

# **An Unlikely Hero**

**by Connie Vogelmann**

**Inspired by Douglas Adam's**

***Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy***

## **Prologue**

What most humans don't know, and will never know, is that since long before the Earth was a planet there has been a struggle in our galaxy. A struggle between good and evil; a struggle to command, to control the galaxy. Both the Red and the Blue Sides have been evenly matched over the billenia, but here, on an out of the way planet known as Earth approximately 48 years before present day, someone was born: someone with the power to change the balance of the struggle, for good or for evil. Someone with the power to command armies, and the power to become the General of the Greatest Army the Galaxy Has Ever Seen.

## **Chapter 1**

Approximately 48 years and 9 months before present day, there was a Blip in the cosmos. Not a big one, and one that only a few noticed, but one that was just large enough to cause a few rather consequential changes in the cosmos.

Right before the Blip occurred, two young people in the small town of Wall Drug, Milton L. S. Pinochillio III and Malissa (the young and sexy girl he had met at the bar earlier that night) retired to Milton's place. Twenty minutes later—the Blip happened. Had they been paying attention (which they weren't), they might have noticed it (which they didn't). The Blip scrambled things, just for an instant. For just a moment creatures transformed. The possible changes were endless and almost completely random. Some dogs got a glimpse of human life, and some humans could look through the eyes of their favorite foxhound. Some aliens turned to humans, and other aliens turned into cats, or cockroaches, or still other aliens. None of these changes lasted for more than a moment (except for one unfortunate fellow who got stuck forever in the form of the duck billed platypus), but for that

critical moment, both Milton III and Malissa ceased to be entirely human. When the Blip passed, both of them returned to their normal states. Unbeknownst to them, however, two had become three, and the third was never entirely human.

Around the time of the Blip, the Red Side of the galaxy was caught up with an argument about the price of piglets on a planet called Penophole—and so didn't notice when someone was conceived that could change the fate of the galaxy. The Blue Side was not so caught up in petty matters such as this one, and so learned of Milton L. S. Pinochillio IV's existence long before his parents did. The Blue Side quickly shielded his presence from the Red Side, and so the Red Side never became aware of him, or not for the next 48 years and 9 months, anyway.

As a baby, Milton IV was always a little odd. First off, everything had to be the color blue. This went beyond typical single mindedness of young children—if he was given something in any other color, he would literally cry himself blue to make up for it. Perhaps more strangely though, Baby Milton knew where things were—when his parents hid his favorite food (which from a young age, happened to be blue dyed crab cakes) he always managed to find it. When they took away his favorite blue plastic panda because he hit his playmate over the head with it, he managed to find it again within minutes, even though the panda had been buried in a box in the attic under several large sheets and a pair striped purple and fuchsia pantaloons.

Then there was his fixation with cards. By the time Baby Milton became Toddler Milton, he always had cards with him, no matter what. By the age of three, Milton had already won 600 consecutive games of solitaire and beaten his entire extended family at poker 32 consecutive times. Milton's father had a history of gambling problems (and had once lost \$25,000 playing poker against a yellow-crested cockatoo), and so he wanted to smother this strangeness out of Milton before it became a problem, but his mother wanted to turn Milton into something of a child prodigy—and drag him around the country performing shows for people with too much money. This disagreement soon became irreconcilable, and his parents decided never to speak to each other again. Since Milton was the cause of their falling out, neither party wanted anything to do with him, and so Milton got shunted through a series of stranger and stranger relatives, until he finally ended up living with his ex-hippie second cousin, her florist boyfriend, and their three little girls (and the girls' pet platypus, who actually happened to be that one unfortunate human who remained forever altered by the Blip). Throughout all the chaos it was forgotten (or perhaps never learned) that Milton was "special" and that he had something of a gift. Consequently, seventeen years later, when Milton became the Grand Master Pinochle Champion of the World—no one knew why.

What Milton had was a bit of a gift of premonition. More than a bit, really. He was actually the third most powerful premonitionist in the galaxy. (The most powerful was a Buddhist monk, who was morally opposed to using his powers—he believed that using his powers would bar him from Nirvana for all eternity. The second most powerful had somehow gotten trapped in a bit of a time loop—and never seemed to grow past approximately three minutes, thirty three seconds in age. This unfortunate soul had been stuck at that unfortunate age for the last two hundred years—but at least he didn't have to worry about applying to college, finding a job, or how to make an angel food cake for a vegan with an allergy to flour).

As Milton grew up, the Blue Side did what they could to put the fighting on hold: they knew that the best time to finally defeat the Red Side would not come until Milton had fully matured. Consequently, the Blue Side watched, built up their forces, and waited until Milton was ready to become the Greatest General the Galaxy has Ever Seen. When Milton was ready, the Blue Side would attempt to snatch him up—and end the struggle for the galaxy for once and for all (or at least for the next few millennia, anyway).

