

WASTELAND OF SAND AND ICE

Rapid response.

BY TOMÁS MCMAHON

Autonomy is a beautiful thing.

06:00: The time of rising. Not the best time to learn of an asteroid hurtling past Uranus at more than 40 million metres per second.

06:30: The time of bathing. AbyssRho's computer monitors were awash with triangulation data and extrapolated vectors. The results were in, the likelihood of terrestrial impact looking shockingly like the percentage of bacteria a good hand soap claimed to kill.

07:00: The time of breaking fast, the time to break old rivalries. One of the benefits of the Deep Space Identification Network being a multinational project was that NASA and Roscosmos received exactly the same data. An agreement was made and the asteroid named: 2037 KD.

The Post-War Asian Union wires the money and takes a step back from whatever AbyssRho does with it. Far simpler for both parties that way.

08:30: The time for toiling, preparing for the inevitable. Missile codes were requested, authorized thrice and ultimately given. PerUN, GUATAUVA, Lei Gong, turned away from their endless showdown amid their ruined brethren to gaze up into space. The plan was simple: if KD was to reach to Earth, it would have to dance through hell.

On any other day, three major superpowers relinquishing possession of their military satellites' kinetic warheads would have been seen as a sign of imminent world peace. That day, however, was not like any other.

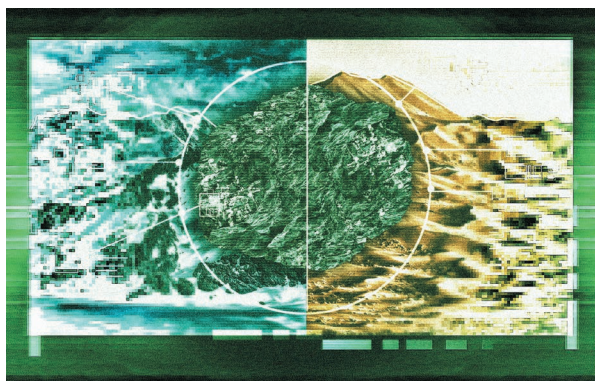
Meanwhile, near the Bay of Bengal, unnoticed, a hurricane began to build.

14:00: The time to return to work. It was around Saturn that KD had been imaged, distant and low-resolution, initially appearing almost as an anticlimax. The asteroid wielded no scythe nor rode an ashen horse, however, upon closer inspection, its true deadliness soon became apparent. A smaller package simply meant a smaller mass and, in turn, a smaller likelihood of interception.

17:30: The time KD passed Jupiter. About the time the button was pressed. By the

number of warheads up in the air, anyone could have thought that a nuclear apocalypse had somehow snuck up on them.

Their city of smoke pillars rapidly dissipated by the winds of the encroaching storm, many missiles wouldn't make it past the vast swathes of debris in Earth's orbit. Those that did would bear all of humanity's hopes of preservation. It was just a good thing they were machine and not mortal.



GUATAUVA automatically receiving data from the Deep Space Identification Network, no input required, certainly saves NASA plenty of precious time. Far simpler for both parties that way.

22:55: An insignificant time. 2037 KD's sudden deceleration came as a surprise. Dodged by the bullet is an uncommon phrase for obvious reasons, but here it was most appropriate. How else would one describe a body decelerating from one-sixth the speed of light to one-forty-millionth?

23:00: The time of rest. The Torino level slashed, just like most of AbyssRho's funding. *The price to pay for wasting the Union's warheads.*

Adrift within the spacecraft graveyard of Earth's orbit, its solar-sail finally fully collapsed, KD 2037 gazed down towards the blanketed planet beneath.

00:00: The time of sleeping soundly. Dashed upon the Himalayas, the storm smothered all of central Asia in an anarchic maelstrom. Above the chaos, KD fragmented, two, smaller objects splitting off. Within the opaque clouds, they fell gracefully, explosively stabilized with fire and wind-torn parachute. Like marionettes on unseen strings, the two were dragged off course, plummeting into sand and ice.

The Deep Space Identification Network reports potential asteroid threats and justifies PerUN's possession of kinetic warheads, in turn making it technically not a military satellite. Far simpler for both parties that way.

In the predawn hours of the following morning, the hurricane had torn itself apart. After KD flew into a debris cloud and did not exit on the other side, it was assumed that it had suffered a similar fate.

As the last wisps of the ultimately short-lived storm spiralled beneath, a surveillance satellite, one of the last few left in operation, imaged an abnormality in the Siberian permafrost. Shallow but nevertheless noticeable, a crater, far north of Lake Cheko, thin tracks leading off to the southwest and, at their end, 2037 KD-01.

03:00: The time for toiling had come early. When the recovery teams at last cleared the snow aside, approximately half the fragment's mass was found at the site of its initial impact, what crawled out having only recently stilled, hull shattered and frozen.

Less than two hours later, at the bottom of a furrow dug into the leading edge of a sand dune, the second fallen object finally revealed its metallic self. In comparison with its twin, 2037 KD-02 had enjoyed a soft landing, the Gobi Desert acting to cushion its fall, allowing it to remain in operation for several hours — at least until the dune swallowed the second of the two rovers.

Autonomy truly is a beautiful thing.

06:00: The time of rising, tension, suspicions and, most of all, a search for any sort of explanation. Disassembly and reassembly on behalf of the Union and Russia, those actually in possession of a fragment, while NASA, through gritted teeth, was already planning a mission to salvage what it could of the orbiting body. As for missions themselves, the probes' had certainly ended in failure. The planet was clearly a wasteland of sand and ice, covered by an atmosphere of opaque gases and extreme winds, 2037 KD transmitting back as follows: *No life on Earth.* ■

Tomás McMahon is an A-level student in England. Until located, it can be presumed he is both sketching and out cycling in the Surrey hills at the same time.

ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY