

## Asteroid

Despite the late hour, the hospital room was a scene of chaos. Intermittent screams and pain had been replaced by a rush of blood and placenta, and then a moment of total stillness. The moment seemed an eternity for William – forever changed from man to father.

And then a tiny cry rang out from the newborn, and he was broken from his trance. Hoping to get some hint, he turned frantically toward the machine and searched for any sign.

The Custodian maintained an absolutely neutral expression. For her, the hospital room drama that had just played out was as routine as her morning coffee, and her job required her to reveal nothing. A quick prick from the doctor fed the blood sample to the COD machine, and she was the only one who would see the result before it was locked away for at least 18 years, perhaps much, much longer.

She had been doing this job for a very long time. Just a few years until she would retire with a lifetime of deaths that were reserved for her eyes only. She had thought she had seen them all. She held her face as neutral as always, prohibited from even the slightest expression. But this time, it was different. This time when she saw the COD, a chill shot down her spine.

\*\*\*

In the very early years after the invention of the Cause of Death machine, the requirement for a Custodian was hotly debated – though the screening of all infants was not. The plethora of data accumulated by the Central Information Organization was of such overwhelming value – particularly to the United Countries of Earth government - that no serious discussion of opposition was ever permitted. Indeed, although the particular cause of death for any one individual might have appeared cryptic at first, the accumulation and data mining of this cryptic information had led to very precise forecasting.

Not that the UCE government was ever particularly concerned about an individual's cause of death, but in the aggregate, the information was invaluable. The science of heuristical death modeling quickly emerged as a predictive tool for the government. With enough points of data, the computers could triangulate on anything they were missing.

With billions of causes of deaths neatly data-based and data-mined, the missing details, such as time of death, became irrelevant. Even the somewhat cryptic causes of death revealed by the machine could be compared with the actual method of death, and with enough examples, the mysteries of the machine's predictions were revealed.

The super-computers assembled patterns and observed sequences across millions of variables: ages, locations, causes; and related those to known actuarial information for likely age, time and very specific cause of death. The result was an amazing new tool for the government – the ability to predict times and dates of large scale accidents, mass murders, wars, famines and plagues years in advance.

The computers could note a pattern of similar cancers emerging in a community decades before they happened, and thus identify potential toxic or nuclear disasters long before the would occur.

A spike in COD's that were know to accompany major earthquakes – crushings, head-traumas, and even starvation (from being trapped under rubble) - in southern California births had allowed the UCE to warn, with amazing accuracy, of the massive May 24, 2032 earthquake in Los Angeles.

Of course, most people had evacuated in advance of the catastrophe, which was part of the value of the machine, saving countless lives – but enough people had stayed behind. Perhaps they thought they could outwit fate, or perhaps they didn't believe the prediction, or perhaps it was just human nature (conspiracy nuts even suspected that the CIO purposefully withheld some people's COD results to maintain the forecasting capability of COD machine). The individual reasons never mattered to the CIO or the UCE. They just knew that the process worked.

\*\*\*

Being a Custodian is a thankless job, Rebecca thought to herself as she left Valley Children's Hospital for the night.

People had often scoffed at her as a younger woman, when she would lament her career decision. They all thought it was so easy. After all, what was so hard about watching a machine read-out and keeping the information to yourself? The job paid well, and she had the security of being a government employee.

It was true that she had had to maintain a security clearance her whole life, and she knew that her emails and calls were monitored, but she had never been a very private person, so those intrusions had never really bothered her. She was a simple woman, who undertook no depravities so extraordinary that they would have made her self-conscious.

No, the work had been simple and the invasion of privacy had always been fine with her. It was a much more subtle issue that nagged at her: *knowing*. She would be the only one who knew how this person – this baby – would die, but she could never tell.

She thought these things as she put her car in reverse and began to back out of her spot. A thud on her trunk pulled her back into the moment and she slammed down on her brake.

A disheveled man appeared at her window and tried to open her door. It took her a moment to recognize the new-father William. He didn't look menacing, but he had a look of desperation in his eyes. She knew exactly what he wanted. She had had this encounter more than once in her years as a Custodian. He wanted to know what she had seen – his son's fate.

The car's locked door kept William out, and Rebecca could have easily slid her car around him and gotten away; but this time was different. This time, she had seen something about the child. For a split-second, she thought that William's presence might be its own kind of fate. For a fleeting instant, her mask slipped and she let out a look.

But the instant ended, and she caught what she had done. Embarrassed and afraid, she blasted out of her spot and drove herself home.

