

A Cretaceous Conundrum (Robert Bee)

Dr Craig Nesmuth slammed his palaeontology tome shut with a thunderous thud. Offering an apologetic shrug to his stupefied colleagues, he expressed his scientific puzzlement in typically precise terms. "Bugged if I know what they're up to."

'They' were the bizarre creatures displayed in the Medusa-like Planck-Schrodinger Temporal Displacement Monitor that dominated the furiously cluttered laboratory. Heated debate had punctuated the frenzied but directed chaos of the past days as to whether it was fair to apply the condescending term 'creatures' to the crew of a spaceship - if that's what it was - larger than a hundred football stadiums and which hovered, perfectly motionless, above the Cretaceous landscape with no visible propulsive system to defy gravity.

Synonyms had flown like missiles across the laboratory seeking the word with the right nuance while the speakers' hands worked desperately at their instruments to maintain focus, recording continuity and, most of all, temporal stability.

'Creatures'. Surely no other term would describe them. They were six, seven or eight limbed, apparently dependant on a combination of their colour and relative size, though no exact correlation had been agreed. What were finally concluded to be respiratory and optical orifices - no-one had yet detected waste or reproductive orifices - were located at the grotesquely bulbous hub of the limbs.

"Look at that spaceship." Physicist Joseph Knaape mentally estimated mass-energy ratios and was awed by his conclusion.

"We don't know it's a spaceship, Joe. It..."

"...didn't come from a Holden factory. Of course it's a bloody spaceship." Knaape threw a contemptuous scowl at his colleague. "And how can we call its occupants 'creatures' as if they came from a zoo. They're not exactly grazing out there. They have a purpose...no Craig, I don't have a clue what it is either. But believe me, they have a purpose." He checked the temporal alignment. "I vote for 'beings'." The bewildered silence seconded and carried his motion. 'Beings' they were.

Their biology, physical mannerisms and communication mode remained a frustrating mystery, despite exhaustive study over the five days since lock-on. The university's Cray IV super-computer was slavishly crunching numbers through a 'body language' neural algorithm suite, so far with no breakthrough.

"Are we certain this is Earth?" a jittery technician asked.

The scientists crowded into the trans-temporal prehistory laboratory ignored the question. They were confident they were staring at the spot where their laboratory now stood - 68 million years ago. The TDM was fully proven and calibrated. They knew exactly where and when they were looking. What they were seeing, however, challenged their senses. They had gone dinosaur hunting, but all they had in their sights was an insane nightmare.

"What they are doing, Nesmuth, is obvious." Professor Hugo Hungerford stood stiffly in the doorway and stretched his lanky frame. Exhausted from over forty hours of constant observation, he'd reluctantly grabbed six hours sleep, but still was ready to drop in his tracks. "They're busy dumping all those bones. It's like a bloody production line out there. How many now?"

"It's past the two million mark, Hugo." Dr Lillith Portney indicated the palaeo-counter beside a rapidly expanding catalogue spreadsheet. She was as exhausted as Hungerford and equally unwilling to admit it. This was hers...and Hugo's...baby and she was determined to see it delivered. "And that's only since we tuned in."

"Still Jurassic?" Hungerford stumbled to the coffee dispenser, poured a luke warm cup and slumped into a chair next to Lillith. He stared bleary eyed at the TDM.

"No, they stopped burying them four hours ago. They're well into the Cretaceous now. See...there." Lillith pointed at a maroon seven limbed 'being' cart wheeling across the bone strewn landscape while juggling a huge load. "Tyrannosaurus Rex jaw bone for sure."

They watched as the giant razor toothed bone was dropped unceremoniously on top of a triceratops skeleton, its horns pointing lamely towards the spaceship burdened sky. Then the alien rolled like a rimless wagon wheel back to the vessel's ramp, avoiding other bone laden aliens with the uncanny precision of ants in a picnic line.

"Why?" A stunned scientist vocalised the single thought screaming in all their minds. Why indeed? The energy expenditure to drive a ship of that size, across God only knows what distance beggared the imagination. And to systematically deposit what looked like dinosaur bones in Jurassic, then Cretaceous layers. Why? But no answer was offered.

A stifled sob broke the electronics filled silence. Nesmuth spoke in a strangled voice. "How long have they been doing this?" Incredulity hung over the group like a hail filled cloud. All their vaunted project objectives of the trans-temporal survey of Cretaceous wildlife, developed over years of planning and university budget back stabbing were demolished before their eyes, scattered amongst the bones strewn across the verdant landscape.

"Has it occurred to anyone," Hungerford growled, "that this is the greatest scientific discovery since..."

The sharp jangle of the phone struck like a lightning bolt.

"Portney." Lillith listened, then gestured to Hungerford, her grey-blue eyes instantly animated. "The Cray's got a line on the body language. Ninety-eight percent confidence." She pointed at the TDM. "They want a reality test. Craig, select that eight legger at the ramp top. They think he may be in command."

Suppressing a shiver of revulsion, Nesmuth moved the monitor's cursor to the red scaled alien, then clicked and dragged a square around it. The being's limbs seemed to tremble to some epileptic beat and the scales about its orifices pulsated convulsively like anemones. For all they knew, it could be exhorting the others to work faster, or calling them in for dinner.

The roomful of scientists - temporal physicists, xenologists, palaeontologists - watched Lillith intently as she listened on the phone. Those who were not beyond noticing saw the colour slowly drain from her face.

"What is it?" Hungerford asked, though he feared he already knew.

"The Cray says the alien's splitting its sides..." Lillith's stricken eyes stared at the monitor "... laughing."

