

QUIRKS and CHARMS

by Tom Schimmel

CHAPTER ONE

Life on Earth

The bus stopped in front of Hubert T. Exerhoff and the rear door opened. Having commuted for seven years from the same street corner, the drivers were accustomed to his daily presence on their route. This is why Hubert T. Exerhoff rarely had to pay a fare. He stepped up onto the platform and made his way to a nearby seat at the rear of the bus.

It was 4:48 PM. The motions of existence continued unabated, as they had for the past seven years. Exerhoff had left his desk at 4:32 PM without a word to anyone. Working in the lower vault of the Health Department archives was a job that requires no direct contact with other humans. To fulfill the obligations of his employment, Exerhoff filled requests for birth, death, and dental records from the basement.

Upstairs, his unseen co-workers placed completed request forms into clear acrylic tubes which fell gently into the bowels of the Health Department. The archive system was closer in appearance to the guts of an abandoned Soviet space station than it was to say, a drive-thru bank. While the tube way had indeed been salvaged from a local bank in the eighties, the installers had covered it with flexible dryer duct in an effort to protect the system from excessive dust, rats, mold, and anything else that lurked between the walls of the old building.

The decades passed and the passage of time begun to show its effects. The ductwork had long ago begun to shed its aluminized coating. Each and every one of the tubes which arrived in the basement did so with a whoosh, a mild thump, and a small cloud of dust. The particulates were inevitably speckled with aluminum. A small hand broom and dustpan hung on the wall next to his desk to deal with the settlements on his desk.

Hubert T. Exerhoff was both a bank teller and a dungeon keeper. Precise, methodical, and mostly immune to the constant assault of airborne inhalants in his stank workplace. The air filters were reserved purely for the records storage area. It was a low-ceilinged concubine of data storage with aisle space sufficient enough only for a single upright human. After shuffling through his dungeon, Hubert T. Exerhoff would locate the matching records and return to his desk. The request forms were folded alongside the corresponding documents and placed neatly back in the clear acrylic tube. Then he would slide the lid shut and flip a switch to send.

Shortly after its installation, the previously-owned vacuum system had failed. An inspection revealed the electric motor had overheated. Heavy dust had suffocated it. Banks tended not to have this problem. The building superintendent had demonstrated his aptitude in improvisational engineering by replacing the electric fan system with a Shop-Vac brand wet/dry vacuum cleaner.

The Shop-Vac Corporation claimed on the product labeling, that their machine produced three horsepower.

Hubert T. Exerhoff would sometimes imagine the three horses inside the Shop Vac. They were an invisible equine posse whooshing up the ductwork like a twenty-first century perversion of what had once been real.

Hubert T. Exerhoff was not a man who cared for aesthetics. His choice of profession and personal appearance stated the obvious. For the most part, he passed through life unnoticed by those around him. He was a plain looking man in a plain brown suit during the day. In the evenings and on weekends, beginning at 5:13 PM when he would exit the bus and turn the key of his apartment door, no one knew what Hubert T. Exerhoff looked like.

Dinner was always delivered. Like most major cities of the world, Boston was full of small restaurants eager to please. When the delivery person would show up with his evening meal and knock at the door, Hubert T. Exerhoff would silently slide a twenty dollar bill under the door and wait. Over time he had trained them all. Take the money, leave the food, and walk away. His choice of restaurant did not interrupt the unspoken protocol. Word had gotten around. To him, they were all just a knock at the door which signaled that dinner was ready. To them all, he was but a door which spat out twenty dollar bills. Hubert T. Exerhoff was a man of physical gesture. Words could go away completely without his loss of self-expression. He was not dashing handsome by any means; but his position as a pariah and a hermit had little, if nothing, to do with looks.

The bus moved from the curb with a lurch and resumed its participation in the flow of traffic. The movement, as always, produced a small dollop of methane from his anus. The sound was inaudible over the diesel purr of the bus engine. The smell however, was ripe, thick, and nearly instantaneous. The young man seated next to him went pale and groaned, turning towards the window and burying his face in his backpack. He was, concluded Exerhoff, most likely a student at nearby Saint Catherine's.

Most of the passengers seated around him began to shift uncomfortably in their seats. Nosed wrinkled and a familiar murmur of olfactory discontent seeped through the air. These were sounds and mannerisms which had accompanied Hubert T. Exerhoff throughout his life. They were the mirror of his existence. The sounds which made him certain that he was, in fact, alive.

Early into his sophomore year of high school, Hubert T. Exerhoff had withdrawn from school and elected to complete his studies by mail. It was quite surprising he had lasted so long. It had been homecoming weekend when he was jumped in the hallway and dragged into the bathroom. The cooperative effort between members of the football and wrestling teams saw to it that his face and body were riddled with cuts and bruises.

The boy who led the charge was unsurprisingly the starting tight end for the football team. His girlfriend had accused Exerhoff's odiferous outbursts in the hallway of being an aggressive act of social non-compliance. She had of course, worded her distaste, with far less eloquence; but the effect on her brawny boyfriend was the same.

The group had held Exerhoff down on the bathroom floor. While some punched and kicked, others

managed to cover him with liquid soap from the hand dispenser. He was wet, dirty, soapy and being tortured against his will. Thus had the bowels of young Hubert T. Exerhoff charged themselves in an act of self-defense. The beating had stopped almost immediately. The offending athletes had lurched all over themselves and the bathroom floor. A young teacher had entered the bathroom to urinate and found himself upon a surreal disturbia. Young men covered in suds and water and vomit. Slipping and sliding to the floor as they tried repeatedly to stand up. The bathroom was closed for two days and word had spread like wildfire to stay the hell away from Exerhoff. He never had another conversation with a fellow student.

Rumors fly and rumors die. Having had his entire life to acclimate to his noxious cheese-cutting, Hubert T. Exerhoff then began to take a grim pride in his abilities. A few days after the incident found him in a counselor's office with a state licensed adolescent psychologist. The woman had suggested the phrase "Gastrointestinal Irreverence", in her initial report to the school principal. After she listened to his end of the story, and gotten a slight whiff of his peculiar abilities, she had simply advised him to leave school. Psychology had no place to help this boy. Simply put, the farts were coming out Hubert T. Exerhoff one way or another.

It was at least encouraging that he had chosen to embrace his abilities as means of both adaptation and survival. The school board wished him well in a letter sent to his mother explaining the school's position on her boy. He was capable and intelligent. His capacity to break wind would likely cause more damage in social situations. The school district followed up a week later with supplementary material on passing the equivalency exam.

Time went by and Exerhoff had his diploma by age seventeen. He had spent about a decade destroying atmospheres in clothing store dressing rooms, sandwich shops, and movie theaters. Time passed, and he began to see his stink bomb status as a gluttonous trapping of youth. More time went by and he discovered that there were certain perks to be had with his position, if he were to become more strategic with his doody burps.

Not paying bus fare was a prime example. The drivers had all learned quickly to open the back door and allow him free passage. It was an unspoken symbiotic arrangement. The odors never seemed to make it to the front of the bus. You could identify the regulars on his route. They all sat as close to the driver as possible. Some would even stand when otherwise unnecessary. The back of the bus belonged to the inexperienced, the uninitiated, and the gas master.

