

INNOCENT EARTH

DALE E. MCCLENNING

SAMPLE

Arhus loved looking at the buildings of Jerusalem as he took the elevator to the one hundred and seventh floor. The towers of glass and carbon nano-tube glistened in the rising sun. The glass tube-connected towers formed a ring around the green of the park far below. Leaves turned in the wind, showing dark to light green and back, like a carpet walked over by an invisible man who paced the floor. The sunlight flowing through the glass tubes made rainbows above the treetops. After a rain, the leaves would sparkle in the sun, adding to the effect. It was a few moments of pleasure before the start of work. How such beauty could come from a city that had been erased by nuclear warheads eighty years ago made it more wondrous.

Not until he was almost at his floor did Arhus notice that the others in the elevator were huddled in groups of two or three with their hands to one ear. They spoke in short, hushed tones to each other. Arhus's earpiece was off so it would not intrude on his short morning revelry. As the elevator door opened, Arhus turned his earpiece on with a practised shake of his head. He was immediately onset by a swarm of conversations. Normally, the conversations were calm enough that one could listen to two, three, or even more at once with practise. Today, they were frantic to the point of blurring into each other.

As Arhus walked into the cluster that was his work area, he spotted Josef Buddo standing in front of a large screen with a crowd of others. Walking up behind Buddo, Arhus tapped him on the shoulder. Josef turned around with a start.

“What’s happening?” Arhus asked.

“Haven’t you heard?” Josef asked with wide eyes.

“I had my connection off like I do every morning,” Arhus replied with a shrug.

“Then you’ve missed it!”

“Missed what?”

“Titan monitoring station tracked an object coming Earthward at 0.87c!”

“0.87c?”

“Yeah! That means…”

“That our notification of the object got here a short time before the object itself.” It was Arhus’s eyes’ turn to widen. “What goes that fast?”

“Nothing man-made, that’s for sure.” Josef grabbed Arhus’s shoulders. “It’s our first contact with other life!”

Josef was all but jumping up and down. Arhus just stood there, staring into space.

“How can you be sure it’s another life form?” Arhus asked Josef, trying to get a view of the screen. “Maybe it’s just a rock in space.”

“Going 0.87c? You have to be kidding!” Josef pleaded for sanity with his hands.

“And it’s headed toward Earth?”

“Yes!” After he said it, Josef started to look a little worried.

“Then let’s hope it is intelligent or we will not be around to correct each other,” Arhus said. A murmur went up from the screen crowd.

“The report is coming in from the moon station!” Ayso said.

“Why can’t they just look at it with the telescope?” Miranda asked.

“It’s going at almost the speed of light! The image doesn’t get there much sooner than the object does. At best, it would look like a smear; at worst, they wouldn’t be able to find it in the sky.” That was Karlstad.

“Trust a German to know the details, even if he is a diplomat.”

“Quiet! What are they saying?” a woman said. Sindie had the sharpest tongue on the floor when she wanted. Her one hundred pounds of energy could be daunting even for her shorter than average height.

“To repeat,” the man on the screen said in an increased volume, “the object has reached the vicinity of the moon and has slowed to

one-third the speed of light and appears to continue to slow. We are trying to get an estimate now of where they believe the object is headed on the Earth, given that its trajectory does not change, of course.”

“So when will it be here?” Sylva asked.

“At the rate it’s going, not long.” Karlstad again.

“The object appears to be approximately six hundred metres in diameter and round in nature,” the man on the screen continued. “The space authority has just released a picture of the object which we are going to show you now. Because of the high speed of the object, the picture is a little fuzzy.”

The man’s face was replaced by a blurred picture of a round object that appeared to be flat on the bottom and domed on the top with a severe angle to the dome from the bottom to the top. It was made of a smooth, shiny material with little variation in colour.

“It’s a flying saucer!” Josef called out while pointing at the picture.

“It is!” Sylva answered.

“Who would have guessed?” Arhus said, glib on purpose.

“But where is it headed?” Miranda asked.

Arhus turned from the screen and ran to his work area. Turning on his computer interface en route, he typed in commands solely because it was faster than using the holographic interface. A globe appeared, followed by a moon and vectors representing the moon’s path. A small pause while data was retrieved led to a new vector being displayed. A countdown appeared next to the head of the new vector, starting around twelve seconds. Arhus then called up a probabilistic algorithm. Areas on the globe became dark, at first oceans, then mountains, and then a narrowing circle of oscillating dashes that became ever smaller. In a few seconds, the circle was small and a name appeared next to it. Arhus ran back to the screen crowd.

“Here! It’s coming here!” he shouted.

“What?!” Josef said, turning from the screen.

“Probabilistic analysis says that Jerusalem is the most likely place the ship is headed.” Arhus found himself short of breath.

“Why do I suddenly want to be visiting my parents?” Worry covered Josef’s face.

“We are now being told,” the man on the screen was saying, “that the most likely destination of the object is Jerusalem.”

Exclamations were heard as people headed to the windows or the

elevators. Arhus let them pass before making his way to the window, not wanting to be trampled. The scene that greeted him was the sky above eastern Jerusalem, filled with clouds and lightning. Bunching together, the clouds looked like the white foam of a tidal wave marching toward Jerusalem. The wave moved up and curled back instead of toward them as the ocean would. The tidal wave of compressed air flooded the city, obscuring the view of anything but the clouds that marked its progress. Droplets formed on the cooler windows. The clouds were pushed away as a large, metallic object travelled through the middle of the lightning storm straight at the city. It travelled at a speed that seemed impossible to stop before entering downtown. People gasped, some holding onto each other.

“It’s going to crash!” a woman yelled in panic.

“Why come all this way to crash?” Josef asked in soft disbelief.

People ran from the window. Arhus stood and watched. If the ship crashed, it would pass through their building. There was no way they could move fast enough to get out of the way.

Against all physics, the ship stopped in mid-air outside of town. The clouds continued to swirl in front of the ship in circles as large as the craft. The air that had been drawn behind the ship kept its momentum and passed along the ship, pulling clouds with it and cleansing the ship of the clouds. No breaths were heard until the clouds dispelled and revealed the ship hovering in place. A common sigh of relief went out as everyone stood and stared at the ship. It felt as if the world stood still.

“LET’S GET OUT THERE!” Josef yelled. The statement was enough to cause half the people to scramble for the elevator. The rest stayed at the windows, staring at the ship. Arhus tried to find any markings, lights, or features on the ship that would give some hint about the beings inside, but there were none. The entire surface was smooth. Even the outer edge had no rim but smoothly transitioned under the ship. He couldn’t even tell if the craft was spinning or not.

“Where did it stop?” Miranda asked.

“I believe it is just outside the city proper,” Karlstad answered, “above what used to be called the Mount of Olives.”

“Shit!” Arhus said. He turned and ran back to his computer.

“What?” It occurred to Arhus that the voice belonged to Eymen. Before he could get to the computer, the media screen caught Arhus’s eye. A map of Jerusalem was on the screen with a small, silver circle.

Arhus ran over to the screen and stared.

“Damn,” Arhus said in what he thought was a soft voice.

Eymen ran up behind Arhus. “What’s up?”

“The ship is hovering over the Mount of Olives.”

“So?”

“That is where the Bible says Christ ascended into the heavens and would return,” Arhus replied.

“You a Neo-Utilitarianism or something?” Eymen asked.

“No, I practice Virtuism,” Arhus said as he walked back to the window.

“Then how do you know?” Eymen followed Arhus.

“It helps to understand a language if you understand the cultural background. Christ crosses several cultures and thus languages I speak.” Arhus made it back to the window. The clouds had settled down and started responding to the winds that normally drove them. The ship hung among them, immobile.

“What are they waiting for?” Eymen asked as they stared at the ship.

“Maybe it takes a while to adjust after stopping so fast.” He waited before saying anything else. “Maybe they are waiting to see if we attack.”

“Maybe they are waiting for us to say something,” Eymen said. “You know, make our greeting first.”

“How would we do that?” Arhus asked.

“You’re asking me? I’m not a protocol specialist. I just schedule meetings.”

“So schedule a meeting with the aliens, will you?” Arhus gave a small laugh with the statement.

“You have their contact information?” Eymen shot back.

“Touché, touché.”

As the men watched, their eyes were distracted by the movement of the other buildings’ elevators going back and forth to the ground floor. The elevators were packed.

“Where are they going?” Eymen asked.

“Maybe they want to get as close to the ship as they can or be the first to greet our visitors when they come down,” Arhus offered.

“I-I think I will let someone else do that job,” Eymen said with a stutter, “just in case.”

“In case of what?”

“Exactly!”

A light started to appear at the very top of the craft. The light was stark white and as bright as an arc-light. The light grew out of the craft until it was a spherical beacon, a ball of pure, intense light resting at the pinnacle. The sphere was too bright to see inside. Both men held their breaths.