\*\*\*

The result of the debate over whether to have a Custodian seemed like a forgone conclusion in the early days. Since all the data was transmitted to the Central Information Organization, and by law, it could not even be accessed by the individual until they were at least 18 years of age, there seemed to be no need for anyone to monitor the result. Inserting a human anywhere in that loop seemed to be a needless point of failure. More importantly, if people were somehow to learn of their raw COD data (before it had been edited, or in some cases, classified), then they would effect the purity of the information that was the entire basis of heuristical death modeling.

If too many people avoided their fate, they could deprive the government of the data it would need to predict the future. The human component was considered by most in the UCE government to be counterproductive.

But the COD machine did what so few people in history have been able to do - it defied the authorities. Before heuristical death modeling had even had a chance to prove its merits, another remarkable statistical anomaly occurred: infant mortality abruptly ceased to happen. More specifically, infant mortality stopped for those children born with a COD machine that was monitored by a Custodian. When the human was not monitoring the machine, infants still died in the hospitals.

At the time, the results perplexed the experts, even though the cause turned out to be obvious. People had not yet come to implicitly accept the paradoxes that come with even the slightest knowledge of the future.

In the presence of a human, the COD machine would never display a cause of death that was instantly preventable. When transmitted to the CIO directly, the cause of death was often listed as "Sudden Infant Death Syndrome" or "infection" or even "infanticide." With a Custodian present, those results *never* occurred, and infants no longer died from those causes.

Arguments raged about the cause of this phenomenon. Was it the observation of the data, or the data itself that was causing this mysterious result? Perhaps, as with Schrodinger's cat, the infant is both alive and dead, but the presence of the human fixes it in the alive state? Some even argued that the presence of the COD machine itself was responsible for killing the babies!

Whether it was the observation by the human or the universe's unwillingness to allow for paradox, the fact remained that infant mortality was virtually abolished when there was a human observer for the COD machine, and even the UCE could not sway the public against that. Thus was born the job of Custodian.

\*\*\*

Rebecca sat stoically in front of the machine. Almost a year had passed since her encounter with the miscreant William outside her car. She would have been well within her authority to have reported him to the police, but something had stopped her. That look he gave her? The look she had given him? No, she thought, it was the strange result that she had seen. She had never seen that COD before, and she thought she had seen them all.

Odd that she should think of him so randomly. Her mind didn't often wander, and when it did, it didn't often think about episodes like that one. In fact, she realized, she hadn't thought about William since the very night he had appeared at her car window.

And then the thought was over, and she returned to blank. Nothing. Just waiting for the machine to tell her how this new child would die. Being a Controller was a more difficult job than most people realized.

Then, without warning, it happened. Rebecca gasped. It was slight. Almost imperceptible. But she gasped. No one saw it. At least, she thought that no one saw it, but for the second time in less than a year, she saw a readout with the same strange and frightening COD: *Asteroid*.

\*\*\*

In the grips of the Great Global Depression of the 2010's, the human race had almost lost its battle for survival. The belief that governments could control the boom and bust cycle of economies through endless stimulus and money printing had led the world into an economic bubble that encompassed almost every asset class. Things that ordinary people actually owned – land, homes and cash, all fell in value. The things they needed – food, energy, clothing – those all became too expensive to buy.

The riots had started peacefully in the middle-east, but those governments quickly and forcefully attempted to put them down. Violent riots erupted, and food riots began popping up throughout Europe. European governments tried to put on a unified face, but

their different circumstances caused increasing tensions, as bank after bank, and country after country needed bailing-out.

In the end, the riots spread across the Atlantic, as the USA, which had printed and borrowed more than any country in the history of the world, finally fell into a hyperinflationary depression.

Drastic and draconian austerity was forced on the world's population by the excesses of the past, and it was only by the stroke of luck that a digital global currency emerged at just the right time to replace the paper money that had been backed by nothing but the "full faith and credit" of bankrupt governments.

The breakup of Europe back into its constituent countries and the subsequent breakup of the United States into a multitude of newly formed states and countries reshaped the global landscape. The digital world – the internet – had coordinated the revolutions, and it was the same digital world that reformed the geopolitical complex. A new money. A new elite. A new world order, but run by the same old human race. The United Countries of the Earth was intended to be the last and best government for the world. It was a desperate effort, and a violent struggle that brought forth a vast destruction of life and knowledge. It commanded a reordering of many things once held as truths.

When all the dust had settled, the countries of the Earth, bloody and broken, had finally united under a single banner. The UCE regained control of the people. A single government ruled over all of humanity, and it was very, very powerful.

\*\*\*

Deep within the confines of the Central Information Organization, massive supercomputers received a never-ending flood of data. Ceaselessly they archived and computed, finding correlations and patterns that painted an ever-sharper picture of the future of the human race. As each day went by, new analysis corrected and refined the ability of the computers to predict, and the government was able to get a more granular view of what would unfold.