## Chapter 2

Milton barely noticed the squirrel. It was rather amazing that he noticed the squirrel at all, given that he really didn't notice much of anything. He didn't notice the sky above him, nor the dirt below his feet. He didn't notice the occasional passerby, all of whom actually stopped in their tracks to watch him pass. Neither did he notice the oddness of his surroundings. Not that there was anything wrong per se, but an observant person would have known that the sun was slightly muted, the breeze carried something of a musky scent, and the leaves didn't crunch to quite the right frequency. But Milton rarely went outside—he had better things to do. Therefore, even had he taken the time to observe his surroundings, he wouldn't have noticed that something was amiss, as he really had no idea how the sun was supposed to look, the breeze was supposed to smell, or the leaves were supposed to crunch.

Milton rubbed his eyes blearily, and glared at the world around him. (It wasn't as if he saw the world, he simply glared at it.) He was The Grand Master Pinochle Champion of the World. No one could beat him, no one. He held every record there was for Pinochle. He had 2237 consecutive victories. He thought he would keep winning for forever. Until last night. In his entire career, and indeed in his entire life, he'd only lost one pinochle game. One.

Milton L. S. Pinochillio IV rubbed his eyes again. He saw another squirrel out of the corner of his eyes, and kicked a rock at it. The rock came nowhere near the squirrel, but still, the squirrel scampered off, and Milton felt slightly triumphant. He paused a second, and wondered if it was the same squirrel as the first one. Actually, now that he thought about it, he was sure it was the same one. He looked over his shoulder to see if he could see where it had gone—it was following him, why was it following him? Milton hurried his steps a bit to try to distance himself from the squirrel.

It was, in fact, the same squirrel—except that it wasn't really a squirrel. It was doing a credible imitation of one, though. It continued to follow Milton, but this time it made sure to keep farther away.

Milton continued to hurry down the path—the path that was rapidly becoming more deserted. It was nicely shaded with trees, but open enough not to seem dark or threatening. In fact, this would have been the perfect place for a nature lover to wander (but Milton wasn't one of them). For the first time, Milton began to wonder what exactly he was doing, outside, in nature of all things. Disgusting really. All full of dirt, and bacteria, and...and, homeless people. Rabid dogs. Ebola. Poisonous spiders, and snakes. Ugh! He began to think of the night before. There was something odd about them, those foreign pinochle players—they had seemed normal enough then, but now he wasn't so sure.

They had beaten him, somehow, those foreigners, those aliens. And Milton once again began thinking about the Hideous Occurrence of the Night Before. The game had lasted for 37 hours and seventeen minutes (which was, inconsequentially, exactly 23 minutes 16 seconds short of the world record for longest pinochle game, a record which Milton also held). But the game against the foreigners was the fiercest pinochle game ever played. Both sides used every bit of skill, knowledge, and talent they had—but somehow, in the end, it was Milton who lost. Lost!

(At this point, since this story is meant to reach out to a wide audience from all parts of the galaxy, it is important to point out a few things. First of all—although Milton didn't like to think about it, pinochle is a partner game. Milton had a pinochle partner, Froiderick, who was almost, but not quite, as good as Milton. Secondly, for those of you who come from the far reaches of space and time, and have never experienced the game that is known by some as pinochle, it is all about chance. That Milton

thought he had talent, and that he was the best pinochle player in the world through hard work and dedication, was due to the idiosyncrasies of human nature, and in part to bad upbringing.)

This memory was still raw for Milton, so, instead of stewing about the Hideous Occurrence of the Night Before any longer, he resorted to thinking about his second favorite pastime: eating. He didn't have a particularly varied diet: everyone knew that pinochle and crab cakes went together like Bonnie and Clyde, like Romeo and Juliet. He had always loved crab cakes, at least since he could remember, anyway. He guessed it was because he was destined to become the Grand Master Pinochle Champion of the World.

That was really where it all started: crab cakes. That was the reason that he was trouncing about in disgusting nature. This morning, when Milton finally pulled himself out of bed, still utterly defeated from the Hideous Occurrence of the Night Before, and stumbled into the kitchen, he noticed something odd. It wasn't until he was polishing off his last crab cake (eaten during his ritualistic breakfast of three blue dyed crab cakes, one small bowl of vanilla and chocolate swirl tapioca pudding, and two small containers of cappuccino soy milk) did he realize what was different. There, in the middle of the table, no more than eighteen inches in front of his nose, was a three and a half foot tall African Peace Lily. Pinned to the plant was a note that read:

"To The Grand Master Pinochle Champion of the World—

*The Intergalactic Council on the Welfare of all Creatures Moral, Proper, Discriminated, Underrepresented, Hated, Abused, Loved, Overpopulated, Extinct, Extant, Carbon-Based, Sodium-Based, Argon-Based, Based on Nothing at All, Blue, Green, Peanut Butter and Jelly Colored, Bilingual, Trilingual, Unlingual, Intelligent, Dumb as a Brick, Harrison Ford, etc. (the IGCWACMPDUHALOEFCBSBABBABGPBJCBTUIDBHFetc), cordially demands your presence for a very important event. Please don't think about ignoring this ever so polite mandate. If you do not come, we will be most distraught. We insist upon your attendance—if you think of avoiding us, we will be compelled to politely hunt you down and bring you to the ceremony ourselves. Please RSVP immediately.*

*Sincerely, the Grand Equusasinus of the IGCWACMPDUHALOEFCBSBABBABGPBJCBTUIDBHFetc.*

Now, if Milton had ever received hate mail—he might have expected a prank. But just as he had never once, in 28 years of professional pinochle playing, received one piece of fan mail, neither had he received a single piece of hate mail. Perhaps it was his defeat of the night before that made him just a bit out of sorts—but somehow the moment his eyes reached the bottom of the page, he found himself mysteriously heading out of his door, without even taking the time to notice that the note contained neither a meeting time nor a place. Yet somehow he knew just where to go.

What Milton didn't know, and indeed, what he had no way of knowing, was that there was something of a compulsion placed on the note. The IGCWACMPDUHALOEFCBSBABBABGPBJCBTUID -BHFetc. committee did not go by such a cumbersome name for nothing. That particular stream of letters formed a slight mind altering complex that put readers into something of a trance. Any command issued after the name of the committee would be followed, regardless of present circumstances. Poor Milton didn't have a chance to fight the compulsion, as he was completely unaware that such things even existed.

Milton stubbed his toe, causing him to break out of his reverie. He began walking forward again—there was something he had to do, something important. Yet through the compulsion, Milton began feeling a bit nervous about this whole adventure: it seemed big somehow, important—even

though as far as he could tell, he was just walking down a path in the woods. He saw a park bench, and it suddenly occurred to him that he might like to sit down. And that by sitting, he could try to puzzle out exactly where he was going, and exactly what he was supposed to be doing once he got there.

However, the moment he sat down on the bench to ponder the meaning of all of this, things began to go wrong. First off, Milton began to feel something sticky trickling down his back. He turned around, and realized that, where he could have sworn there was no tree before, there was suddenly a tree behind him. It was growing. Four feet tall, then six, then eight. And it was leaking sap. At first it was just a trickle, but the trickle was rapidly widening into a river. Nature hated him. It really did. Milton tried to shift over a foot or two to avoid the sap, when suddenly he saw something out of the corner of his eye. He looked down in horror to see a vine creeping toward him. And it had thorns, yeugh! The vine reached his feet, and began prodding him, as if to make him get up, as if to keep him moving. Milton began to shift to the far end of the bench, in the vain hopes of avoiding both the sap and the vine, but then suddenly, the squirrel was sitting there, staring up at him with evil, beady eyes. The squirrel yawned a bit, displaying very un-squirrel like canines, and looked at him with almost human intelligence.

### Chapter 3

"You know," said the squirrel in a rather deep, un-squirrel-like voice, "you're really supposed to keep moving. He doesn't like it when you stop."

"Yeaaaaugh brrrr brrrr ahhhh br whooooooooooooooeee!" Milton replied intelligently. (He was The Grand Master Pinochle Champion of the World, after all.)

"I always knew humans weren't the most intelligent creatures in the universe, but I had been told that they had a spoken language at least. Hmm..." At this point the squirrel waved his paw distractedly, and time seemed to freeze. Milton belatedly realized that he could still move, although the vine had stopped mid crawl and the sap had stopped mid flow. Actually, nothing was moving save him and the squirrel. The squirrel was currently flipping through a giant book, which was several times longer than it was tall, and that had somehow been procured from a miniscule pouch that the squirrel had strapped across his chest.

"Ah hah! Here it is. See, Human? Here it says that humans have a language, and an intelligible one at that. Well?" The squirrel leaned forward on his paws and peered over the book, in a way that would have been menacing, if the squirrel had weighed somewhat more than two pounds.

Milton's first reaction was to panic: he hated nature, and somehow all of a sudden nature had come to include a talking squirrel. But then Milton remembered that he was the Grand Master Pinochle Champion of the World, and something of a calm came over him. Because of who he was, he could handle anything. And so, Milton puffed himself up, took a deep breath, and let his genius shine to its fullest:

"You appear to be a squirrel, and squirrels cannot talk. So why I am I hearing you talk?"

The squirrel simply glared at him, and showed no inclination of answering him.