WE... RETURN!

The voice filled Arhus’s head. More than just filled, it pushed outward from the inside of his skull. There was pain. He became dizzy and couldn’t see because the voice occupied all thought. He felt his knees hit the floor. Covering his ears with his hands did nothing to lessen the intensity of the words that echoed back and forth inside his skull again and again as if they were phantom images. When the intensity subsided, he found himself prone, his forehead touching the floor and his hands on top of his head.

Fighting dizziness, Arhus made the effort to raise his head until he was in a sitting position. Everyone left in the room was on the floor also, some prone and some on their backs. The one exception was Miranda, who had somehow wedged herself between a pillar and the window. She looked uncomfortable, leading Arhus to decide to help her first. Rising to his feet would have been impossible if the windows weren’t right there to use as support. Small steps and lots of leaning got him across the floor to Miranda. By the time he got there, he was feeling well enough to stand on his own and lift the woman out of her trap.

“Thank you,” Miranda said in a whisper as Arhus helped her stand.

Trusting she could cope, Arhus turned back to the others. Most were stirring and a few were sitting up. All were holding their heads as if waking from a record-breaking bender. Eymen was attempting to stand and make his way to Akmal, an elderly man who specialized in southern Pacific dialects. Arhus made his way there, too. By the time he arrived, almost falling once, Eymen had turned the man over. Blood seeped from the man’s nose. Eymen put his finger to the man’s throat and then laid his head on the man’s chest. He brought his head up slowly after a few seconds.

“He’s dead,” Eymen said.

“How?” someone next to them asked. Arhus was still too dazed to recognize the voice.

“His heart couldn’t stand the strain, I guess,” someone else said.

“Probably more like a brain aneurysm,” Eymen said. “That voice was extremely loud.”

“If it was a voice,” Arhus asked, “why didn’t it break the windows?”

“They are pretty sturdy,” someone said.

“But the sound would have to come through the windows,” Arhus replied.

“It would be a good question for the engineers,” Eymen said. Placing Akmal’s hand on his chest, he said, “I guess we’ll just leave him here until a medic shows up.”

“I’ll put in a call.” Arhus registered the voice as Karlstad after a prolonged second of mental processing.

“All that just to say ‘I have come’,” Sindie commented.

“That’s not what he said,” Eymen said, looking at Sindie as he stood. “He said, ‘We arrive’.”

“I didn’t hear either of those,” Arhus said, furrowing his brow

“It’s easy enough to settle,” Sindie said, turning toward the workstations, smugness in her voice. “We’ll just check the building noise monitors.”

“If they pick up bird activity on the roof, I’m sure they would have picked up that!” Eymen said, following her.

Arhus did a visual check of everyone else before following. No one else appeared to be suffering more than the rest and all were recovering well. *Whatever it was*, he thought, *it doesn’t seem to last long.*

Sindie was busy swiping her finger across the holographic interface. Her face was contorted as if in a struggle. “It has to be here somewhere,” she stated.

“What’s wrong?” Arhus asked.

“We can’t find a record of the words from the alien,” Eymen replied.

“That’s not possible, we all heard it,” Arhus said.

“There’s no record. All I am finding is bird noise.” Sindie kept moving her finger in the hologram. Bird calls were the only sounds from the speakers.

“Could the aliens have some way of generating sounds only people can hear?” Eymen asked.

“The sensors pick up everything, even stuff we can’t hear,” Sindie

said. "I just don't understand."

Arhus put his elbow in his hand and his hand under his chin. "We're missing something here."

"We're missing a lot!" Eymen said. "We're dealing with a fricking alien! Who knows what we're dealing with!"

Eymen was panting as he spoke. Arhus began to worry he would hyperventilate. Sindie's movements were getting quicker; her breathing was getting faster; and her face was getting red. *We all need to calm down*, Arhus thought.

"What World Council department would handle this?" Arhus asked aloud.

"There's a good question," Eymen replied, straightening up from looking at the display. "I wonder if that's even been decided yet."

"Computer," Sindie said into the display, "who has been put in charge of contacting the alien ship?"

"A commission is being formed," a voice from the speakers said. "Many departments have... volunteered... to be a part of the commission."

"More like they are insisting," Eymen said. "I am sure there are a lot of people who think this will make their careers. I should know, I deal with them every day."

"Computer," Sindie continued, "are the security forces included?"

"Security is asking to be included," the voice replied.

"Of course they are," Arhus said. "Why would we expect any different?"

"Who is the head of the commission?" Sindie asked.

