

The Sword of Gaia

Keith J. Bowers

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Published by Keith J. Bowers
kjbowers1@hotmail.com

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The klaxon had been ringing for the last twenty minutes. Gibson's headache had developed nearly immediately. The General appeared on the deck above him, scanning down for the operator. His eyes were drawn up to the wide angled screen that covered the far wall. Gibson joined him, taking in the grim information presented above. It was flashing red as the main server updated its calculations on a minute-by-minute basis. The probability of collision indicator had reached ninety-nine percent.

The General's hand appeared on his shoulder. It was not a comforting gesture. Nothing could comfort Gibson now. His stomach was in the basement during the moments he didn't feel like throwing up.

"Where and when is it going to hit?"

The need for the headset suddenly seemed unimportant. Slowly Gibson took it off, sitting back in the seat. "Oh, in about four hours."

The General coughed on his coffee. "Did I hear you right? Four hours?"

"Yes sir. It'll land smack dab in the middle of the Amazon if the calcs remain consistent. It will wipe Brazil off the map. We're talking Chicxulub style crater here." The Yucatan had been the recipient of a meteor strike some sixty five million years before. It was believed to be the strike that ended the reign of the dinosaurs.

"Mother of god, is it that big?"

Gibson rubbed his face with his hands. "Yes sir, the impact will likely rip South America into a series of islands and the firestorm will likely torch anything south of Florida.

"That means we'll be okay, right?" He meant the tracking center located in Houston.

"No sir, the earthquakes alone will destroy every standing building on the North American continent, if not the world. The plate under the strike will shatter and collapse, thus the remaining tectonic plates must compensate – i.e. fill the void. The next century will be filled with constant earthquakes, not to mention the cloud of debris that the strike

will kick up. If the fires and earthquakes don't kill you immediately, then the dust and cold from the unending winter will." He paused for a moment. "It's endgame, sir."

The general moved away, slumping back into his leather chair. "How? How did we not see it coming?"

Gibson shrugged. "If that kid down in Hawaii hadn't spotted it last night we wouldn't have had as much time as we did to calc its trajectory."

"But we have people devoted to scanning the sky!" The anger was rising in the General's tone. "How do you miss something that fucking big?"

Gibson shrugged. "How does anything get by our scans? They just do."

The General flopped down in the chair beside Gibson. "Have you informed the President?"

"No," he replied. "I honestly didn't see the point."

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Terrance sat on the rock steps that led up the gigantic stone structure above him. The jungle canopy made it difficult to see the extent of the ancient complex, but it was there, as old as the hills around them. Carbon dating on the stone read to forty thousand B.C., long before mankind was even beginning to build huts, much less huge complexes made of stone and mortar. It didn't make much sense to him, but then he wasn't one of the scientists. All of them were blown away by the discovery, but it mattered little since the asteroid was going to come down smack on top of them.

The news came through on the satellite radio - a gigantic asteroid was going to destroy the earth. Panic had set in; the local guides had taken off, leaving their packs behind. Where they were running to, Terrance didn't know, but it didn't really matter to him. It was pointless to run.

The government was powerless to stop it; the president and Congress were already safely ensconced in their concrete bunkers, the populace left to fend for themselves. NASA, the ESA, the Russians, none of them had any plans in the works to save the world.

The end of the world was nigh.

Terrance pulled out a cigarette and lit it up. The rest of the scientists were huddled around the sat radio, listening to updates. He heard snippets of their conversation - their anger, their disbelief. It was rumored that the government had hid their knowledge of the impending strike for as long as they could, making their preparations to keep what they felt important safe.

There were only hours left before the stone fell from the sky and wiped South America off the face of the world.

All of the announcer's words meant nothing. Terrance flexed his legs, getting stiff from lack of use. Standing, he stared down at the entrance to the stone complex, only a stone's throw away. A thick slab of rock plugged the archway. Would it survive?

Terrance wasn't a scientist - he was merely a tour guide. He hailed out of San Paulo, Brazil, an expatriate of the U.S. that enjoyed the jungle and hated city life. Hated America for what the Republicans had done to it. He abandoned that life years ago.

Parents dead. Sister lived in Virginia with her three bratty kids and corporate husband. Never saw her. Never wanted to.

He started out with this bunch two weeks ago, surveying the mountains, observing the scientists with their sample trays, snatching every bit of flora that looked interesting to them. To him it was pathetic, but then they were paying him two thousand a week to do this. Down here in Manaus, the twenty bucks he paid each of the locals that helped him was a fortune. A month's salary for a week's worth of lugging samples into town. The two thousand didn't include the palm money to brigands – both the legal and illegal kinds – to keep the ten scientists safe from harassment. Money made the world go round...

Already, a star appear in the morning sky. It was a bright pinprick that grew quickly.

One of the scientists, Markley, approached him, her hand reaching out to grip his arm. "There isn't much time..."

Terrance snorted. "No, there certainly isn't."

"Do you want to..." her voice trailed off.