Milton pondered for a while, trying to come up with some other stroke of genius, but his genius had overextended itself for the day. The squirrel continued to wait and watch Milton, and Milton felt himself getting mad. He was out in disgusting nature talking to a disgusting squirrel, he was covered in tree sap and a vine had just tried to murder him, in addition to the Hideous Occurrence of the Night

Before. And now there was a squirrel staring at him, as if he was nothing more than an unruly child.

Milton exploded, "Why the hell is a squirrel talking? Why are you talking to me, instead some other bloke? Why now, why today? What in the world are you? And what in the world can you possibly want from me?"

"Oh, Human. You don't know anything, do you? Let's begin at the beginning." And the squirrel waved his arms in such a grandiose arc that he lost his balance and almost toppled off the bench. The squirrel continued, "The Grand Equusasinus himself sent me to protect you, and to guide you."

Milton stared blankly.

"Have you been living your life in a cave? My book says that humans lived in caves, but you're supposed to be beyond that stage of development. Your ignorance is disgusting, but I have my orders. I haven't the time to explain everything, because to explain who he is means I'd have truly have to begin at the beginning. At the beginning of the Universe. And that's simply too much for one day, and I can't keep time frozen for forever. Besides, I'd go "horse" long before getting done, and I rather like being disguised as a squirrel." (At this point, the squirrel committed one of the biggest faux pas known to humanity and laughed at his own joke. But where the squirrel was from, it was considered socially acceptable to laugh at one's own jokes.) "But just know, Earthman, that the Equusasinus is important. Very important. He is the head of the Blue Side of the Galaxy. You do know what that is right?" Milton seemed to be going into a bit of a daze, his eyes weren't focusing any more, and his mouth had gone slack.

The squirrel, however, continued with his monologue, apparently undeterred by his audience's lack of comprehension. "There are two sides of the galaxy, both of them are fighting to control it. You know, like your movie...The Wars of the Stars? There's the bad side, trying to take over the galaxy, and there's the good side, which is trying to stop the bad side from taking over the galaxy." (At this point, the squirrel started humming a very tuneless and marginally recognizable rendition of "Darth Vader's Theme") "The Equusasinus is the head of the Blue Side, the right side. The side that you are going to help. You're going to help us destroy the Red Side, the enemy. To crush them, to defeat them. You're going to help us wiiiiiiinnnnnnnnnnnnnn." With this last word, the squirrel's voice deepened by at least a few pitches, and, just for emphasis, the squirrel did another gigantic motion with his arms, and this time really did topple off the park bench.

The squirrel's fall finally seemed to jolt Milton out of his stupor. He snapped his jaw shut, although his eyes still wouldn't focus quite right. He did, however manage to phrase a question that had been bothering him, "So your horrid boss-creature wants me to help you? But why in the world did he latch on to me, of all people? And couldn't he have picked some other day?" Milton whined "I had a rather bad night last night."

The squirrel glared a little, but then nodded and waved his arms yet again, and Milton seemed to be reliving a time two nights before—through his own eyes, in a way, and yet somehow detached.

\*\*\*

They had come knocking on his door, close to two nights ago. Both of them were cloaked and hooded, and neither ever revealed their faces throughout the entire grueling pinochle game. They spoke in heavily accented English, and it sounded like they couldn't quite force their mouths to form the right syllables. (By this point Milton had decided that the players were illegal aliens, but he didn't much care as long as they played pinochle. That didn't stop him from calling them the "aliens"

though). The aliens declared that they were undefeated, and it was a matter of the utmost importance that they play him. Naturally, smelling a challenge, Milton and his partner Froiderick agreed.

Milton and Froiderick felt that something was wrong right from the start. Milton had a knack for doing things perfectly—he always seemed to have the right hands and he always knew exactly how to play each one. He had an uncanny knack for knowing exactly which cards his partner and his opponents had. But that didn't happen this game. Milton kept making errors in judgment—he never made errors in judgment! He would think he knew how to play a hand, and yet the alien players always had the perfect counter. Milton and Froiderick fought hard, but after an intense battle (the likes of which have never, and likely will never, be seen in a pinochle game), the alien players took the victory.

Then something odd had happened. The foreigners had bowed to Milton—a strange, almost crooked bow. Then one of them had hissed, “He will be proud of you, Untrained One. Know that He will be proud.”

\*\*\*

“Them!! It was them, those fools. Those awful aliens. They caused all of this!” Now Milton was the one waving his arms in a ridiculous manner and jumping up and down. While Milton only came to this conclusion due to a bit of racism and a wallop amount of hurt pride, he did happen to be right.

“Well, yes,” the squirrel seemed to be watching Milton's antics with some amusement. “But you know, you really couldn't have expected to have beaten them. They were sent by Him. To test you. To see if you were ready.”