"At the moment it appears the vice-commissioner Arlan Morresette will be in charge of the commission."

Eymen groaned. "Great, we're doomed."

"Just because you don't like the guy," Arhus said, "doesn't mean he's not competent."

"The man's a pain in the ass," Eymen said, emphasizing the last word.

"Demanding, yes. Particular, yes. Both might be good for what he will be dealing with." Arhus tapped his finger on his chin, not thinking about the commission.

The display changed to a man's face. In fact, all the displays changed to the same face at the same time: Rossarro Cashel, department head of the translator's office in Jerusalem and their

supervisor. His face looked like it had been sealed air-tight, but then, that was how it always looked. His eyes scanned back and forth across the screen.

“Where is everyone?” Rossarro asked.

“Some went outside,” Sindie replied. “Akmal’s dead.”

“Dead?”

“Eymen thinks that voice caused a brain aneurysm. We called the medic.”

“Shit! The last thing we need is to be losing people right now. I’m calling everyone back. The whole World Council is going nuts. I need some people at the central committee room now and I guess you three are it!” They could see Rossarro’s hand in the display pointing at them.

“I’m not even a translator!” Eymen said, his head pushed back as if by the hand, his eyes wide.

“Doesn’t matter! You speak several languages, so you’re assigned. Not like any of us speak alien anyway. Now go!”

Rossarro’s face disappeared from the screen.

“We better get there right away,” Arhus said, resigned. He disconnected his electronic interface from its dock on the workstation and placed it on his wrist on the way to the elevator. Eymen and Sindie already had theirs on. When the lift-car arrived, several medics got off. Sindie pointed the medic toward Akmal as she got on.

When all three were inside, Arhus told the elevator, “Top Floor.”

“It’s going to be chaos up there,” Eymen said.

“It’s chaos everywhere, I’m sure,” Sindie replied. “They should have sent someone else.”

“Thanks a lot,” Eymen said.

“Not you, stupid, I meant myself!” Strain covered her face as she fidgeted in place. “I hate dealing with those people. Any people, actually.”

“Oh, sorry,” Eymen said, more resigned.

“Not that you should be either,” Sindie said without looking at him.

Eymen laughed.

“I am sure everyone is going to be on edge,” Arhus said in a calm voice, his meeting manner kicking in. “Stay calm, translate the best you can, *but* only when asked, and don’t translate anything that

sounds like something that the speaker shouldn't be saying."

"Yeah," Sindie said with a small huff, "we don't need another Geneva incident."

"Isn't that the one that doomed computer translations?" Eymen asked.

"Yes. Our biggest job is knowing what *not* to translate," Arhus said.

The lift-car slowed to a halt and the door opened to a short, wide hallway. Six security personnel stood outside a double door, announcing that they were in the right place. Nowhere else warranted that level of security. Arhus led the way to the doors. One of the security guards waved his hand in front of Arhus's face, checked his interface, and opened one of the doors. The manoeuvre was repeated for all three.

Arhus entered a room in less confusion than he had expected. About twenty people were already in the room and more were arriving from other doors. A man in an immaculate dark green suit walked up to him and raised an eyebrow. The realization that he had not dressed for the occasion flashed into Arhus's mind, but then, most people in the room hadn't either.

"Translators," he told the man, who nodded once and went back the way he had come. Arhus waited for the others to catch up with him. "Let's take a position over there. When they need us, they will call us over."

Taking a position against a wall that had no doors, Arhus scanned the crowd. The representatives in the room were higher in the organization than he was used to servicing. The thought caused a twitch he had to consciously suppress. The room was filled with commissioners and their aides. Senior Commissioner Mi Kutua stepped to one side of the round table, picked up the gavel, and hit its pad several times. All talking stopped as the commissioners turned toward Kutua.

"I know we are not all here yet," Mi said, "but we need to get started. The others will have to be briefed as they arrive. If everyone would please take a seat."

Mi sat in a chair next to her that an assistant had pulled back. The other commissioners took seats around the table. They seemed to leave as much space between each other as possible. Arhus noted groupings by political interest group, such as the African

Confederation and India. The North American ambassador was here but the United Americas representative was not in attendance. That and other absences made Arhus wonder how bad things were outside of the building.

“As I am sure you all heard,” Mi started, “a commission is being formed to contact our visitors, if that is possible. The make-up of that commission is not our task here,” she said in a firm voice. “Our task at the moment is to decide what appropriate actions should be taken due to our visitors’ arrival..”

