

Henry's Moment

by Ron Teachworth

The new century is at its mid-point. Fusion is producing ninety percent of the world's energy, surpassing renewable sources, while reducing oil-based applications to plastics, cosmetics, food, and auto racing. This holy grail of energy has its beginnings in the 1920s and now, one hundred, and fifty years later, the United States is building its fourth generation fusion reactors.

Henry Morrison was the lead director of the *Montana Fusion & Energy Center* (MFEC) lab located outside of Roy, Montana, population 115, mostly cattle farmers. Henry lived in Roy with his mother and referred to the facility as his 'lab' when he spoke to family and townspeople. It was Sunday, and he was ready for a day off after working a ten-day shift during which he monitored sky activity as well as the flow of electricity from the fusion reactors to the Northwest grid.

After their dinner, his mother asked him to take out the garbage, a ritual that had been repeating itself since he was a boy. He scoured the house, collected all the wastebaskets and divided the organic garbage from the recyclables. In the garage, he emptied everything into two large, wheeled containers, and then he started to roll them down the steep driveway to the street.

The light snow that had fallen during the day had melted and refrozen on paved surfaces once night came on and the temperature dropped. Halfway down the incline, Henry's feet slipped out from underneath him while the containers took on a gravitational force of their own and continued toward the street. He lay on his back staring into the clear night sky and its galaxy of stars as melting ice soaked through his pants. He took a deep breath. It seemed as if there was no serious injury to his body, but there was some pain not

to mention the discomfort of ice-cold water reaching his skin. At least no one was around to see what had happened and laugh.

Henry sat up. *Shit*, he thought. *I could have broken my back*. He slowly got up and eased his way to where the containers had rolled to a stop in the street. He rolled them back to the curb and started to make his way carefully back up the driveway when a flash of movement overhead caught his eye, probably a shooting star heading for the horizon. It was a common sight in this part of Montana, something that he had seen many times, but just before it reached the ground, the bright white light turned red and left his sight. He realized just then that the phenomenon had occurred right in the vicinity of MFEC.

Henry was single, had a Ph.D. from MIT in Nuclear Physics and had a variety of hobbies. He was obsessed with fly-fishing and tied his flies using fur, feathers, thread and hooks. He loved to fish a small remote part of the Missouri River not far from the lab. He fished early and late and would always stay in the shade, if possible, keeping his ripples small and close to his feet. He knew millions of years of evolution had given trout an amazing ability to blend in with their watery surroundings, but there was a trick he used: look for the fish's shadow.

A close second to fly-fishing was the study of asteroids, but as many as Henry had seen, none had ever sported a red trail. An asteroid he had been watching pass Earth a year ago was due for a return pass as part of its orbit but was not scheduled to hit Earth.

The *Montana Fusion & Energy Center* housed a very large fusion plant with six engines that provided energy to eight states in the upper northwest corner of the United States. The site had originally been home to thirty nuclear silos left over from the Cold War, but had gradually evolved into a fusion research facility. The multi-level security force was a carry-over that included a mix of military and civilian personnel. The fusion facility itself was located on fifty acres of government land that was heavily protected by a military perimeter and monitored by Maelstrom Air Force Base out of Billings. Henry ran the Sky Survey software that used an array of

military satellites to monitor celestial activity and could provide a warning system for incoming objects headed for Earth.

He looked at his cell phone screen and noticed an alert. From its Jet Propulsion Lab in Pasadena, NASA had tracked another asteroid dubbed E47-XM2. The agency had warned of a slight possibility that the asteroid would be pulled into Earth's orbit and land in a remote area of Montana, but most likely it would burn up in the atmosphere. There was a possibility that small pieces would reach an area east of Great Falls and north of Billings. *Maybe that's what I saw*, he thought, *but why the red trail?* The notification system was as good as its weakest link, which was whether or not the humans involved noticed the message in time.

When he walked back inside the house, his mother was sitting on the sofa in the small family room watching TV and knitting a sweater for her Henry's baby niece.

His mother barely glanced up when he came in and said, "Are you all right? You certainly took your time out there. Did you hear something? It sounded like an explosion."

"There was something off to the north on the horizon. It looked like a small asteroid that hit the ground out near the lab, but I'm not sure what it was." I noticed it when I slipped on black ice on the driveway. I'm fine, by the way, in case you're wondering."

"Do you know your pants are all wet in the butt?"

"Yes, Mother, I noticed that."

The red trail of light still lingered in his mind. *No sense mentioning that part to his mother*, he thought. She had moved into the kitchen where she was getting them both some ice cream when she said, "Maybe you should call in," And just then his cell phone rang.

"Hello, General," said Henry as he gazed at the familiar name on his cell phone screen.

"Henry, I just got a secure text message that there is a disturbance at the plant, but it came in from NASA on an emergency text line, code blue. Does that mean anything to you?"

Henry hesitated, and then said, "It's not a good sign General. We should have been notified first by our security personnel."

General Dwight Woodworth was the commander in chief of security for the fusion plant, and his voice was now loud and nervous.

"Could you get out there, Henry, and see what the hell is going on? Take your cell phone and don't forget your weapon. I am going to get in touch with Maelstrom and scramble a couple of F-35s to do an aerial survey. Keep this channel open and call me when you know more. Is that clear?"

Henry almost dropped his phone, "Clear, General, I am on my way."