Terrance tore his eyes off the light and looked at her. Her brown hair was still pulled back and her face was blotchy from crying. She was absurdly plain, not ugly, but certainly no beauty queen. She wasn't unattractive by any means. Was she propositioning him? She was one of three women in the party. He looked at the group by the sat radio. None of the other two women were anywhere to be seen.

"You've got to be kidding," he replied, not trying to be hurtful, but he really didn't want to spend the last few minutes on this world sweaty with someone he didn't like, much less know. No, he was content on staring this rock down alone.

Without a word, she spun around rushed away so Terrance climbed further up on the rock steps, turning around to lean back against them so that he could watch through the canopy to the eastern striking point. The sat radio said it would be hitting only five hundred miles or so away and that they'd be dead in the first superheated wave front. Likely they wouldn't even feel much except their skin burning for a few micro seconds.

Terrance wasn't looking forward to that experience, but he shrugged and lit up another cigarette. This was going to be an interesting - though brief - show. He was glad he didn't have kids. Or Markley underneath him.

She appeared at the base of the steps, rising up them slowly before sitting down on the steps beside him. He offered her his cig and she took it. She took a deep hit of the cig. It was unfiltered and she choked on it. Terrance loved it. Her eyes watered but she didn't hand it back, which kind of pissed him off. He only had three left.

"Couldn't find anyone to scratch your itch?"

"They're all gone. Disappeared. Some running to find places of their own. Some just running."

"I'm surprised you stuck around."

"Thought you might change your mind."

Terrance snorted again, lighting up a new cig. Still... "I just might." He took a hit from it and said: "It seems like it's two am and the pickins' are getting slim..."

"God, you're such an ass."

Shrugging, he looked up in the sky, wondering how much longer he'd have to deal with her. As the awkward seconds turned into minutes, for him the end couldn't come fast enough. What was once a pinprick of light was now the size of a car headlight. It

had gotten noticeably brighter, as if the sun was intensifying. The ambient heat had also risen.

“Moving fast,” she muttered.

Sighing, he tossed the spent cig. Better get this over with before he missed out on the final curtain call. He had decided to fulfill her wish, if only to get his own rocks off.

As he started to rise, the ground shook. Gently at first, then it intensified. Leaping up, he grabbed Markley’s hand to balance her. He didn’t want her to fall off the steps and die early. At least not until he shot off. It occurred to him that he really didn’t like scientists.

A low whine filled the air and it slowly began to build.

“Where’s that coming from?” Markley asked - her fingers tightly entwined with his.

Unsure, he swiveled his head, determining that it was coming from beneath their feet. Above them as they watched, the rock plug that sealed the entrance to the overgrown pyramid popped off with a hiss and it slid down side of the pyramid. Both stumbled to the side of the steps, avoiding it.

“What the hell?” Terrance muttered, dragging Markley up the steps, leading the way to the now open entrance. There the whine was louder, but the pitch remained the same, slowly rising in intensity and speed. A flickering shadow danced at the end of the long corridor.

“What’s going on?” Markley asked - her hand sweaty in his. Her nails were digging into his palm, but he didn’t bother to shake her free. Her presence was somewhat comforting.

“I don’t know - I’m not the scientist!”

“Fuck you! I’m only an intern!”

Terrance ignored her and led the way inside where it was dry and hot and getting hotter. The dancing lights entranced him as he walked towards them. The corridor had no side passages and the dancing lights looked to him like lightning. As he turned the corner, he realized he was right.

It was lightning. Only it was unlike anything he had ever seen before. The corridor opened up into a large circular hall-like structure with a smooth floor. In the center there was an opening that led downward. Above it floated a smooth silver sphere roughly fifty feet across with lightning dancing over its surface. Just beneath the floating sphere was a shiny metallic rod that was rising up out of the opening.

Terrance walked into the hall, staring up at the huge sphere. Crackling from the lightning deafened him and it wasn’t until he realized that Markley was tugging at him, trying to get his attention. She pointed down through the opening in the floor, and he could see a red glow beneath.

“It’s some kind of power reactor!” she shouted. “Feeding off the geothermal energy of the planet!” She pointed to the rod. “That’s the converter. There must be some form of transference between this rod and the sphere. The sphere is collecting the power.”

“So what is this thing?” he asked, gesturing all around him.

She shrugged. The ground shook again and all around them metallic columns rose out of the floor in a circle around the silver sphere. They were around two feet in diameter and slowly rose up into the air, dwarfing both of the two witnesses.

“If it is fission or fusion based, those are cooling rods! It should be ramping up to full power!” Markley was shouting now and Terrance could barely hear her because the whine had turned into a roar.

The amount of lightning increased dramatically as the columns rose and when they stopped the sheer amount of its flashing blinded Terrance. He was forced to look away and all the hairs on his arms and head stood up on their own. Markley looked like a one of those troll dolls, her brown hair stood out from her head.

“Static charge!” she mouthed to him. Lightning shot from the sphere to the columns with increasing frequency. All of his nerves stood on end and he suddenly believed that if they stayed, he’d be cooked alive.

Terrance backed away, out of the circle of columns, dragging Markley out of the room into the relative safety of the corridor.

“I definitely it’s a reactor of some sort! Something ancient!” Her eyes were wide with manic glee.

“Is it reacting to the asteroid?”

“I don’t know!”

Seconds passed and the heat and electricity increased until they were forced away. Markley released his hand and ran outside, bouncing down the chiseled steps and looking up in the sky. A hot wind had picked up and several of the other scientists, some half dressed, now stood outside the fauna, staring up at the trembling pyramid. The lightning was now visible at the top of the pyramid. The metallic columns had risen to the point that they were visible on top. The coagulated lightning swirled around them, coalescing in greater and greater amounts. The vegetation on top was on fire, burning down and away in a rush. There was a terrific roar and suddenly a vortex of lightning spat upwards, looping around, spiraling towards the bright light of the false sun that bore down on the planet.

It became cohesive stream, burning upwards towards the asteroid that was quickly becoming a meteor.

“Christ!” Terrance shouted as the beam intensified, geometrically expanding to encapsulate the entire top of the pyramid. The swelling heat wilted the plants around them and everyone was forced to scatter. Then the vegetation burst into flames and Terrance pushed Markley in front of him into the forest and away from the burgeoning fires. Everyone, including Terrance, found themselves screaming as they fled. Within seconds, they lost track of the other fleeing scientists in their panicked flight. Water appeared before them and he dragged Markley into it, shoving her beneath the water as he dove in behind her. When he surfaced moments later, the jungle canopy was on fire all around them. But through it all, he could see the bright white beam from the pyramid striking the point in space where the meteor had last been seen. It didn’t explode or any other such dramatics, it simply sat on it, pumping its energy into that spot in space.

“It’s destroying the meteor!” Markley gasped, pulling her shirt up over her mouth to filter out the blowing smoke and ash.

“How the fuck do you know that? And how? With that lightning?”

“No, it’s not lightning! They have to be highly charged particles! The particles are interacting with the surface of the meteor and breaking it apart! Like a controlled explosion! As it falls to earth, it breaks apart faster and faster, but the push of the beam slows it down dramatically! So gravity’s pulling it down and the force of the beam holds

it up. It's running on the same principle as the laser lift system! But in this case the particles of the beam then destroy the object. It's amazing!"

"Are you sure you're an intern?" His opinion of Marley was lowering. He decided he really had a dislike of scientists or smart people in general.

"Fuck you!"

Over the next four hours, the pair stood in chest high water, watching as the forest burned around them. The hot wind picked up further, swirling ash and embers all through the jungle. It was a firestorm. A few members of the party straggled out of the forest, taking refuge in the stream. Many were burned.

The pyramid stood alone amid the carnage, constantly pumping the particle lightning into the spot in the sky where the meteor had been.

Then, just as suddenly, the beam cut off. The pyramid's top glowed white hot. The sky was no longer blue, but a bright red. It was like a deep sunset, even though it was barely two in the afternoon. The meteor was gone.

"That's a result of remaining particles glowing in the sunlight," Markley told him. "Soon they'll be entering the atmosphere..." As she said that, slivers of light began cutting across the sky, growing in quantity. Soon it seemed as if it was raining light. Some fell all the way to the earth but most were gone in a few seconds.

"Meteorites," he said in wonder. "Thousands of them."

"Hundreds upon hundreds of thousands. And all of them harmless." She laughed and began trudging her way out of the water.

The ground shook, and she dove down into the water, her eyes wide in new fear. In the distance, the roar from the pyramid ceased. The rods that stuck out the top of the pyramid's top dropped out of sight and then a huge gout of steam rushed out of the pyramid's openings, exploding out and up into the atmosphere.

Slowly Markley stood up and meekly looked back at him. "It's only venting. Shutting the reactor down."

"I figured as much."

"Why are you such an asshole?" she asked.

Terence shrugged. "Duh. Because I am one?"

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The General sat slumped in his chair, staring in disbelief up at the screen. The threat was gone.

But. There was always a but.

All around the world, nuclear nations were on high alert. Moscow had already called in threats and questions, as did Beijing and Jerusalem. NORAD had jumped to DefCon Two with all other nuclear capable nations quickly following suit. The world suddenly teetered on a new brink.

"What the hell just happened?"

Gibson struggled to keep up with the information presented to him. "We registered a massive particle surge emanating from the middle of the Amazon. It seems to have destroyed the bogey, General. Though I can't really be sure because we've got radar signatures falling all over the southern hemisphere. I think they are harmless though..."

"Destroyed?"

“With the exception of these disappearing radar signatures, it has been destroyed.”

“How? The Brazilians don’t have that kind of technology!”

“Neither do we.” Gibson turned back to the readouts. There were indications of six sources of randomized energized particles located in six geostatic positions around the world. One happened to be the one that destroyed the asteroid. As he watched the six sources disappeared, but their locations were registered. Within thirty-six hours, they’d have teams on the ground at all six. That was if the world didn’t implode in the mean time...

“Then who?”

The phone kept buzzing insistently.

“I wouldn’t worry about that, General, sir. I’d worry about how you’re going to calm the rest of the world down.”

The General slowly reached for the phone. Calming the world wouldn’t be easy...

End