Suddenly and without warning, a new pattern emerged.

It began as a slight blip on an actuarial table that was used to formulate government medical insurance benefits. At first, the change was within the expected statistical deviation for unusual death events. Within a few months, the software started to identify a statistically significant event. It was 16 months after the first report before the computer labeled the episode as a "future natural disaster," and heuristical death modeling scientists were alerted to the information.

\*\*\*

Rebecca was an old woman when she passed away. She had never again seen that man who had been to her car - the one with the baby whose COD had been the first “Asteroid” that she had ever seen. She had seen many, many more since then. Yet even to her final moment, the only sign she had ever shown had been one little gasp that no one had even seen.

She didn’t live to see the asteroid that would wipe out mankind, but she knew that it was coming.

\*\*\*

## **PART II**

It had been nearly 18 years since the first “COD: Asteroid” had been recorded. The first child born with that COD would have been the oldest living man at the time of the disaster. Within a few months, “Asteroid” was seen several more times, and quickly it became a common prediction for death.

The reports weren’t limited to one geography, as was sometimes seen with earthquake related COD’s or with radiation poisoning that was known to indicate a nuclear meltdown. Asteroid, and causes consistent with a massive stellar impact, were seen all over the world, and soon after the first prediction, they were seen in a large number of newborns without some other, premature, cause of death. The computers began to hone in on an exact date. This was of grave concern to the UCE.

But even as the supercomputers tirelessly computed the date, time, location and composition of the earth-ending impact, another pattern began to emerge. Remarkably, this new pattern was even more concerning to the UCE: Revolution. The first infants to be born with riots and uprising related CODs appeared on the charts about the same time as the first asteroid readings, but they formed different clusters, suggesting a different pattern.

It had taken just a few years for the CIO to piece together the whole remaining future of mankind.

\*\*\*

Klaus Hansen was a senior Senator of the Upper Chamber. He had been elected to a first term when he was barely 40 years old. Now 55, he had spent almost a third of his life serving his planet’s government, and he was the Chairman of the COD and Security Committee. It was a new and very powerful position.

When he had first been elected, the COD Committee was a separate, and certainly less important Committee, than Security. Klaus had been assigned to the COD Committee by his party, and as a freshman, he had no case for objection. He had served dutifully for several years, hearing matters about laws and regulations that governed the details of the

Cause of Death machines, and the complex overseeing them and the data that they produced.

Countless court cases involving rights of privacy and rights to know made the job of legislating in this area more complicated than most. For the most part, though, the value of the information to the UCE was considered paramount, and so the rights of the individuals were largely disregarded. The UCE needed to keep some data private – they couldn't very well disclose the eventual assassination death of a future target to the person in advance for example, but it was handy for them to know.

And so it was that Klaus Hansen was well versed and enmeshed in secret governmental affairs long in advance of the fateful day. The day that would both create the powerful position he now held and promote him to it. The day when a group of heuristical death scientists presented their report that human life was going to end with a massive asteroid impact some 80 years hence.

\*\*\*

“... Daddy, we're pregnant!”

It seemed to be a perfectly normal way for him to receive the news – half a world away – and Klaus smiled. He was uniquely positioned to know that the child's distant future would be only pain, but right now, he didn't feel that at all. He felt just like a father should feel when he hears about his first grandchild. A kind of pride and a kind of happiness. A part of him continued. He said his congratulations to both of them.

“That's wonderful news. Really wonderful!”

She smiled. She was happy. He said nothing more, and the call was over.

The Hansen's weren't the closest family. Klaus spent far too much time away from home to be a good husband or father, even if he were so inclined. His wife was faithful, and she never discussed his transgressions. She was a good political wife and a fine mother. He knew he was lucky to have her, and she appreciated even that.

Klaus genuinely loved his two grown children, though, and the thought of his family nagged him strangely. He had always expected to become a grandfather some day, but the reality was suddenly very different. He was a rational man. He knew that the wish to have grandchildren would result in a need to protect them – even from a fate that was decades away.

Suddenly, his megalomaniacal drive to power had another motivation. Seven months before his first grandson was born, Klaus devised a plan to save him and all his descendants.

\*\*\*

Armed with the accumulated evidence of the heuristical death scientists, Klaus brought together his allies and senior officials throughout his party, even including the President himself. He was shrewd and clever – a dangerous combination for a man armed with the kind of information that Klaus had in his possession. He revealed only what he needed to reveal, and only to the right people. He had made his compelling case: if the public were to become aware of the end of the world, the government would collapse.

