

## Long Shot

Andrew Sherwood

In the decades before extraterrestrials first contacted Planet Earth, there were three schools of thought as to how it would happen: The first school was expecting a message that said, "We come in peace. Live long and prosper." The second, more cynical school, also expected, "We come in peace. Live long and prosper." But it would be a lie. The third school of thought wasn't expecting a message at all, but rather a mushroom cloud, or an EMP, or something that would make their intentions absolutely clear.

It turned out, the third school was right.

Dr. Raymond Hargrave thought about that first message as he steadied the cue stick in his fingers. Six ball, side pocket. *Crack-Tap!* Off one edge, then the other. The ball landed with a satisfying thud in the pocket. Hargrave was glad they hadn't tried any subterfuge. He hated surprises. He did enjoy springing them on other people- it had been a big part of his job in the military before he went back to school. But he hated being on the receiving end.

The woman- *is that what they'd call it?*- in the video the Tarvanitians sent was something to be seen to be believed. She looked like a fashion model, with a vaguely exotic allure that looked pleasantly new and different- but not too different. Just enough to give you ideas.

"People of Earth, we ask, do not resist this colonization process. It is for your own good." The Ambassador had a smile that seemed designed to put you at ease. Maybe it worked for some people- but not Hargrave. She continued,

even giving coordinates for the ship that was now heading for them. That certainly made Hargrave's job of finding it that much easier.

Then again, the thing was kind of hard to miss.

It looked like a simple design, a sphere, with a thick, but mostly featureless outer hull. And it was *huge*. Bigger than anything humanity could even dream of building. Hundreds of thousands of kilometers in diameter. The mass of more than a dozen Jupiters. Whatever FTL system they had would cut the interstellar journey down to just a few years. Not much time.

Dr. Hargrave took another shot- nine ball, corner pocket. A miss. That was unusual. He thumped a hand on the edge of the table as a door slid open behind him. A young Ensign leaned inside.

"Doctor? They're ready for you."

He nodded and followed her out into the corridor. When was the last time someone called him by his real name? First it was sir, or Major. Now it was Doctor. The tall panes of glass on the wall gave a clear view into the abyss outside. A gleaming solar panel stretched across half the sky. Below his feet was a sliver of Earth- an ocean, miles and miles below. Above it, the rocky, barren face of the Moon.

Hargrave hated space travel. It was even more boring than air travel, if that were possible. Everything about it messed up his usual routine. No day or night. The artificial gravity was always weak. The weight machines in the gym never compensated enough. And that was when they had gravity. No wonder the pool balls didn't like to go where they were supposed to.

Back when they'd first found the ship, he'd taken another trip off-world, to the Tycho Lunar outpost. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs had summoned

him personally. He was outside the chain of command at that point, but when you get a summons from the Admiral, you just go.

“Is it Major or Doctor now?” he had chuckled as Hargrave shook his hand. Hargrave forced a smile, and answered, “Whatever you want, sir.”

They poured over the telescope images of the ship again, as if it would teach them something new. “I don’t know why they kept calling it ‘colonization’ if they’re going to just take us back with them.”

Some other uniform scoffed at the idea. “It’s a bluff. How could they possibly move a six sextillion ton ball of *iron*?”

“If they can build that thing, and fly it here in under a century, I figure they can do just about anything,” said the Admiral.

“They don’t even need any special technology,” Hargrave said, piping up. “Just gravity. If they park their ship right next to us, they can catch Earth in an orbit around them, and take us wherever they want. The tricky part is keeping them from doing it.”

“That’s where you come in, Doctor,” said the Admiral. “You’re the only one with the military experience and technical know-how to do what we need.” He tapped his tablet screen and handed it to Hargrave. On the screen were the dossiers for the most stoic bunch of mug shots Hargrave had ever seen. “Your team has been hand picked from every military force on the planet- every job you could need, we have someone to do it. They are the best of the best of the best.”