After getting a BS in computer science at Stanford, Henry took a job with a Silicon Valley company, *DeepIntel*, whose sole mission was developing Artificial Intelligence applications for the Stanford Medical Center. When he left his position for MFEC, they let him take his cell phone, a new prototype that could access a supercomputer feed from the Bell Lab in New Jersey and all its applications. It was the most valuable possession he owned.

Sunday evening in Roy, Montana, was peaceful and quiet. The combined gas station / grocery store had just closed as Henry sped by in his Land Rover Wolf. He raced up Highway 191 and cut across the corner of Fort Belknap Reservation toward Malta. As he came over the Zortman Ridge, he could see the plant in the distance covered by a red cloud. He stopped the vehicle long enough to get out and snap a few images. Just then he saw the F-35s passing low over the facility, when suddenly they disappeared in midair. His stomach tightened.

What the hell?

He went to the back of the Rover, pulled out a full-faced respirator and used a special phone app to configure which filters to use. As he grabbed his NASA-made thermal gloves and buttoned up his jacket, he estimated the distance to the lab to be three miles away, four minutes by car.

When he arrived at the first security gate, he could see two military guards through the checkpoint's bulletproof glass slumped over, unconscious. Ten yards away lay two German Shepherd guard dogs.

He checked the guards' pulses, heartbeats and temperatures remotely with his phone. All normal. It was as if they were asleep. The only anomaly he could discern with his senses was the air temperature, which was twenty degrees higher than when he left home. The next two check points were the same with all military personnel unconscious, but he noticed the base warning system lights were flashing, and there was an alarm tone coming from the plant. He got out of the car and photographed the checkpoint.

He then continued slowly down the entrance road toward the main plant entrance observing the lack of activity everywhere. As he drew closer, the alarm tone was deafening. When he came to the open field, he saw the asteroid, about the size of a washing machine. It lay smoldering where it had come to rest after gouging a path through the high grass field. He pulled over about fifty feet from the large object and stopped the car. He splayed his flashlight beam over the surface of what looked like a typical asteroid until he saw a large, pizza-sized mass of red gel stuck to the top side. When he screened it with his phone, it was identified as a life form. He took four images. *Now is not the time to physically engage with the asteroid*, he thought. He needed to secure the fusion plant.

When he looked back at the facility, he saw what looked like multiple bands of red light connected to the *deuterium-tritium* storage units that reached up into the dark sky like high-powered searchlights. The streams of light had an internal fluidity as if some material was moving up to a holding source. A large number of dead birds lay under the large 660 mega-watt transformers that connected each of the six fusion engines. Coating from the mammoth power lines had melted, forming puddles of resin on the ground. Then a message appeared on his cell phone screen.

"We are here peacefully to extract deuterium-tritium fuel from your supply containers. We are temporarily interrupting your communication device from all incoming calls."

Henry spoke into his phone. "And the F-35 Fighter jets, I just saw disappear."

"Your hostile machines were moved through space to a location a thousand miles due south and are safe. We need to continue our operation without disruption. Stand by; we are nearing completion."

Henry noticed incoming calls on his cell phone blinking on all three secure channels.

"It will not work until we are finished."

Henry asked, "Who are you?"

"We are Philomen Bacterium and have traveled here to extract fuel for our planet. We have been using fusion energy for nearly a thousand years and now find ourselves in short supply."

Henry leaned up against his car and felt a pain in his back from his earlier fall.

"Where are you from?" Henry asked.

"A distant planet in the Andromeda Galaxy in orbit around a neutron star about 2.5 million lights years from your Earth. Our galaxy is spiral shaped like your Milky Way. Our complex life form has evolved over 10 billion years."

Henry was guessing he had little time, so he asked, "What have you learned that might help us?"

"You need to keep a close vigil on your X-Ray binaries from the Sun. The star and its blazing temperature could spill over at its outer-most edges. The material would be such a high temperature; it would destroy all life on your planet, and..."

The alarm stopped sounding, and the red gas started to lift slowly and become part of the red beam of light that reached upward into space. At a distance, Henry could see the guards slowly waking up and he knew time was short. The voice came again from his phone.

"The potential threat of your Artificial Intelligence is greater than that of the Sun."

Henry searched his memory back to his time at *DeepIntel*. “What do you mean by that?”

His cell phone indicated the atmosphere was now clear of gas. When he glanced at the asteroid, the red mass was gone. He disconnected his mask and breathed deeply as a response displayed itself on his screen.

“Artificial Intelligence has the potential to surpass humans. We call that trans-human activity. There is no physical law precluding Artificial Intelligence particles from being organized in ways that perform advanced computations far beyond the capability of the human brain. Parallel computation, data collection, and advance algorithms can speed up Artificial Intelligence growth and become dangerously counter-productive, even hostile. You need to harness the power to your benefit, and especially to improve your humanity through the critical vehicles of spirituality and art. Only these two concepts together will moderate the potential of hostility. The communication paused briefly, before continuing. We are finished here and will leave without notice. May peace be with you and your humankind.”

Suddenly the base lighting system came back on. Henry's phone lit up like a video game and began to ring and vibrate in his hand. He checked his phone for the images he had taken, but they were gone. It was a little past ten o'clock. As Henry looked around, everything had returned to normal. The asteroid was now gone, and a couple of security guards were heading his way.

He decided first to answer his mother's call.

“Hello, Mother.”

“Henry, did you find anything up there? You're going to miss that sci-fi movie on cable. The General has been calling, said he couldn't reach you. Are your pants dry? Can you hear me?”

“Yes, I can hear you, Mother. A stray moose got onto the plant property. It's gone now, and I'll be home in time for that movie. Is there any ice cream left?”

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