All of this having been said; it never failed to amuse Exerhoff that newbies to the route would leave their comfortable internal worlds to voice their displeasure at an invisible enemy. His ears located the target. Female. Caucasian. A lot of flab and an overdeveloped permafrown. Hubert noticed that she was not yelling, and yet had a noticeable talent for broadcasting obscenities at the local population.

Fat ugly mean white trash. The woman was a likely participant in a regular sofa orgy between Jerry Springer, Cool Ranch Doritos, Taco Bell, Mountain Dew, and cheap menthol cigarettes. What a bitch. He smiled and got to work.

Farting was the only thing in the world that gave Hubert T. Exerhoff true pleasure, albeit a selfish and noxious one. But as he had told his mother as a teenager, he felt he had little else in this world to enjoy. She had died of colon cancer seven years ago. Shortly after her passing, he had been hired on at the Health Department to service the archives of Boston.

The Moroccan curry that he had enjoyed last night had completed its passage through his superhuman large-intestine. An even twenty under the door and it had been waiting. Now, twenty-two hours had passed. The cumin, cardamom, coriander, and hot peppers had bounced and bobbed along splendidly

as his body digested nutrients from the rice, lamb, and vegetables. Now the food was gone. There was only spice remaining. The Moroccan curry was as jittery as stallions come race time. The sphincter gate opened and Hubert T. Exerhoff smiled with a vague pleasure. This was going to be good.

Contained in the dense weave of his suit trousers and with nowhere else to go, the immense fart snuck around his testicles and into the fabric below his belt. Under fantastic pressure from his curried air biscuit, the frayed seam on his zipper gave way and the crotch of his pants exploded.

Everyone heard the noise, but the noise was too sudden and bizarre to produce a familiar reaction from the crowd. No one could see his pants under his trench coat. Only Hubert T. Exerhoff knew what had just happened.

It had sounded, by his best analogy, like the final croak of an Amazonian bullfrog which has swallowed a live grenade and then wrapped itself in a wool Army blanket. The breeze on his crotch added to the sheer reverie of the moment.

The Fart God hath spoken. Let the people smell.

His methane bullfrog hopped slowly up the aisle on the left and began its assault. A middle-aged Asian woman clutched at her throat. She looked Korean, thought Hubert T. Exerhoff as he watched her writhing become pronounced, and then horrific. He had truly outdone himself. The white trash bitch was frozen and wide-eyed with terror. Cries of alarm became terrified screams as his flatulence circulated the middle of the bus. The Korean woman fell into the aisle. Her nose was bleeding.

For the first time in a very long time – if ever at all – a red flag was raised in the mind of Hubert T. Exerhoff. Never before had he caused a nasal hemorrhage. It had never gone this far. Never. Not once. Not with the jocks in high school or even the time he had eaten two quarts of *kimchee*. The Korean woman on the floor appeared to be dying before his eyes. There was a lot of blood. He couldn't even see her nose anymore.

A fart is still just a fart right?

The bus had stopped. Looking down the aisle into the large rearview mirror, the Fart God saw the form of the driver slumped over the wheel. Hubert T. Exerhoff saw his own countenance looking back at him. Was his the face of a murderer?

Then something blocked his view and he felt a very strange sensation from underneath his trench coat.

CHAPTER TWO

A Long Long Time Ago in a Nearby Place

The planet called Earth is a very old place. It has a rich history of ice ages, global warming, giant floods, volcanoes, and polar shifts. These cataclysmic events are partitioned by periods of relative stability. The stable times allow the resident species to proliferate.

The evidence for these multiple histories of living things on Earth exists largely within layers of sedimentary rock and miles and miles of ice. The current period of relative stability has allowed for a diverse genetic pool of humans to create and refine scientific methods to access and analyze and interpret the clues that are hidden. Geologists, archeologists, and oceanographers have all discovered congruent bits of information. Antarctica once had trees. Pompeii had been a prosperous city. Humans had survived the last ice age. Long before that, the Mississippi River Valley was underneath a warm ocean, along with part of Canada.

One thing is certainly true about planet Earth. Things come and go. Where the evidence no longer exists, there are many myths to rouse our thoughts. The lost city of Atlantis, the Biblical Flood, pyramids in Egypt, Aztec temples, Stonehenge, the Loch Ness Monster, dragon lore, and – as an extra dash of spice – Area 51.

The origin of Earth has always been a favorite subject of curious people. Many spiritual vocations, academic disciplines, and many religions have been formed in a basic effort to provide explanations to a deceptively simple question.

How did we get here?

This question has proven incredibly elusive. Countless wars have been fought over ideologies and theories which did not agree and/or vilified the opposition. Following these wars, periods of acceptance followed; and then led into new ages of war. The fighting followed the flux and flow of human thought, which in turn followed the flux and flow of planet Earth. Again, the question in question has proven incredibly elusive.

Very old places tend to carry with them multiple histories of proliferating species, separated by global cataclysmic events. In fact, scientists are now reluctant to call them cataclysmic. Ice ages, polar shifts, and global melting occur on a cyclical basis. Seamless flux and uninterrupted flow are the ways of the Earth machine.

Also, the lower crust slowly falls into the furnace, where Earth melts it down and spews it back up somewhere else. The planet appears truly, to be a reconstructive spacecraft serving as home to zillions and zillions of living organisms. It is also a very beautiful place.

This is life on Earth.

When times are free of the wars men wage about God, life on Earth can be a wondrous and satisfying experience. Families of all species are raised and thrive.

If you should be lucky enough to be alive during those times, you will find life on Earth to be a very satisfying experience.

Or, at least until the next war about God, which will cause us to work very hard at not thinking about things again.

Many humans on Earth are troubled in various degrees by the misleading concept that knowledge can lead to God. The concept of knowledge – even a general one – has caused a tremendous amount of discontent. Simultaneously, knowledge has spurred most growth in human awareness. Quid pro quo.

A very old story in a book written about God tells the tale of a man and a woman, naked and oblivious in paradise. The woman gets coerced by a talking snake into eating the ovary of a fabulously intelligent tree. She offers her man a bite. He takes it. Awareness kicked in immediately. They felt shame, guilt, and the very sad feeling of not knowing what you have until it's gone. Paradise looks much different from outside the gates.

That is one account of this very old story. There are many more. For the most part, people have gotten sick of debating whether the woman slept with her sons or copulated with a snake. A lot of people feel sorry for the man. They don't really know why God would stick the No-No tree in the garden if not-eating the fruit was so important. Forget these unanswerable questions, the secular world proclaims. Life on Earth is happening now. Just let us live and shop in peace.

Long before Earth was created, humanity was living in the same solar system. The events that precede life on Venus remain a mystery. The star called Sun once had only nine planets in its orbit. The earliest historical records were kept by the lone survivor of these times. His story marks the edge of known human history.