He pointed down at one of the schematics of the Tarvanitian planet-ship. “As near as we can tell, there seems to be an access point in the hull near these coordinates. Your team will land on the surface, and infiltrate the vessel. You’ll

keep a low profile- but we've studied the anatomy from their video, and we have some tips on how to blend in. From there--

"I'm sorry, sir," Hargrave said, "but with all due respect, I think that's the last thing we ought to try."

"Doctor, we can't hope to match their ship-to-ship capabilities. Destroying it from the inside may be our only chance."

"Admiral, I'd rather parachute into Pyongyang, wearing a bull's-eye on my back, and blaring an air horn the whole way down. There are probably trillions of Tarvanitians onboard, not to mention the distance we'd have to cover inside."

The Admiral was silent. He stared down at the schematics, the dossiers- all the careful plans they'd drawn up. "What do you suggest, then?"

Dr. Hargrave thought for a moment. "We can't use ships or missiles... but we might be able to hit them with something... big. Big enough to cause a massive amount of damage, maybe even knock them off course."

The uniform at the back of the room called out again. "And what do we have that would possibly be big enough to do that?"

Dr. Hargrave folded his arms and stared at the ground beneath his feet. Tapped his heel against the floor. "This should do it."

The Admiral gaped. "You want to hit them... with the *Moon*?"

That was the not the last bit of skepticism Dr. Hargrave heard about the plan. Certainly not when humanity would be devoting every resource it had putting it into action. But somehow, they had gotten it done. It had taken months of preparation, and years of work. And they didn't have much time.

As he followed the Ensign down the corridor, he looked at their makeshift missile just outside the window. A gaping black hole had been dug out of the lunar surface, ringed by a sprawling complex of buildings. A Texas-sized job like this required a Texas-sized hole. It was an ugly wound, on such a beautiful face, but it was necessary. The five hundred thousand colonists had long since been evacuated. They'd put up a fuss, of course. Many of them had lived on the Moon their whole lives- they would never adjust to Earth's stronger gravity, and would be lucky to operate a wheelchair. But it was for their own good. Good for everyone.

The Ensign led Dr. Hargrave into the station's command center and took her post at a computer station. Another clear pane of glass would give them a perfect view of the show. Hargrave joined the Admiral in the middle of the room, next to the Master Arm station. They shook hands.

"Would you like to do the honor?" The Admiral asked, gesturing to the switches and button on the console.

"Please, Admiral, you deserve it."

"I insist, Doctor."

Hargrave lifted the cover on a switch and flipped it. A klaxon sounded throughout the room, and the computer spoke: "Warning. System armed."

"There are trillions of them on that thing," Hargrave said. "I'm sure someone would call this genocide."

"I know," said the Admiral. "But they started it."

Hargrave chuckled. "That's what they all say." He leaned on the button. The klaxon sounded again.

Outside the window, there was a flash of light. A puff of gas. Dust and cracks around the center of the pit. Then nothing. "I'm reading major seismic activity," the Ensign called out. "At least a nine on the Richter. And... yes. We have acceleration."

Hargrave breathed a sigh of relief. No one would notice anything now, but in the coming months, the Moon would slowly disappear from the night sky. It would pick up speed as it fell toward the center of the system- and the Sun. It would swing around behind it, going even faster still. When the Tarvanitians arrived, it would be coming back. And there would be no stopping it.

All they'd given it was just a nudge. A tap. That was all it needed. Unfortunately, there would be no surprise involved. If the Tarvanitians hadn't seen anything now, they would soon. All it would take was a burst from their thrusters, and everything would be for naught. But Hargrave knew this.

They had enough fuel for a couple of adjustments, if needed. But they would need to be made carefully, depending on what the Tarvanitians did. If there was one thing to like about space travel, it was predictable. Gravity would never surprise you. People could. And Hargrave hated surprises.

The Moon missile was on its way now, and nothing would slow it down. It was a long shot, but if it hit, there was no question it would do the job.

If.