“Buut who were they, and how dare they beat me? I am The Grand Master Pinochle Champion of the World!”

The squirrel stared at him blankly, whether because Milton was missing the entire point of the conversation, or because he was still trying to puzzle out what “The Grand Master Pinochle Champion of the World” was (or why Milton was going off about it), couldn't be determined. However, the squirrel, having decided that he was dealing with a significantly lower life form than himself, decided to humor Milton, and answer his question.

“You ever watch that movie...oh that movie, what was it called? The Odyssey one. Not the one with the blind guy, but the one about the space ship. And HAL. 2001: Robot That Takes Over the Ship maybe? Well, whatever it was, it was good. Primitive technology and absolutely horrid depiction of space travel, but the history was there. Believe it or not, Earthman, that movie is actually one of the most accurate, not to mention historically meaningful works of the human race. It recounts the evolution of man almost perfectly, except for one detail. Due to slight constraints on budget, time, and a small group of Christian fundamentalist activists trying to stop the film from being created, the director decided to cut one important part of primate evolution. In the scene that was never filmed, one more obelisk descended down upon the apes. This obelisk actually caused a small group of gorilla like ancestors to evolve a state of human-like intelligence. These individuals were identical in most respects to humans, with the small exceptions of slight differences in body proportion, mouth shape, appetite, and a knack for premonition.”

“So what I'm getting at is that your aliens are some of them. You're closer to “human” than they are,

but you're like them in that you have a gift for premonition. But they're trained. They've trained since birth, and you almost beat them. You almost beat two of His very special messengers. They went back to the Grand Equusasinus simply gushing about The Untrained One. And He sent me, ME, to come summon you. Did you like the African Peace Lily? They're my favorite!"

Milton collapsed. He had never had a strong constitution, and his late night (coupled with his crushing defeat) combined with the strange events of the day were just a little bit too much for him. The squirrel jumped onto Milton's chest, then waved his arms again and hopped up and down a few times, as if that might revive Milton. It didn't. The squirrel wondered if humans were supposed to just fall over in the middle of a conversation, and thought he might have read somewhere that that was true. So he unfroze time with another lazy wave, then wandered off to see if he could either find a lady squirrel to court, or try to figure out what the big deal about burying nuts was.

Several minutes later (during which time the squirrel found three lady squirrels, all of whom had even less to talk about than Milton did, and buried sixteen nuts, and decided that he didn't know what all the fuss was about), Milton woke up. He seemed to remember something funny going on, about a squirrel that talked (but that was preposterous), and about time freezing (which was equally preposterous). Everything seemed a bit fuzzy though, and Milton decided that whatever had happened wasn't of immediate concern to him.

Just as he started trying to figure out where he was, and how he was going to get home, the compulsion again took hold of Milton, and so he found himself plodding forward once again, toward his still unknown destination.

\*\*\*

Six thousand two hundred and eighty-seven steps later, Milton looked up and realized that he was approaching his destination. The path which he was walking on was steadily becoming narrower and narrower, and just when it shrank into nothing, a towering tower towered over the trees. It stood tall and dark—not exactly sinister, but not welcoming either. Milton took a bit of a breath, and was astonished to feel his chest tighten a little bit. But no, he couldn't be scared; he was above such primal instincts. And so his pride, and the compulsion, pushed him onward.

His footsteps slowed when he reached the door—which, like the rest of the towering tower, was utterly towering. Milton took a deep breath and reached his hand forward to knock on the door, when suddenly it opened up of its own volition. Milton squinted into the darkness within, and wondered if he dared to take a step inside. Suddenly he felt something push him from behind (a something which happened to be the squirrel), and he took a stumbling step forward. Milton felt himself falling, falling. But not falling down as per the usual laws of gravity (gravity is, after all, only a theory), but he was falling up. Though he did not know it, he was being pulled up out of the reaches of the earth's atmosphere: up into the vast, vast world of beyond—up to the destiny which had been ordained since his conception. To a destiny which would alter the galaxy, for forever.

## Chapter 4

Milton's eyes were scrunched tightly shut, but he knew he was traveling farther and faster



than he ever had before. He mustered his courage and opened his eyes, but when he saw the Earth whizzing away, his eyes rolled up into his head, and he passed out. (Though Milton didn't know the specifics of it, he was actually traveling over 7 times the speed of light, which happened to be approximately 1.22 million times faster than he'd ever gone, and he traveled about 700,000,000 miles, which was approximately 58,000 times farther than he'd ever been from home.) When he finally stopped whizzing around the cosmos, he found himself in a giant room. A cavern, more like. Milton was beyond expecting (or not expecting) anything, but if he had been in the presence of mind to expect anything, it wouldn't have been this.