Klaus became a secret crusader. He used his knowledge of the inevitable riots to consolidate his power. He convincingly argued that the fabric of the government must be protected while they searched for a solution. The full resources of all the world must be brought to bear to change their fate – the future – but to do so required secrecy and unaccountability.

Under his manipulation, the Security Committee was merged with the COD Committee, and he was made the Chairman. A small but powerful group had to be made aware of the fate of the world, but Klaus had picked them all. A hand-picked group of Senators made up the balance of the Committee, and they were all brought into his secretive fold.

“Our first priority has to be to keep this information from the people.” Everyone already knew that, but Klaus continued the preamble to this first official meeting. “If the public-at-large was ever to learn about the impending asteroid strike, all order would be lost and our government would be in grave jeopardy.”

A nodding of heads around the oval boardroom table, thirteen floors underground in a windowless, high-tech assembly room, prompted Klaus to continue.

“We already know that we will be unsuccessful at stopping the asteroid. The question that we need answered is ‘why?’ Will we be unable to find it, or will we just be unsuccessful at diverting it. Knowing this ‘why’ may allow us to be more successful at our second main priority, which is, of course, finding a way for our race to survive.”

With two simple mandates, the Committee began work on a plan that would last for nearly 80 years.

For all of the high-minded principles that Klaus had expounded, the reality of his actions were seemingly trite.

The initial efforts of the Committee were *not* to find out why the asteroid would not be found or deflected. Instead, the Committee embarked on a massive effort to delay the inevitable discovery of the impending disaster by the public.

With only the very thin excuse that 18 years was too young for individuals to be trusted with the information about their own deaths, the COD release age was summarily raised to 25 worldwide. The roaring public discontent was muted by an endless media parade of

heuristic death scientists claiming that their data showed that when an individual learns of their own cause of death at an early age, they are more prone to die earlier.

Since only those scientists had access to the data, the state-sponsored media gave the entire matter a pass. Protests were downplayed or not broadcast at all, and a disgruntled young public was made to wait a few more years for their personal information.

The ploy bought the cabal of Senators seven more years to enact the next phases of their plan. A plan, the main purpose of which was to delay, extend and pretend that all was well. Dealing with the asteroid itself was something that could always be done later, once they had the time.

\*\*\*

In his heart, Klaus knew that he was not a killer. He saw himself as a kind and caring man who was thrust into an impossible position – and it was lucky for the world that he was so dedicated to his job that he would go against his own nature. It was only for the good of man, never for himself, when he annexed power. And what was the harm anyway, he told himself, if all of mankind is doomed to perish, in one or two murderous acts?

There were simply too many Custodians, and not all of them would be quiet as Rebecca had been. One day, the truth about the future would somehow leak out, and then the Custodians, who would think that they were doing the right thing, would start to speak out and confirm it.

If the unregulated press ever learned about the COD: Asteroid, his whole plan would be for nothing.

It was a funny thing, too, Klaus mused, that so many Custodians were never told their own cause of death. Everyone had assumed that it was one of the reasons individuals chose that line of work – a need to learn about others when their own information was mercilessly withheld from them. Klaus suddenly realized that it was much more complicated than that, as he reviewed the secret orders that he was about to issue.

Klaus smiled. He knew that soon, a very public scandal would embarrass the COD program worldwide. First, a single Custodian would be found to have accepted bribes for revealing information to parents. An investigation by his Committee would find that the Custodian program was littered with security breaches, riddled with Custodians with flagrant disregard for the sanctity of information.

The public would be outraged! Emboldened by a constant stream of media speaking to the unethical and outright traitorous behavior of Custodians, the frenzy would end, tragically, with a day of rampage and many, many deaths.

For their own safety, Custodians would be pulled from the job. With the help of the Committee on COD and Security, they would be provided with new identities and new lives. The Custodian program would be ended, and humans would once again be removed from the data loop.

It was a temporary measure, to be sure. Eliminating the Custodians would buy a few years, but eventually, he would need to end the program entirely. No one could ever see a COD that indicated an asteroid, and eventually, those would be the only CODs that were produced.

Still, a few years was a few years, and he knew he could always manufacture another reason to end the COD program when the time came. Perhaps when he did that, he wouldn't even need to order anyone to die.

After all, Klaus was no murderer, he reminded himself, as he signed his orders into law.

\*\*\*

The world's space exploration programs had been ended long ago. They had been a symbol of a profligate age, when fiat money had bankrupted the world.

There were still rockets that were used to fly satellites into space, but the satellites all served practical functions – communications relays or espionage or that type of thing. Gone were the days of the great space-based telescopes and the decadence of thinking about colonizing the stars.