The one who would survive was born to a human mother and father on the Northern continent of Ishtar Terra. The loving couple named their new child Epemelius. He had a brother and two sisters; and the family was very happy and loving toward one another. His father was a merchant who traveled the south extensively, gathering medicinal plants and sea vegetables from tidal pools and along the floor of the boreal forest. Venus at the time was spectacularly wealthy with life. The air was clean. The water was mostly calm. Everyday in his work, there were surprises. Some days a new kind of phosphorescent moss which had chosen to blink. Other days a group of giant redwoods would dance when there was no wind even high above. Occasionally there was a scary moment with the dragonflies, which were the size of pigeons on modern Earth. Fortunately the dragonflies were not hostile, they were just very large. Ancient Venus was so beautiful that it was really a lot of fun even for moss and mushrooms and sea vegetables. The environment was so pristine and full of life that even the flora and fauna had the luxury of learning how to do neat things like turn blue and blink. Life was very interesting and full of surprises. His family loved to gather at their father's return to marvel at baby monkeys, telepathic fish, dancing plants, an occasionally, a gem for Pleida, his wife.

Pleida specialized in genetics. She worked from a home laboratory to be near her children. Their family made a comfortable living providing care and sustenance to those who required their growing skills in the healing arts. Their home was powered by the tidal generator anchored off the beach. Geothermal vents in the surrounding lands were used to heat the floors and stave off the chill of the cool rain forest mornings. The land and sea were clean and abundant. Epemelius loved his family and his home. They swam together in the cool crisp ocean and walked many steps through the wooded hills behind. From an early age, Epemelius learned a deep respect and awe for the world around him. He shared a blissful early childhood with his siblings. From the time he learned to talk, the boy began to state out loud various species of flora and fauna and ocean life. His parents were of course, delighted.

Adobe designs for the time were similar among other Venusians. The society was collectively prosperous at a level which respected their planet. Love, awareness, and understanding had allowed them to live equally and well. People respected one another and the world around them. Technology was progressive and the air was clean. At his young age, the boy had no reason to contemplate the question of his existence. There were too many things to discover to wonder how he came to be.

Well things changed, as they always have and will. Life is motion and motion leads to change. Motion is change. As Epelimus neared his eleventh birthday, his father returned home from the southern continent in a state of anger and concern that the boy had never seen on his father's face. Pleida served a meal of fish, quinoa, and fresh fruit; and his father provided his wife and family with a number of disturbing observations about the southern landscape. Large wetlands were becoming arid. Fish were in many places, nonexistent.

When the family was settled and her husband was asleep, Pleida spent a few hours in her laboratory chatting online with other scientists around the planet. She was shocked to discover that the same problems were being observed around parts of Ishtar Terra as well. The magnetic poles appeared to be undergoing a shift. It was happening very fast and had not been noticed until recently by the scientific community at large. The result would melt the polar ice caps on both Ishtar and Aphrodite. The ocean would rise and warm. Observational data was now streaming in at record pace.

Now, when his parents spoke, Epelimus could hear the concern in his parents' voices. His sisters withdrew while his brother turned feisty and outspoken. They would allow him to remain at the table and he would listen without comment. They debated whether the ice under the ocean could turn to gas so quickly. The boy mostly detected frustration and worry in their voices.

Venusians were peaceful and responsible people. Their civilization knew nothing of cynicism and sarcasm and other grueling devices the mind uses to deal with bad luck. Their general disposition would appear on Earth to be somewhat serious and potentially boring. The peoples of Venus lived as one with their planet. Never had they chosen to monitor the system of their world. The weather was calm and the sun was warm. What else did they need to know?

Venus had produced magnificent technologies. Magnetic transportation was personal, noiseless, and without pollution. The environment was pristine. Though their co-habitation with nature, they had lived peacefully for centuries. Remarkably, this very time of plenty would prove fatal to most everyone on the planet. Simple lack of change or incident in so long had led them into a blissful ignorance. Prosperity was now due to turn around and head the other way.

Humans on modern Earth are better adapted to the flux and flow. While many would be more than happy to have a go at life on ancient Venus, it should be remembered that the planets themselves are part of a larger flux and flow. The cycle which itself is in some way the universe itself; and in some way – by

that same definition – could be called God. Either way, the axis shift was quick – not more than a few months passed when the new alignment had been achieved and the planet began to boil.

Fortunately for Epelimus and his family, Pleida had enough influence in the scientific community to gain them passage on one of the few spacecraft available on Ishtar Terra. The evacuation plan was sparse, simple, and uncontested. Few Venusians were able to comprehend the implications of global warming. They were so synchronized with the turtle's pace of nature that they could not really grasp this radical change. The histories of families for generations – passed along through their oral tradition - simply did not contain any information on global cataclysmic events. And the people had little information available about what lay under the ocean depths, except about what was good to eat and useful for health and shelter.

In the end, Pleida and her colleagues had no clear idea what was the true physical situation on Venus. The family's decision to evacuate Ishtar Terra aboard a spacecraft was based on the warnings from dolphins in the oceans. Some friends of Pleida had received reports from whales and dolphins that there was a grave instability in the deep ocean that threatened everyone and everything alive. Venusians had communicated with sea mammals for centuries. Pleida herself had helped communicate genetic science to the ocean dwellers in return for information on where sustainable fisheries might be established.

This entire concept would seem somewhat ridiculous to the modern Earth dweller. It was perfectly normal on ancient Venus however, to talk about talking with the creatures of the sea.

According to the dolphins, a large amount of undersea ice was beginning to shake and crack from the rapidly rising water temperatures. The ice was known by the whales and dolphins to be of a different composition than the water which surrounded it. Areas far below the surface were already turning volatile even for their best swimmers.

Epelimus was in tears as his family boarded the spacecraft. He caught a glimpse of his father's glassy eyes and watched the man choke back a sob. His sisters remained mostly silent. Only his brother protested. He did not want to believe the dolphins' story. He begged to remain on Venus, finally throwing such a tantrum that Epelimus' father was forced to carry the kicking and screaming adolescent up the gangway. Epelimus had thought it was perhaps best to leave his brother; but Pleida scolded him severely when he whispered these thoughts in her ear. As it would turn out, their family and a few hundred others would be the only ones to survive.

Modern Venus is observable from Earth. Almost fifty years have passed since the first Soviet exploratory spacecraft touched down and recorded surface temperature readings in excess of six hundred degrees Fahrenheit. Two later Soviet probes were literally crushed by the atmospheric pressure. If the solar system is God's kitchen, Venus is certainly the pressure cooker.

Hundred of millions of years prior to American and Soviet space programs - as Epelimus and his family took to the heavens in search of a new home - the ocean temperatures passed their critical level. The vast undersea mountains of methane hydrate which had maintained the stability of the Venusians atmosphere for eons was no longer able to remain solid and inert. Frozen methane hydrate does not melt. When rising temperature threatens the existence of its solid form, methane hydrate prefers to skip the messy liquid stage. The gaseous state of the stuff has 1000 times the volume of the undersea ice. Like Pop Rocks, only bigger.

The oceans boiled and the methane gas moved past the water's surface and into the atmosphere. The expansion was of such magnitude that all of Venus was green housed beyond repair within three days. Immediately the steamy atmosphere was warmed by the sun, with no hope of shedding the heat.

Everything that did not escape in a spaceship was pressure cooked into oblivion.

Modern Venus as the Soviet and American missions have observed is hot, heavy, and inhospitable to probably anything except anaerobic bacteria. The key word is probably.