“Should we not first,” a man sitting in the African Confederation’s group interrupted, “determine what exactly was said?”

The question seemed to cause Mi pause. “We all heard it.”

“Yes, we did,” the man continued. “But from my discussions with others, we did not all hear the same words.”

“I am not sure that matters,” Mi countered. “We all heard the same basic message.”

“Yes! But why did we all hear it differently?” The man’s hand rested on the table with one finger pointing up into the air. “And more importantly, does different people hearing it differently mean that the message was meant to be different to them?”

“We are not here to discuss philosophy,” Mi said, her voice becoming more pointed. “We need to set what kind of response will be allowed to this encounter.”

“It is not philosophy!” Another member of the African Confederation piped in. Arhus recognized him as Kuwa Tammil. “How can we decide how to respond if this visitor is sending different messages to different cultures? And maybe more important, how is this even possible?”

“It’s simple,” the North American ambassador said. “It spoke different languages at the same time.”

“So loud?” Kuwa asked. “How could they have done so without each of us hearing several languages at once?”

“I don’t know what kind of technology the aliens have!”

The discussion, as Arhus had expected, was getting heated. Multiple voices started speaking at once. To Arhus, people looked worried. The representatives were better at hiding it, but several of their aides almost looked sick with worry. Arhus’s brain had continued to work on the problem even before Rossarro had contacted them. Three people who worked in the same office, in the

same vicinity, had heard different words. How was that possible? Arhus's brain came to a conclusion.

Breaking all protocol, Arhus stepped forward until he was next to the table. Mi was trying to control the conversational chaos but it was a tough fight. The gavel hit its pad again. On the fourth hit, the conversations stopped.

"Everyone, please!" she shouted. "This is getting us nowhere!"

Ambassador Miguel Montoya from Spain sat across the table from Arhus, looking directly at him. "Did you have something to say, young man?"

Clearing his throat, Arhus said, "We didn't hear our visitors say anything."

"What do you mean?" Mi asked.

"The words were not communicated through our auditory senses," Arhus replied.

"Then how did we hear them?" Mi asked, suspicion in her voice.

"They were communicated telepathically." The statement brought murmurs from around the table. "That is why different cultures heard different words. Even our little group of translators heard three different phases, most likely because one of us is Turkish, one is Chinese, and I am Dutch. The telepathic communication was interpreted into different phrases by each of our brains. It also explains why it wasn't picked up by the building auditory sensors."

"It wasn't?" the North American ambassador asked. Arhus's brain put a name to the man: Greg Mallard.

"Yes, it was the first thing we checked."

"That is an interesting hypothesis," Mi said. "I am not sure how you would test it."

"You don't have to test it," Mallard replied. "They already did when they checked the auditory sensors. Any microphone in the whole city would have picked up that voice if it was auditory."

"We agree with the hypothesis," the Western Pacific Conglomerate representative Song Bir said. "We have reports from other parts of the world that everyone heard the same thing. There is no way a spoken word could have been heard that far away."

Mi scanned the members seated at the table. The expression on her face gave the appearance she felt besieged. Arhus stepped back from the table in the least obvious way he could imagine.

"If accepting the hypothesis ends the previous discussion and

allows us to proceed to more immediate needs, then I will accept it. Agreed?”

Heads nodded around the table.

“Good. To other business, then.”

A central holographic display run by a green-suited functionary kept track of the decisions made in the meeting. Arhus was called on twice for hushed translation advice. The others were not needed. After a couple of hours, the meeting broke up. Mi looked satisfied with the results. The representatives left first, but Ambassador Montoya walked over to Arhus instead.

“Keen observation, young man,” Montoya said as he extended his hand. He gave Arhus a firm handshake. “I’m not saying you’re right, but it is the best idea we have at the moment.”

“Thank you,” Arhus replied, trying to keep the nervousness out of his voice. It was the first time an ambassador had shaken his hand. Translators were used to being treated slightly better than furniture.

“Can I have your contact information, please?” Montoya smiled as he asked. Shocked, Arhus raised his hand in an automatic fashion to allow Montoya’s interface to scan his. “I have a feeling I will be needing your services in the near future.”

Montoya walked away from the stunned Arhus as Eymen walked up behind him. “Big score, that one.”

“I am beginning to wonder if any of this day is happening. I am awake, aren’t I?”

“It is happening, alright. I wonder how Rossarro is going to react to your direct link to an ambassador.” Eymen laughed at this thought.

“Not well, I assume,” Arhus said as he exhaled. “Let’s get back to the office.”