If the cavern had a ceiling, Milton couldn't see it—all he could see was blackness stretching up into the distance. He seemed to be in the very middle of the room, and in the distance he could vaguely see walls, but they seemed rough and uncut. The floor beneath his feet was rugged and unfinished, and there was a dim light in the cavern, but Milton couldn't see where it was coming from. The squirrel materialized beside him. As soon as it "landed" it began to become less and less squirrel-like. It grew larger and larger—until it was approximately 6' 1 ¼". Its tail, instead of shrinking, became longer and thinner, almost like the tail of a lizard. Its skin changed from grayish brown to a bright magenta color, and the fur got shorter and thinner, until it was almost unnoticeable. The snout remained the same, but the unsquirrel-like canines became even less squirrel-like, as they ended up being a full 7 inches long.

Milton stared and blinked, and coughed "Whooatareffffyou?"

"Hello, Earthman. You look much shorter now, but I see that you are no more verbose than you were before," replied the creature. "But if that garble that just fell out of your mouth was supposed to address the sudden change in my appearance, then I am a Malfrian, and I hail from a small planet surrounding your neighboring star of Alpha Centauri. You can call me Trevor." Somehow the creature managed to force human words around the canines, and the voice was much like before.

Milton gaped at him, and didn't even know what he should be thinking, much less how to respond. But even through his shock, Trevor's next words didn't come as a surprise, or not really anyway. Maybe it was the premonition, but somehow Milton just knew what Trevor was going to say:

"Now, Earthman, you much choose. Choose whether or not to fight, to become the General of the Greatest Army the Galaxy Has Ever Seen. Choose whether or not to attempt to forever end the struggle between the wicked and the innocent, to aid us in our struggle against evil. If you fight, the victory of the Blue Side is not assured, but we would have a greater chance now than ever before to throw off the the Red Side—the evil that has been attempting to dominate us for millennia. So Earthman, will you fight?"

With these words, suddenly bright lights flared to life, throwing the walls into sharper relief. Milton realized that he had been wrong about the walls. They were not uncut, like the floor; instead they contained thousands and millions of little windows, from which millions of faces peered out. But not human faces, but faces of creatures that Milton had never heard of, or indeed never dreamt of. They were faces of creatures moral, proper, discriminated, underrepresented, hated, abused, loved, overpopulated, extinct, extant, carbon-based, sodium-based, argon-based, based on nothing at all, blue, green, peanut butter and jelly colored, bilingual, trilingual, un-lingual, intelligent, dumb as a brick, Harrison Ford, etc. Indeed, they were all the creatures of the IGCWACMPDUHALOECSBABBABG- PBJCBTUIDBHFetc., and more.

"This room is the Room of Viewing," Trevor continued, "Creatures from around the galaxy watch here. Within minutes of your decision, they will be preparing their factions, their armies. Within minutes of your decision, the Blue Side will go to war. We have been holding back the Red Side for many

years—waiting for you. However now, both sides are ready to fight, for they are taught strings, ready for action. Without your aid, the Red and the Blue Sides will continue to fight for centuries, for millennia, and the wicked side may triumph. However, with your help, in just a few of your human years we can crush the Red Side.”

These words were echoing up, swirling around the huge hall. As they swirled up, the words were translated into thousands, indeed millions of language. These sounds swirled back down, creating almost a deafening roar of words, grunts, whistles, and one strange bell tone, that was always either just a few cents short of a c-flat, or just above an e-sharp.

“Earthman,” Trevor bellowed, “Will you fight?”

Milton opened and closed his mouth several times, but no sound came out. Speechless didn’t even begin to describe it. He played pinochle, for heaven’s sake! Besides, in general, he was against threatening people, or blowing their heads and arms off with weapons (unless, of course, they beat him at pinochle). How could he possibly be qualified to lead an army? An army of creatures of which he’d never heard, from planets that he didn’t even knew existed. An army of creatures that had never even heard of pinochle.

Trevor, sensing the fact that at this point Milton was completely and utterly overwhelmed, again waved his hand to freeze time (Malfrians are creatures with mostly ordinary attributes—slightly above average intelligence, average common sense, slightly excessive levels of work ethic, somewhat below average physical abilities, and an extreme sensitivity to temperature—except for two things. Firstly, Malfrians can morph into other creatures (like squirrels) and secondly, they can freeze time with a simple wave of the hand. This time freezing does tend to make things a little difficult when there is a large group of Malfrians in one place—as sometimes time won’t move forward for the equivalent of decades, but it does come in handy in many other situations, like this one).

“It’s the premonition, isn’t it?” Milton moaned, “and all this time I thought I was simply a good pinochle player. But no, I can read things, can’t I? I just know what cards they have, I just know what people are going to do. That would be useful for an army wouldn’t it...”