Somewhere, perhaps in a cave deep below the surface, a clump of phosphorescent blue moss still chooses to blink.

CHAPTER THREE

A Long Time Ago in another nearby Place

Venusians interplanetary travel had occurred only twice before in the known history of the planet. Both journeys had successfully returned both the ships and the explorers they contained. The tales were true, they had confirmed. The green planet was profuse with tall narrow evergreens and cold, pure water. Mountains rose and fell into smooth flats where the sea came to greet the land. They had seen little mammalian life, and no large beast or reptile of any kind had been observed. Mars had plenty of oxygen in the land and water. There were places of dense plants and moss. The level of gravity was also lighter. Epelimus and his siblings were immediately fascinated by being how far they could now leap and jump.

The landing sites on the green planet had been marked by the first Venusians to visit Mars. There were no difficulties in the approach. The spacecraft were propelled and protected by numerous quantum magnetic fields which deflected particles and allowed for a soft landing even in this thin, cool air. The rich iron content of the water rapidly enriched their corpuscle supply. Within a week of their arrival, no one shivered anymore. Everywhere the water was fresh and clean and it bore them no ill effects. Epelimus and his brother spent much of their time with their father, exploring the land and learning what was good to eat.

Adafon had been gifted with an extraordinary sense of smell. His nose was the nose of their new colony. He sniffed and sniffed until every distinction was made between plants of benefit, and those of harm. Moss was generally left to be where it was found; and a certain tree provided leaves for tea which all of the adult colonists agreed was a lot of fun.

The climate was cold. The frozen water hung on the mountains. Pine cones littered the forest floor. Mars was as hospitable to life as their home planet had been. A community now of only a few hundred men, women, and children; they were indeed lucky.

Mostly, this population consisted of friends and families. There were a few of the other men who maintained a similar temperament to Adafon. They quarreled now and then over this and that; but they resolved their differences quickly. It was easy to do in such a new place. The necessity of reestablishing their home was merciful labor. It provided them all with countless tasks to occupy their minds. Only during the Martian nights, after the sun had set, would they gather around a fire and sing of their lost home.

What had been a ritual for their ancestors in prosperous times now had evolved into respectful wonderment. They had been spared a great catastrophe; and for the first time in any of their lives, began to contemplate the circumstances and events which had delivered them, not to death, but to a new life in a new place.

As the colony's basic needs were met, the times around the fire began to linger. It may have been here on Mars, among the few who were chosen, when the concept of religion was born. Adults and children alike, it was the first time any of them had pondered their fate to exist. While their voices joined in the clear Martian air, Venus glowed faintly white in the distance. Thick cloud had replaced the rich blue which Epelimus had seen from the spacecraft.

Even at his young age, the boy observed a somber quality in the tone of his mother's and father's voices when they sang. Then he began to hear it in his own voice as well. The group as a single voice was weighted by entire lifetimes gone in the blink of an eye and an eruption of the ocean. Mars was their new home. They would never return to Venus. They had been spared from death. Although there was a set of circumstances to explain their survival, there was also deep and somber wonderment.

It was a simple thought, which they all experienced from time to time.

Why me?

Relative to the eons, any time is small. Human context is but a twang of light in an impossibly quiet fabric. The time of humans on the green planet of Mars is known only to have been a lot shorter than the civilization of Venus. Time is suspect over large areas of space. Modern Earth has no true knowledge of how fast time was going then. Guesswork is performed in methodical fashion by very intelligent, hardworking people; but there are only clues about the past. Theories may abound that Epelimus lived five hundred years on Mars while building a great kingdom. The water perhaps, gave them extended life. But there is no way to really know either the relativity or the concise period of human life on Mars.

It was enough time for Epelimus to grow up, learn the works of both parents, and other scientists in the colony; and even find a wife and sire a child, named Priapus. During this time, however long or short it was, there were many triumphs and hardships. Hardships were laughed at while triumphs were celebrated. These were bold changes in the Venusian temperament. And while their animated selves emerged, so grew their collective desire for excellence. Pleida and Adafon delighted in working with

their children to grow an immense variety of new vegetation. Venusians genetics was quite happy in the mix with Martian species.

Adafon was quickly established as the leader of the exploring groups. He regularly returned from a trek to delight his wife with a bottle of anhydrobiotic crustaceans. Pleida would shriek with happiness, plant a kiss on his face, and scurry off to the lab to reanimate, study, and rearrange. Epelimus had spent his adolescence exploring with his father until Pleida's genetic wonders stirred his excitement the possibilities of new life. Unlike their hastily gathered records on their doomed home planet, Pleida had begun recording ocean temperatures, solar radiation, and soil magnitude. Others in the colony observed winds, precipitation, and the temperatures between day and night. Season changes came and went and were observed with more than a poem. They had been naïve once, but no more.

Epelimus grew to excel at genetic engineering. He was revered even as a young man for his ability to imagine possibilities for splicing this gene onto that one. Instinctual and masterful, Epelimus created this new plant and that new animal. Many of the new woodland dwelling mammals were recognizable to the colonists. Epelimus had brought some of Venus onto Mars. Having some old friends around was a good thing in this big, lonely place. Over time there were birds, and with their avian skills helped Adafon procure the evidence he had long postulated about. Returning from the ocean with shells of mollusks and dried pieces of trilobite, Adadfon finally had proof that the salted waters of Mars were not empty.

It was not long until the prodigious Epelimus was able to adapt the genetic structure of the beloved Venus dolphin to freshwater survival. The dolphins explored the river ways, charting landmarks, and feasting on many varieties of small jellyfish, crustaceans, and the occasional amphibious tadpole. The exploration led to a bountiful food source known as Wagga to the colonists. It had the sweet pink skin of a snapper with the voracious reproductive ability of the tilapia. The fish could be gutted, rinsed, and roasted whole over a steady fire. Under the charred skin, the white flesh was moist and mild. The dolphins were delighted to help keep the populations in check. The new fish had been named by a toddler, brought to visit Epelimus in his lab. She had pointed immediately at the tank and bluntly stated her opinion.

“Wagga.” the little girl had said. “Fishies name is Wagga.”

The name stuck like hot glue and the adults had laughed till they cried.

The creation and proliferation of Wagga and the dolphins had brought them all hope and comfort. Life was less lonely with a few birds in the air and a few dolphins in the stream. And while the addition of fresh fish to their diet was a supreme improvement on nutrition capsules, there were still a large number of unforeseen problems. This is of course, the downside to exploration and early colonization. Things happen.

Predators were discovered at a minimum. Some wildcats lurked in the mountains and equine hoof prints tended to congregate in those areas. But Mars was very large, and the colonists would have to depend on their offspring to find out, over time, more of what lay hidden.

Some of what lay hidden was giant sandworms. The peoples from Venus were forced to adapt their peaceful technologies into defensive weaponry to scan and stun these thick skinned eyeless terrors. The first attack had claimed the lives of an entire family. The colony had gathered and laid out their countermeasures. Magnetic technology which powered the transports was adapted to scan the surface below and around their outpost. Should a voracious sand worm breach the safe area, it would be met with an electromagnetic pulse which would promptly end its sandworm life. Pulsators were marked with signposts around the camp. The assaults soon ceased.