Resurrecting a space program would be colossal undertaking. Keeping it secret would be nearly impossible. Thousands of scientists and tens of thousands of laborers would be needed to construct space-stations that could evacuate even the smallest number of humans, along with enough of the plants and animals that they would need if they were ever to be able to re-inhabit the earth.

Even with a program ramped to the limits, Klaus was unsure that they would succeed, with fewer than 60 years until impact. He was sure, however, that the program needed to proceed without budget restraints and without public interference.

More importantly, Klaus wanted an army. He knew he would need one to protect the space program, but more importantly, he knew he would need an army to quell a revolution still far in the future.

For all of these things, Klaus was thankful that he had such powerful friends. Those friends occupied all the seats of power, and they were held together by his and only his certain knowledge of the future. Klaus was impressed with how high he had climbed.

\*\*\*

Klaus got his army, and he got his space program. His years in government had brought him his life's dreams. He knew he was not a murderer, though he had his death squads working overtime to quell riots and revolts that were ever increasing in frequency and intensity. Every person who had died had been dead already, as far as he was concerned. What difference did a few years make to a man destined to be killed along with the rest of humanity? And to safeguard his information, the price was worth it. In his heart, he knew he was no killer.

Klaus never did get to see the public rise up in their *final* revolt. He knew that he would not. His death by pneumonia had long been foretold.

His illness was timely, as he had long suspected it would be. The space program had yielded success just in time. His grandchildren and great-grandchildren were to be among the few hundred humans evacuated to the space-stations, and he felt that his life's work had been done. He had only one question that remained to be answered.

In the years leading up to his demise, Klaus had overseen the largest governmental undertaking in history. He had overseen a bureaucracy that had informed billions of people of their future cause of death, and then he had taken that information away. He had rebuilt an empire, with an army and secretive police that infiltrated every corner of humanity; and he had used that army to wipe out opposition who didn't even know what they were opposing. He had built space-stations that orbited the earth, and kept a Noah's ark of life, in the hopes of returning humans to a new kind of world.

He would pass away soon, and never see for himself whether the evacuation would be successful, but there was one way that he could know.

A final Custodian prepared to administer a final test.

\*\*\*

For years, Klaus had seen the aggregated reports from the automated COD machines, and he had seen how more and more of the causes were related to the asteroid impact. As he had known he would, he eventually ordered the entire COD program terminated, for even he could not justify withholding the personal information from every single person.

And so, under his watch, the COD machines had been dismantled, and the public had objected. The action had sparked isolated riots, and his global police force had to put down more and more revolutionaries.

Pockets of resistance had turned into areas of outright revolt, and the public uprisings required ever greater armed force to quell. As the years went by, it became impossible for Klaus to keep the costs of all of his programs secret, and he and his Committee had been forced to take over the government outright. Initially, the unsuspecting masses were no match for the might of his army and the force of his allies.

But as surely as the computers had predicted, the Revolution eventually came. Klaus had been ready for years. His scientists had never found the asteroid that was hurtling toward the earth, but he had known that the impact was inevitable, so he wasn't surprised. He had completed the space-stations just in time, and the evacuations were about to begin.

Klaus smiled at a new thought. The revolutionaries could have this doomed world for the end of days, while his kin were safely sheltered from them and from It.

There was only one thing left to do, and Klaus could pass in peace. An evacuee was ready in his hospital room, and he gave the go-ahead. His entire life's work depended on the outcome of a single blood test. One test, and he would know that he had succeeded.

"Sir," the last Custodian said surely and steadily, "the COD is *not* Asteroid."

Klaus's heart leapt even as he saw an almost imperceptible expression slip out on the Custodian's face. "It says, 'COD: Alien Torture Device.'"

\*\*\*

### **Epilogue**

*Humans watch a lot of Science Fiction. So much, in fact, that it sometimes can brainwash them to what the future would really look like. Funny, how in just about every science fiction story that involves a conflict with aliens, the enemies seem to use incredibly high-tech weapons, when in reality, any ol' rock would do...*

Far away, a small group of alien mercenaries tugged a few asteroids behind their craft. Moving at near light speed, they intended to wipe the life off of a very valuable piece of galactic real-estate by throwing a few big stones at it. The asteroids they were bringing weren't quite as big as the one that wiped out the dinosaurs, but four or five slightly smaller ones were going to be aimed at key locations around the globe. The aliens' plan was to give the planet a few years to cool down, and then settle themselves in to their new home. Oh, and if any of those sci-fi watching humans was somehow to survive, then bonus! The mercenaries would even get a few slaves for their effort!