Milton was coming to a realization—the realization that for the first time, he had been given the opportunity to do more than play pinochle. In all his life, he had never once done something meaningful, and to be honest, the General of the Greatest Army the Galaxy Has Ever Seen had something of a ring to it. More of a ring even than the Grand Master Pinochle Champion of the World. But still, he wasn’t sure if he wanted to dedicate his life to a bunch of vile creatures, some of them probably worse than the filth that inhabited the Earth. And good grief, he was being ordered around by a giant magenta...lizard! One that used to be a squirrel!

Milton’s premonition helped, though. It told Milton that Trevor spoke true, and that the Blue Side of the Galaxy was truly the “good” side. That they were trying to defeat the Red Side, and that the Red side was “evil” (or at least the the more evil of the two). And this helped—Milton knew that if he chose to fight, at least he would be choosing the right side. Besides, Milton liked the color blue. He had ever since he was a baby, and so it seemed like a sign, encouraging him to fight.

With these thoughts, Milton opened his eyes clearly for the first time in decades, and truly saw the world around him. Milton began to ponder, to truly think about the situation, and contemplate the decision he needed to make.

Trevor sensed this change come over Milton, and could tell that Milton was using his mind for the first time today (and indeed, the first time since about age two, when he used a combination of intelligence and premonition to find his hard plastic panda that had been hidden under that pair of pantaloons), so Trevor kept mum. He realized, rightly, that all he could do now was let Milton figure things out on his own. As Milton pondered, Trevor looked at him intently, wondering what the future

would bring. Wondering if The Chosen One would live up to his name. He remained silent, and began counting the seconds (well, actually, this whole interlude took place over the course of .007 of a second since Trevor had frozen time. But if the seconds had been ticking, approximately 1536 would have passed before Milton gave his answer).

At long last, Milton nodded to Trevor, and Trevor waved his hand again to unfreeze time. Milton opened his mouth to speak—unlike the last time, he shocked himself, as his voice was strong, powerful, and confident.

“I will fight.” Milton declared, “I will command The Greatest Army the Galaxy Has Ever Seen. And we will win!”

The million faces in the screens suddenly sprang to life—a cacophony of sounds rained down on Milton and Trevor. Each quickly disappeared, to rally the troops and spring into battle. And Milton began his training—training his gift to become more powerful, so he truly could become the General of the Greatest Army the Galaxy has Ever Seen.

## Chapter 5

Several months later, Milton squinted out onto the scene in the valley below him. The twin suns shone with almost painful brightness, and reflected blindingly off the sand. Actually, the sun would have reflected off the sand, but the sand was completely obscured—creatures from all parts of the galaxy covered every square inch of it. Milton glanced up and cringed a little—the sky was just as full as the sand was. Full of ships and air-boats of all shapes and sizes, as well as several species of flying creatures. Xelern was really an awful planet, home to absolutely nothing. Which of course, was why it was determined to be the place of the Greatest Battle the Galaxy Has Ever Seen. So that after the battle, when there was nothing left of the planet, no one would care. The previous months had brought skirmishes aplenty, but nothing on a larger scale. Nothing that counted as a battle. Milton had been training his gift intensively, and his power of premonition had increased by 3778%. Even though he was not yet the Greatest General the Galaxy Has Ever Seen, he was well on his way to becoming it.

Milton glanced at Trevor and the Grand Equusasinus, and the three of them headed down the slope. He thought it ironic really and rather degrading: here was to be the Greatest Battle the Galaxy Has Ever Seen, and yet somehow the leaders of both sides were meeting in the middle of the valley, as if it was some Civil War battle. At least the Civil War generals had horses; he was on foot. (Of course, Milton was thinking of the Civil War that took place in the country known as the United States, on a planet known as Earth.) He didn't voice this thought, though, because he knew Trevor and the Grand Equusasinus would just be puzzled, and wonder what in the galaxy he was talking about.

The three leaders of the Red Side lumbered toward them. And they really did lumber—as if size would determine the outcome of the battle. They called themselves Elphas 1, Elphas 2, and Elphas 3. Milton squinted up at Elphas 1, in attempt to get a clear vision of his ugly, barbaric face. Good luck at that, he thought to himself. Each Elphas was well over 27 feet tall, and so all Milton could see was a trunk like shape, a couple of ear like blobs, and a whole lot of blinding light from the two suns.

The three Elphas all had a bit of premonition themselves, which is why they were leading the Red Side. But they paled when they saw Milton. The aura surrounding him was threatening, even if his size, at

under six feet, was rather diminutive. As one, the Elpha realized that the three of them were no match for him. Milton had been powerful before, but now he was all but unstoppable.

The six leaders stared at each other. The leaders of the Blue Side were busy trying not to be intimidated by the huge size of the Elpha, but the Elpha actually took this time to communicate in their gurgling rumble (which was, by the by, too low a frequency for the human, the Malfrian, and the Equusasinus to hear).

Elpha are a bit power hungry, which is why these three ended up on the Red Side of the Galaxy. But they're not stupid by any means, or evil. On an intergalactic scale, Elpha have significantly above average levels of intelligence. So now the Elpha were using their intelligence to try to construct a plan of action—and to try to figure out what to do about Milton.

They rumbled back and forth angrily—but there was no way around it. The Red Side and the Blue Side's forces were virtually equal, so leadership and premonition would determine the outcome of the battle. They knew they couldn't beat Milton, even combined. The three Elpha briefly contemplated trying to just squash Milton and get on with the battle, but came to the conclusion that if they tried that, the Malfrian would freeze time, and then they would be dead mid stomp—without even taking Milton with them.

Right about then, Elphas 2 came to an odd solution. He paused a moment, wondering if it was too insane, too crazy to suggest. He lingered for several moments in indecisiveness, but in the end, when no other solutions were forthcoming, Elphas 2 decided to voice his idea. (Although he didn't know it, it was in fact such a strange conclusion that in the entire 14.2 billion years that the galaxy has existed, this decision had never once before happened before a battle.) Elphas 2's decision was to retreat, to pull the troops out, and to surrender (Elphas 2 actually has a plaque in the Honorary Museum of All Things Strange and Rare for this decision). What is perhaps even more incredible; however, is that Elphas 1 and Elphas 3 understood that there was no other solution (that wouldn't involve them all being killed, at least) and actually acquiesced to this decision (For which it might also be noted, Elphas 1 and Elphas 3 also have plaques in the Honorary Museum of All Things Strange and Rare).

They informed the Blue Side of the Galaxy of their decision (Milton's blood pressure plummeted, if it had dropped 1.5 mmHg more, he would have passed out—even his premonition hadn't warned him of this, Trevor had to freeze time for several minutes to overcome his shock, and the Grand Equusasinus felt two of his four legs buckle). The Elpha exchanged sad glances, and were momentarily sorry that they would never have the opportunity to rule the galaxy. However, even as they turned back to tell their troops the sorry news, Elphas 1 began thinking about his retirement on the jungle planet of Dantirie, Elphas 2 began wondering if he could start that pineapple creamsicle business that he'd always wanted to begin, and Elphas 3 began celebrating that he would get to see his twin Elphapups grow up—and so none of them were particularly crushed by the situation.

The Elpha lumbered back to their troops and gave the order to lay down arms. The Red Side troops began to pull back, when all of a sudden a single legion of troops, led by a strange chimp like creature (who bore a strange resemblance to George Bush Jr., of the planet Earth) came rushing at the Blue Side. The troop was overwhelmed by a ratio of 12,304,330 : 1, and consequently they were stunned and tied up in approximately 16 seconds. This brought the end of the Greatest Battle the Galaxy has Ever Seen.

## Epilogue

Poor Milton though—he never did get back to pinochle. First there was a bit of paperwork after the “battle.” Milton and the other premonitionists had to round up the troops from the Red Side, and separate those who were confused, conned into joining, or otherwise generally harmless (2,345,384,309,489 individuals) from those who were actually dangerous (Just 7 individuals. These 7 individuals were sentenced to life on Xelern). Then Milton was whisked around on a publicity tour of the Galaxy, and on that tour, Milton met Miltina (an “alien” premonitionist), and one thing led to another, and he really had no time for card games.

In his autobiography, “How I Single Handedly Won the Galaxy,” Milton wrote that “A life without pinochle has been somewhat of a struggle for me. Sometimes my hands ache for the cards, and I regret that card playing has fallen out of Galactic fashion.” However, later in the book, he notes that, “I am happier now than I have ever been—I have learned to laugh at the idiosyncrasies of life, and I have learned to laugh at the pinochle title that was once so important to me.” The inside back flap of the book remarks that “Milton and Miltina are happily married and they currently live with Milton’s foster parents (and the foster parents’ three adult daughters, and one very aged platypus—all from planet Earth) in a condo on Haiha.”

In regards to planet Earth, however, in the aftermath of the “battle,” the Blue Side issued a policy of non-contact—meaning that no worlds that had not already been already introduced to the presence of alien species would ever be introduced to them. According to the new rulers of the Galaxy, this would prevent another powerful “evil” faction from arising in the Galaxy—although just how this was supposed to do that, no one could ever say. Milton and his immediate family were the only creatures from Earth who were even aware of other life forms in the Galaxy—the rest of the planet remained in the dark.

Consequently, humans were put on the list of “Creatures Not to be Contacted,” and so, in a little known reach of the Galaxy sits our blue and green Earth, alone, untouched, and completely oblivious.