When the colony left Venus forever, they were essentially fleeing in blindness. There had been very little time to plan for the necessities of survival; and no time at all to consider long-term needs. And they had done very well in adapting to Mars and providing solutions for needs as they arose. All things considered, life on green Mars was better than any of them could have hoped. Loss of life from accidents and early sandworm attacks had been well compensated with broods of beautiful children, who grew very tall in the light gravity. Adults found that old age would still lead to death, but that it took awhile longer now thanks to the rich mineral content of the water. Their naiveté had dissipated almost entirely. Each of them knew birth, death, sex, and how something can be right one moment, and then not the next.

Still, you can't plan for everything. They had quickly covered their settlement with monitors to insure that Mars was a healthy planet which would not surprise them suddenly with things like death. Even the large volcano which was always in the horizon had been assessed for tectonic activity. Olympus Mons had blown its stack long before they got there. It would not create their demise.

While all of these things were going on inside the Martian atmosphere, things were going on outside of it as well. The colony had not learned yet that the heavens themselves can be a danger.

Far into the future, on planet Earth, some humans would speculate that Mars had been a thriving civilization whose nuclear capability in time of war had blasted every living thing clean off the planet. The red soil, constant large boulders, and frozen sky would truly support this hypothesis. Water had been there once; but now it was either deep below the surface or frozen to mountainsides. Presumably, most of the water had been sucked into outer space with the rest of the atmosphere. Still, modern Earth was just now beginning to remotely land automated spaceships. It would be awhile before they had enough fossils and relics to fill in more details. Mars was a very long way to travel without the aid of landing markers and quantum magnetic hyper drives.

Interesting mythology on Earth claims that Mars was decimated by accident. Zeus and his father Cronus had been playing their version of catch. Father and son were fond of heaving rocks back and forth between Jupiter and Saturn. When Zeus overthrew the very large target of Jupiter with one of his very large boulders, the result was red Mars. Farewell to thee oh atmosphere of Mars. It is unwritten but highly likely that Cronus then threw back his head and laughed, bellowing something like "That's my boy!"

Zeus really could chuck a rock. There was no doubt he was a chip off the old block. So goes the legend. Others living on modern Earth accept as true that the asteroid belt was a product of a large and very pregnant mother planet. The birth, according to the believers, was quite violent. The resulting baby planets briefly simulated a croquet match played in a fighting cage by angry, legless men. This celestial body meets that celestial body; Earth gets her cherry popped, and out comes the moon. It is not surprising that most people who accept this explanation are women with a taste for other women. Many men would be happy to accept this belief too. As long as they were allowed to watch....

Perhaps after rocking the far side of the planet, the errant throw of young Zeus, did in fact continue onward to connect with something else closer to the Sun. Epelimus would have been the last to know. Had anyone been spared in order to speculate, they would perhaps conclude that the meteor had been a solid mass ejection from the Giant Red Spot of Jupiter.

Lying asleep with his wife and son, Epelimus had been dreaming of his mother as she was when he was himself a boy. They were in Pleida's laboratory on Venus. His mother smiled at him and showed him the genetic encoder in her hand. He touched her hand and the small machine. His mother's hands were warm.

A dolphin entered the splash pool at the rear of the lab. It had swum up the river and into the lab through a special waterway built just for them. The dolphins were free to come and go as they pleased. This one let out a squeaky hello and smiled at Epelimus.

In his dream, he had just reached out to touch the creature's moist beak, when the sparkling eyes met his. The dolphin bypassed all the silly communication charades that humans and dolphins often enjoy playing. This one had gotten right to the point and spoken straight into his brain. The voice was a tremulous bass. It had exactly one word to say.

“Run”

In his dream, there was only time to feel a shiver through his spine. The giant shock wave from the far side of Mars razed their buildings in a single rumbling swoosh. His wife and son had been tossed violently out of their beds and struck by the debris that had, only a few seconds before, been their refuge. Epelimus staggered to his feet in a surreal landscape. The transformation of the colony was permanent. Everything at ground level or above was scattered like snowflakes. Bodies and debris were everywhere. His wife and child lie among unrecognizable wreckage, their corpses intact; but twisted, broken, and unmistakably dead.

Modern Earth has produced a number of movies which depict a man standing in the wreckage of his home, with everyone and everything dead and gone. Quite often, the male character will raise his eyes and arms to the heavens and scream a single word.

“Why?”

Character development after the tragic climax scene varies tremendously. Some characters drink heavily and forget to shave. Suicide occurs with some frequency. The darkest stories lead the man to forsake God and embrace savagery to avoid the pain of loss. Soldiers, athletes, and vampires alike have been portrayed as such monsters. The endings of these movies are often bloody and rarely merciful.

There are also movies on modern Earth which describe men who are able to lose everything and triumph even without bitterness. Religious men accept and continue to walk their path. Secular types might create a foundation to help those who lose everything. The endings of these movies often bring tears to viewer's eyes. They are filled with mercy.

Epelimus was fortunate to be a pioneer of religious thinking. He didn't know enough about God to blame God for anything. But he did look up to the sky as the passing dust cloud was sucked upwards and out what appeared to be a large hole in the sky. Air and dust and everything else were being sucked out of the hole and into space.

Shock can be merciful in keeping one insulated from tragic loss. The ground rumbled and knocked Epelimus to his knees. He could see the entrance to the underground laboratory exposed. The laboratory had been the only part of the colony dug below the surface to keep the crystal storage disks and genetic encoders and splicing equipment safe from fluctuating surface temperatures. The ground level roof had been neatly sheared off.

Twice more the ground shook. Epelimus crawled the last few meters and fell down the stairway. Boulders and small rocks were erupting from the soil. In the distance, sandworms fifty meters long were flopping up onto the quaking surface. They rolled slowly, catatonically. Some had been lacerated and severed by the unstable crust. Whatever it was had shifted layers of rock even below the surface. Tectonic movements were gaining intensity. A small sandworm flopped helplessly near in concussive

shock. Epelimus heard his mother's voice. Was she here, alive?

Pleida had passed from her body two Martian years ago. Epelimus realized the voice was inside his head. He was remembering the dream he had been dreaming moments before. How many moments had it been? Something very bad had happened. He was dazed and confused. Fortunately he was cognizant enough to know that there was little time to act.

The surface of Mars showed little mercy to the man as he located the crystal disks containing DNA sequences of himself, his mother, and his son. Most everything in the lab had been scattered and shuffled without intent by the seismic forces, including the fractal record of the dolphins. There was precious little air left. Temperature was dropping. The atmosphere of green Mars was almost gone.

In a final act of survival, Epelimus of Venus ran up the stair of the laboratory with the disks and the encoder. Lungs screaming for any available air, he threw himself on the twitching body of the young sandworm.

Much later, Epelimus would regain consciousness. And he would find that he was no longer Epelimus, son of Pleida and Arafon. His consciousness was intact; but his body had died on the surface of Mars. Long ago, his flesh and blood had succumbed to the sudden freezing vacuum. Over time, his flesh had become dust and blown away in solar wind. Now, he resided in the body of a Martian sandworm. The creature's instinct, upon gaining his DNA, had been to burrow again deep into the soil to find air.

Well there was air down there all right; and the strange combination of mind and machine remained underground for many thousands of Martian years. Eventually the sandworm would crawl to the surface to discover the deathly cold of night and the searing daytime heat. Epelimus of Venus had become a Martian sandworm. Back it went into the frozen regolith.

Thousands more years passed on Mars during which the sandworm did very little else but contemplate a solution to its predicament. It was the sort of higher consciousness that only comes to a great mind with plenty of time.

The sandworm began to evolve. Small pustules behind the eyes grew into bulbous sacs. Bulbous sacs added thickness and then receded into the skull. An observer (of which there were none) might have noticed the shimmering blue liquid which was always moving within.

The boy from Venus was no longer the boy from Venus. The scientist from Mars was no longer a scientist. The Martian sandworm was no longer a true sandworm. It had only made sense to change its name to something that reflected the immensely boring millenniums leading to the triumphant development of its pan-dimensional lobes.

By the time its wormhole opened to Andromeda, Zymphonamous Bla had a plan.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ancient Andromeda

Author's note: the Andromeda galaxy is really, really, really, far away.

TMC2 was produced a very long time ago. Billions of years before Hubert T. Exerhoff was born. It was the finest neural device ever to be produced in the Andromeda galaxy. Coupled with an outrageously successful marketing strategy, it was an unstoppable team. Until the collapse of the current universe, TMC2 will retain the most coveted consumer award: Most units of anything sold in any galaxy at any price.

Profit margins for TMC2 were shaped like Pac Man on the pie charts, intent on gobbling up the last few remaining numbers in the expense column.

The excellent quality of the TMC2 device, by no coincidence, led to the rapid depopulation of the Andromeda galaxy and the beginning of the greatest movie ever made.

It seems pretty simple. And it is.

Sort of.

Maybe a little.

Not really at all.

TMC2 was a brand name. Across the product's smooth plastic packaging, it was written that TMC2 stood for Trolevian Mind Configuration Calibrator.

Manufactured on the desert planet of Troleve, the Trolevian Mind Configuration Calibrator was a compact and painless way to keep in touch. Long gone were the days of personal handheld devices in Andromeda. Still, TMC2 was the only self-implanting personal communicator in the Andromeda galaxy. Open the package, say yes, and it crawled into your head behind the temple. The device worked on most every type of creature with an inner ear.

Modern Earth lags far behind ancient Andromeda in the quality of consumer goods. However the financial success of the TMC2 relied as much on marketing as it did on proprietary biotechnology. Andromeda as a galaxy had already mastered knowledge of quantum magnetic hyper drives and interplanetary travel for all. Everyone stayed in touch and moved around a lot. Such was the nature of galaxial commerce. Thousands and thousand of inhabited planets, all looking to get in touch. TMC2

was a bargain.

Quite unsurprisingly, a government was involved.

Planetary self-government had been the law in Andromeda for as long as anyone could remember. Each planet maintained a form of law and order which all visitors were to respect. Likewise, planets did not attack each other for any reason. Truly, it was a secular life. Consumers coped with inflation and buzzed about each new thing to buy. Everyone who was anyone already had TMC2.

The governing body of Troleve consisted of a very large, scary, and needless to say, unethical creature named Zow. Because his planet was mostly empty, he had bullied his way to the top in a mostly straight line. Such are the advantages of politics on sparsely populated desert planets.

Within moments of his arrival on Troleve, Zymphonous Bla had this gadfly in its pocket. A security detail had arrived brandishing fancy cannons which they trained on various parts of Bla's enormous figure. Eventually the governor floated over to inquire on this creature that was nearly as large as he. The newcomer was smart, concluded Zow as he watched the sandworm's pan-dimensional lobes drop his bodyguards like strands of cooked spaghetti who thought for a fleeting moment that maybe they could dance. Yes, this one could stay. Zow had no idea where this place Mars was located, and he didn't care. Zow was interested only in money. He commissioned this strange creature of fortune with the task of making him rich. A sign, he reckoned, of his great destiny.

TMC2 was a voluntary mind-control device. In an effort to get in touch, consumers would pay happily for the privilege of being encoded with a genetic device. The sound and video quality was crystal clear and you could listen or watch anything you wanted to. The implant, true to the skill of its creator, was indeed painless. Consumers were free to do what they wished. It was mind control for sure, and completely voluntary.

The concepts of true value and personal freedom guaranteed that sales of TMC2 immediately went through the roof. Likely the same would occur on Earth, if such a brilliant pan-dimensional sandworm as Zymphonous Bla were to create and introduce such a fantastic voluntary mind-control product. People immediately stopped talking to each other in person on Troleve and began communicating with their neural chips instead. For shortsighted military officers and politicians like Zow, the concept of people paying him to stay in touch with one another was a perfect Machiavellian solution. The population of Troleve was linked, under control; and the money was just rolling in.

Zow was so in love with his growing assets that he failed to see at all, just how fast word could get around in a consumer-driven galaxy.

Once word got around, economics packed up and left. Manufacturing efforts were doubled, and tripled, and then quadrupled again for fair measure. But Zow had not considered that the guns and stewardship of an entire galaxy would want to buy more units of TMC2 than even his own avarice could have anticipated.

Consumers began swarming to Troleve in everything from moon-hopping jalopies to massive sleek titanium cargo ships.

"Load us up" they all would say.

This on-demand type of customer service was not Zow's strongpoint either as a political leader or a creature of business. He was a large creature, impatient, and soon without enough units of TMC2 to satiate the steady flow of customers. Like a maitre'd in a crowded Earth restaurant where the kitchen is far behind, Zow fell under immense pressure from angry customers with genuine complaints.

Unlike a *maitre 'd* in a crowded Earth restaurant, Zow was a bully who instinctively chose violence when he felt uncomfortable negative pressure. He promptly swallowed the nearest three customers and then reiterated the need for their patience to the rest. As would be expected, his course of action was not well received; but it immediately became the cornerstone of Zow's marketing plan for TMC2.

Word got around faster than ever thanks to those who had their own TMC2. Larger customers began to show up. Those who did not accept the opportunity to pre-pay and back order were promptly swallowed. A famous incident and further turning point in Zow's profit margin came with a visit from a large reptilian creature. Claiming to be from the Sirius B system, the angry customer had demanded that Zow hand over all existing units of TMC2, or perish.

This reptile was not as large as Zymphonous Bla, although it still put up a good fight.

After that jagged pill and the pain to his proboscis which followed, Governor Zow surrounded planet Troleve with gamma ray cannons in case anything too big to swallow showed up.

Amidst all the customer-service drama, over six trillion Trolevian Mind Configuration Calibrators had already been sold. Prices rose with demand, and had become nothing short of spectacular. It wasn't long before the Emperor Zow was the richest being in Andromeda.

Emperor Zow was now also quite pudgy.

The rest of the galaxy was full of doubt. Consumers had become nervous, like modern Earth wildebeests in the Serengeti, when they know that they must drink even though the crocodiles are waiting under the water. Back order requests were politely sent to Troleve with payment in full, as required. Rumors and gossip clotted the air. Critical thinking and truth were lost to wild speculation. There was on all fronts, a distasteful loss of trust.

TMC2 had been designed by a creature that claimed to have once been human, and from a planet called Venus. Zymphonous Bla was a physical manifesting of near-omniscient brilliance. Bla existed simultaneously in past, present, and future since its pan-dimensional lobes had first appeared on Mars. It knew when it would die, and what would happen before its death. When Zow brought out the guns, Bla was happy to retire in comfortable modesty. The crib that Zow purchased for him was a glass terrarium eleven cubic kilometers in volume. It was not a flamboyant or spacious abode for a creature of his size; but the warm red sands of Troleve were a big step up from the frozen regolith of Mars. Minus the cold and the solar radiation and the lack of atmosphere, Troleve was a lot like Mars.

Zymphonous Bla had taken to the easy life with a satisfying amount of money; but the revenues from his invention made his slice of the pie to be a micron's width. It was no longer a secret that most income from TMC2 was being poured into building an enormous army. When confronted by members of the Andromeda Chamber of Commerce, Zow had proudly explained that it was part of his marketing plan.

Swallowing customers after taking their money had been a stopgap solution. Every leader from every inhabited planet in the galaxy now had standing orders for trillions of Trolevian Mind Configuration Calibrators. Most of these orders were pre-paid and would never be received, handled, or shipped. The sales of TMC2 were beyond any economic scale.

The supply and demand curve had been viciously bugged into knots with an unprecedented degree of guile. Instead of trying to fill pre-paid back orders, Emperor Zow had concluded; why not just send in his new imperial army to take all their money?

It was tyranny; but the secular peace of Andromeda had no organized opposition. Morality was compromised like rice paper in a lava flow. A gigantic array of lopsided customer service issues had resolved quickly when the Imperial army of Emperor Zow went on tour. Basic consumer principles of free trade become extremely elastic when the supplier's army has the surrounded the customer's planet and impounded the local currency.

If Zow was the brawn of Andromeda, the transplanted Zymphonamous Bla was certainly the brains. Bla had developed a military-grade version of TMC2 for the Imperial Army. It also suggested that Zow, as the richest being and de-facto emperor of the mighty Andromeda galaxy, should implement a system to insure the continued growth of his wealth and assets.

Business meetings with Zow were always the same. Bla would make a brilliant suggestion; Zow would think on it. A few days would pass, and Zymphonamous Bla would find his terrarium surrounded by soldiers with gamma ray cannons. As always, the emperor was bluffing. Zow needed Bla to design this new machine of riches. And Bla had bigger fish to fry. It already knew what was going to happen.

So was the origin of a galactic mind network, known commonly in ancient Andromeda as the SAIM. It was similar in principle to the World Wide Web on modern Earth. The SAIM amalgamated Andromeda, physically and mentally, into the unified task of making money.

Zymphonamous Bla moved quickly to deliver a detailed plan to the impatient emperor. The army would use their skills in marketing to obtain consent from individual planets. The great majority of all populations would eagerly embrace their new lives of sleep and wealth. Each new planet would be more eager than the last to join the growing matrix of prosperity.

The capability to encircle and maintain an entire galaxy, as might be expected, requires a lot of power. The Social Artificial intelligence Moderator was no exception. Zymphonamous Bla truly was a genius. Citizens became employees. Employees became rich for doing nothing else than crawling into a cube and sleeping. During their sleep, the Central Neural Network would deduct a predetermined amount of neural energy. This energy would power the SAIM. And the Social Artificial Intelligence Moderator paid well. After their first night's sleep, employees found their bank accounts to be chock full of Zow E-Bucks.

Word got around the galaxy faster than ever. While some citizens of Andromeda would be unable to own their own Trolevian Mind Configuration Calibrator, they could now have something even better than a self-implanting neural communication device.

Battalions and divisions of the Imperial Army widened their survey of the planets. A military-grade TMC2 made it impossible, in the most literal sense, for any soldier to think for him, her, or its self. They went about their work; conquering planet after planet, and installing the SAIM infrastructure everywhere they went. When they murdered, they felt neither remorse nor dark ecstasy. They did not share in the laughter and tears of the local populations. They did not scream. They did not sing.

If the Imperial Army showed up at your planet, you had three choices:

1. Die
2. Volunteer for the Imperial Army
3. Go to sleep and get rich.

The vast majority of ancient Andromeda had been peaceful mammalian creatures. They went to sleep as soon as their planet was connected to the SAIM. By sleeping in cubes and supplying the SAIM with their brain energy, they were awarded large incomes which would allow them to afford monthly payments on larger, even more comfortable cubes.

Option number three had no real competition. Only a few were principled enough to die. Those who demonstrated the inability to make an important life decision were promptly filtered into the military. Once a military-grade Trolevian Mind Configuration Calibrator crawled inside a head, any form of doubt, reluctance, resentment, or disinclination towards either death or wealth was gone. An old form of thinking was replaced by stimulus and response. There was no guilt trip as they blasted the living piss out of whatever stood in the way of their mission. The SAIM prospered and quickly encircled the galaxy, forming a dull, translucent veil over all of Andromeda.

As the story alludes, the general populous was so pleased about being rich that few even noticed the murders and atrocities. No one really cared either. They were rich and sleeping well. Dream sequences would remind them regularly to sleep well. They were safe now. The Imperial Army was their army. It was both enormous and extremely well-armed.

The following letter of submission was a diplomatic move typical of many planets in Andromeda. By expressing gratitude, rather than hostility, they hoped to avoid any confusion regarding their acceptance of the way things had become.

Dear Emporer Zow,

It is with our great pleasure that we announce our surrender to your fearsome army.

We are grateful that you neglected to ship our pre-paid order of Trolevian Mind Configuration Calibrators and we appreciate instead, being connected electronically to all of the Central Neural Network by means of the Social Artificial Intelligence Moderator.

All of the physical assets of our planet are now under the control of your technology. Our citizens are working hard and cooperatively building the sleep cubes. We hope those who wavered in their decision are enjoying their basic training in your fine army.

Our recent communication with the Chief Financial Theory Computer resulted in financial gains which were unheard of prior to your arrival. Our own currency was clearly not profitable and we appreciate how polite your soldiers were as they took it away from us and replaced it with a much greater amount of Zow E-Bucks.

Please contact us through our CNN sleep halos anytime you are in town.

S.A.I.M. Old! S.A.I.M. Old!

The Employee-Citizens of Parcheesi 1974

Over the course of a few hundred Trolevian years, life in Andromeda had changed dramatically. The velocity of change was far too high on any scale of relativity to be considered safe. Emperor Zow had grown obese, even by the bodily standards of giant gadflies. The continued practice of swallowing local threats to his position of power had caused exponential bloating and also, constant hunger. Zow needed

more and more to feel full. He had taken to gobbling up small planets to quell his appetite. Eventually, the sheer size of the Emperor was so great, that his home planet tilted sideways and he was dumped off the planet and into the ensconced orbits of Troleve's many satellites. Forced into his most basic gadfly instincts, Zow had regurgitated his last few customers and spun a trampoline of saliva to net himself between the moons of his home. Zow was a big fat emperor stuck in a hammock. In this gluttonous fashion, he soon ceased to exist.

