Hillzinger. Sheila escorted Bill through a service entrance. They arrived at her laboratory undetected. They were met at the door by Rudder Rudigast. Technicians were busy working around the large time capsule.

It looked like a giant cylinder with rounded ends resting on a gigantic pancake. It always reminded Bill of a colossal fried egg with a cylindrical yolk. The test pilot said.

"Dr. Blomquist is waiting for you in the office with Dr. Hillzinger. They have some good news for you."

Sheila turned toward Bill. She said. "It is nice to have good news for a change." She led Bill to her office's door.

Behind the glass partition Bill could see the tall Swede discussing emphatically with a short grey haired man. He presumed that the older man was Dr. Hillzinger. Sheila confirmed his suspicion. When she entered the room, she turned toward the man and said.

"Good morning Dr. Hillzinger. It is nice to see you. I hear that you have good news for us."

The man answered in a raspy voice, the result of a lifetime of too much good living.

"I have located the ideal black hole to deviate your asteroid. With a few more hours of computations, I will have the exact coordinates for the transfer and interaction. My containment equipment should be installed in your time capsule within two days. Now the only thing that I need from you is the rigorous location, in time, of the interaction, so that we get the results that you want of it."

Sven put his arm around Bill's shoulders and brought him in front of a large wall terminal. He punched a few buttons on the control unit and said.

"This is the theoretical results of the asteroid's interaction with earth, after a close miss. We will have to decide what ecological consequences would best serve our goals. I suggest that we do not create too drastic a change to preserve as much of the habitat as possible, on a large enough scale, to be effective."

The two men worked for several days on their theoretical model. They finally agreed on the parameters needed to preserve part of the Late Cretaceous ecosystems and end up without too much drastic changes in the modern ones. From these parameters they calculated the precise timing of the interaction with the asteroid. The experiment was scheduled for the following week. In the meantime they would examine all the data and scrutinize the equipment.

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The morning of their flight was suddenly upon them. All had been checked and double checked. Tension filled the air. The scientists paced the floor nervously while the technicians attended to last minute details. Beside the regular crew of Rudder Rudigast and Gina Lesage, Dr. Hillzinger, Phil Redbird, Sven and Bill would be passengers of the capsule. Sheila Osbourne would remain behind to monitor her equipment from the Institute's control room.

She cornered Bill before he was ready to embark. She kissed him deeply and said.

"Now that the experiment is almost over I am looking forward to spend more time with you. And I do not mean work time. Though there is some research that I would not mind doing with you."

On that she hugged him suggestively and escorted him to the capsule's narrow hatch, where they parted

company. Bill joined the rest of the crew in the cabin where everyone was already preparing for the time flight. He buckled himself in a comfortable seat. While the flight crew was going through the final checklist Bill leaned toward Sven. He said.

"Do you think that we are doing the right thing? I feel somewhat like god. I hope that we are not playing with something that we cannot handle."

Sven answered. "It sounds to me like you are getting cold feet. You know as well as I do that we are doing this for the good of mankind."

"I know..., it's just that I am anxious to get going. Actually I am more anxious to come back to Sheila."

Sven laughed heartily. He replied. "It is nice to see that the shy Dr. Livingston is finally coming out of his shell. Don't worry we will be back in time for supper. You will be able to go out with your cherished Sheila."

Their discussion was interrupted by Rudder's voice. He was saying. "We are about to disconnect the umbilicals. There will be a short period of darkness before we go to internal power."

The lights blinked on and off a few times then stabilized. A soft hum enveloped them. Rudder's voice came back on.

"Please get ready for time transfer. We will be going in one minute."

Bill looked out the small aperture in the shuttle's side. He caught one last glimpse of Sheila, standing behind her console, before his vision became blurry.

From Sheila's point of view the jump appeared normal. First the outline of the time capsule became blurry, then it flattened itself into nothingness with a loud clap. She hoped that all was as well as it appeared. She had more

riding on this launch than usual, Bill was aboard.

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To Bill, who was on his third launch, the feeling accompanying time travel was expected, if not comfortable. It felt as if you were flattened out of existence then inflated back to life. As usual he felt somewhat disoriented after the jump. They stood in the emptiness of space in another time. After taking a bearing Rudder contacted Dr. Osbourne, they were on track. They would only have to set course for the black hole to collect it. He punched in the coordinates. The control panel in front of him came alive. The powerful thrusters hissed loudly as their jet of ionized matter propelled them to their destiny.

After a few hours of monotonous travel, alarm bells broke the silence that had set amongst the crew. They were near the black hole. Dr. Hillzinger went to his equipment, which had been installed in the large cargo bay. He quickly set his machinery in action. The drone of the ships mighty fusion generators increased in pitch under the load of the containment system. Bill looked out the window and did not notice anything unusual going on. He said, to no one in particular.

"I do not see the black hole. Are you sure it is there?"

Dr. Hillzinger replied. "It is of very small size, only a few centimetres in diameter. Though its mass is tremendous you will not see its effect due to the lack of matter entering it. If we were to collide with it, it would neatly bore a hole through the ship. When the containment field will be established there will be emission of high energy x-rays as the stray particles from the field enters it. Any matter in its vicinity will become ionized by the x-rays. You will see a glowing aura around the black hole."

Hillzinger turned back toward his equipment and Phil joined him to calibrate the field. Everybody were busy around Sven and Bill. They felt somewhat left out as they watched, with interest, the activity around them. Soon the drone of the fusion generator reached a climax and a crackling ball of energy stood in front of the time capsule.

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Phil, using an electromagnetic traction device, skillfully captured the black hole and stored it in a containment cell in the cargo bay. He cheerfully slapped his thighs and turned toward Bill. He said.

"See, there was nothing to it."

Bill smiled. He asked. "Do we have time to go have a look at earth before we set our plan into motion? I would like to have a look at what we are trying to preserve."

Rudder, from his command seat, yelled at the men assembled in the cargo hold.

"If you want to go to earth first, we should go right now. We only have a few hours before our appointed meeting with the asteroid. We will go and have a quick look.

The thrusters throbbed back to life and they were on their way to earth. The view of the planet, as they approached was familiar to the crew. It had not changed drastically in the intervening eons. They touched down in a lush tropical area. They observed the scenery through the ships monitoring systems. They did not have the time for a full blown outing. Animal life teemed in the lowland area forested with massive fern trees. They caught the occasional glimpse of a massive sauropod lumbering through the tall plants.

Bill was amazed at the sight of the fauna and flora untouched by man. This was a dream come true. He wished that Sheila was with him to enjoy the experience. Their stay was too short. Their senses had just been teased by the complexity of the Late Cretaceous ecosystems, when they had to leave. Bill hoped that one day they would be able to study this unspoiled habitat at leisure. But a more pressing engagement awaited them. They reluctantly left the planet's surface, the thrusters at full blast.

The trip to the rendezvous point with the asteroid was a short one. The crew got busy calculating the coordinates for the release of the black hole. Bill felt somewhat left out of the process. He anxiously looked on as they worked. Soon the machinery was set in motions. Phil used the electromagnetic traction beam to manoeuvre the

black hole outside the cargo bay. After double checking his computations Dr. Hillzinger instructed Phil to use an impulse beam to propel the contained black hole towards the asteroid.

After a few wrenching minutes, the crackling ball of energy, containing the black hole, collided with the asteroid. A fiery release of energy ensued. In the aftermath of the collision the asteroid lost part of its mass. This matter was absorbed by the black hole. The result was a deviation of the asteroid's path by a few degrees. Due to their distance from earth, this was enough to prevent a direct impact with the planet. The tidal forces from the close miss would create havoc with the earthly environment, but it would be a lot less destructive than a direct hit.

With the tremendous release of energy from the collision a great deal of static prevented communication with home base. It did not worry the crew who had been expecting it. Rudder Rudigast, with the help of Gina Lesage, set the coordinates for their return home. There would be a short delay before the capsule's capacitors would reach full charge. At that point they would return to the Institute.

Bill spent this time thinking about his future with Sheila. This last week had been one of the happiest of his life. The woman he had always dreamt about, loved him after all. It had only been his shyness that had prevented them from hitting it on earlier. His new work association with Sven Blomquist and Sheila opened so many new possibilities that it would take a lifetime to unravel all of them. Both his personal and work life were at their zenith.

Bill's ruminations were interrupted by Rudder's voice. "We will be proceeding with time transfer in thirty seconds. Please brace yourselves."

The crew experienced the now familiar sensation. When they emerged at the other end of the time warp, they were greeted by billowing clouds of noxious smoke. They were caught in a tremendous storm raging over an immense active volcano. Rudder controlled their position. He yelled in a high pitched hysterical voice, as he fought with the capsule's controls.

"According to my instruments we are directly over where the Institute should be. I don't know what hap-

pened while we were gone, but a massive volcano lies in its place. I will try to set us down."

While Rudder and Gina were busy at the controls, the remainder of the crew prepared themselves for the worse. They buckled their safety harnesses tightly. All were tossed and buffeted as the experienced pilots tried to find a proper spot for a landing. A brief respite from the storm permitted them to locate such an area. Rudder aimed the capsule toward it, as the storm doubled in intensity. Any attempt at a soft landing was futile. Rocked by the storm the ponderous mass of the shuttle hit the ground with a terrifying crash. Only its great strength prevented it from rupturing. All aboard were knocked unconscious by the impact.

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Bill regained consciousness a few hours later. He was hanging sideways from his broken harness. Around him he heard soft moans of pain emanating from the lips of his crewmates. He struggled helplessly to extirpate himself from the remains of his harness.

Suddenly, a massive arm draped in coarse fibrous cloth easily pulled him up to his feet. He turned toward his benefactor. Bill choked in his own fears. He was looking directly into an alien face. The creature was bipedal and stood taller than himself. It was of more massive proportions. Its physiognomy was definitively of saurian origin.

Bill could not believe what he had done to his world. It dawned on him that all that he had known and loved, including Sheila, were now gone.

From 1990: A Time Conundrum



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