Things that outgrow their resources have a collective tendency to become extinct. While Zow himself certainly claimed he was starving to death, it was not for lack of calories that he would perish. Nutrition took a backseat to rudimentary physics. Mass, density, and gravitational pull all enter into the equation. Overlaying the mathematics of the event is the simple fact that a large enough mass with an empty inside is a done deal.

The collapse of the richest and most powerful creature in ancient Andromeda was calm and quick, like an Earth jellyfish taken out of water. Emperor Zow imploded quietly in orbit around Troleve, turning into a pile of space snot.

The event passed virtually unnoticed by the empire. The SAIM ran itself. Only a single human on Troleve, gazing at the stars would observe a dripping web of moons in orbit around Troleve. He noted in his journal the following words:

Amber sky as always night,

*What is here this great delight?
Sailing through the dead of night?*

Muddled snare of grime and goo

The universe hacks up loogeys too.

Everything in the SAIM continued normally for a few weeks. Even the Central Neural Network made no mention of it in its final bulletin to employees of the SAIM.

Central Neural Network News Headlines

Snooze It Or Lose It: Zow E-Bucks Making Fans among New Rich

New Sleep-Over Dream Sequences Big Hit with Teen Employee-Citizens

CFTC on Inflation: "WOW!"

Dreaming Again! Employee-Citizens Love Their Zow E-Bucks

New Sequence Downloads Get into Your Head - Political Style

Missing Prison Pod Reports Itself as Non-Existent (FLAGGED SEE BELOW*)

Imperial Army Gets Boost From New CNN Base on Parcheesi 1974

S.A.I.M. As Ever - Waking Up Early May Be Costing You Money

Fat Ass Emperor Gadfly Losing Weight Battle (FLAGGED SEE BELOW**)

SVN Neural Waste System Exceeding Expectations

* A prison pod has vanished out of physical orbit. Residual radiation gives evidence of a recent wormhole in the area. The disappearance of the pod coincides with a firewall breach at CNN News. Published content at CNN has been locked out and regrettably includes flagged headlines posting from an external and unidentifiable source. The network remains in good order.

** This headline was posted without the approval of CNN

Following the collapse of Emperor Zow, all soldiers of the Imperial Army of Andromeda were still fitted with military-grade Trolevian Mind Configuration Calibrators. They were extremely well-armed and totally unable to think for themselves when the final cycle of orders from their commandeered had expired. Without further ado, they promptly began shooting the piss out of everything around them

When there was nothing left to kill and destroy, the mindless soldiers turned on one another with their remarkably powerful weapons.

The final battle in ancient Andromeda lasted all of three minutes, and created large open spaces which remain abandoned even to this day.

CHAPTER FIVE

The First Vision

When the SAIM exploded in Andromeda, chunks of its design and source code ricocheted around the universe like buckshot. Most every remaining celestial body in Andromeda would end up absorbing the brunt of the wave, but even the late great Zymphonamous Bla had not been able to accurately judge the ultimate effect.

It would stand to reason, by any standards on modern Earth, that even cavemen would have been safe. However, the universe itself, by most standards of reason, is quite a strange place. Things often happen even on Earth which make people scratch their heads and wonder.

Most of the explosive frequencies did indeed meet their demise or entrapment within all the other places in the universe that something can go besides Earth. A few snuck into the Milky Way galaxy. A few even smacked the greenhouse of Venus and thumped into red Mars. Earth was the most elegant of the inner planets. She refracted the waves, like all harmful radiation, gently into her large oceans where, seemingly, they would do no harm.

For the very great part, this was true. When a wave from the SAIM drifted into a person, they sometimes had heavenly inspirations. An Italian man named Machiavelli intersected with a fleetingly sparse design code in 1513A.D, as he stared into night sky. This particular pebble of history had spent the last few hundred million years in a complex orbital cycle involving loops, spins, drags, wobbles, and high speed straight-aways of exceptional length. Finally it rounded a red dwarf and slingshot itself over a solar wind near Algernon. This put it directly on course with Niccolo Machiavelli, who immediately received a lot of flack for his new ideas. Twenty-one years later, the Italian political sensation would have his book. As the centuries would pass, the idea caught on Earth. Keep the army chock full of weapons and make the people rich. Ignorance will settle in and the rest will run itself.

People on modern Earth, when asked how their day is going, will sometimes give this reply:

“Same old, same old.”

They have no idea how funny they are being when they say this.

Long before there was a place on Earth called Italy and things like alphabets and paper and books, an unlucky caveman standing naked outside his cave to greet the day was suddenly blitzed with an ultimate

dose of ancient cryptography.

Ugg.

Given the primitive times into which caveman Ugg was born, it is remarkable that his brain survived as long as it did. The refracted source code had traveled far to reach Earth. When it did, the planet's gentle hand steered it harmlessly down toward the Sea of Galilee, where it bounced off the shell of a prehistoric sea turtle who was taking a nap at the surface.

Like a cosmic beer keg, the wave energy caromed into the caves at Machpelah.

Usually his mate (Mrs. Ugg) awoke before he did and stood where he stood, stretching and scratching herself in the light of dawn. Neither of the couple would ever understand what happened. Naiveté was blamelessly with the times.

Ugg was a true caveman. His closet cave held many pelts and his skill for hunting creatures of the air, considered sublime. Mrs. Ugg gathered and made colored paste. Neither of them ever thought about life. They slept, woke, hunted, gathered, ate, drank, shit, pissed, fucked, and raised babies. Sometimes Mrs. Ugg would put colored paste on her children's faces and watch as they whoopu-whoopued and ooga-aggahed to express their delight.

Sadly, caveman Ugg would never again hear another whoopu-whoopu or ooga-aggah from his offspring. He was and still is however, the only human to have seen with his own eyes, the true design of the universe and the wonderfully simple blueprint which it maintains. Ugg had painted this image on his cave wall and then fallen into brooding catatonia.

Mrs. Ugg was terrified by this innocuous image in their shared bed cave. Her mate had run back into the cave and gone straight for her colored pastes. Blood of beast or juice of berry, Ugg hadn't seemed to care. Then he had cut the foreskin off his penis with a sharp rock.

Far into the future on Earth, his cave would remain under the real estate principal of Hebron, near Bethlehem. It was in this place where caveman Ugg was buried. A crystal was placed into the hole he had carved into his forehead. After his death his mate scrubbed the cave walls violently; but her excellent colored pastes held most of their color. She had a brief and confused mating session with her uncircumcised nephew and died soon after.

Far into Earth's future, and unknown by the clan of Ugg, an archeologist would run composition tests of this very cave painting. One sample would include the semen of Mrs. Ugg's nephew, who had backhanded his spunk across the machine of the universe to demonstrate his dominance. The archeologist would conclude that cavemen painted with manganese (Mn).

In the future, when the information superhighway was building more corridors and adding more lanes, the cave painting of Ugg would have made more sense. His image of a large dark object sucking up stars and blowing out the universe may have even gained him widespread recognition as an artist of merit. Social circles would have buzzed with the name of Ugg. A man who was truly in touch with the way things were.

Thousands of years would pass before modern consumers would unknowingly idolize the machine of the universe through a product line of wet/dry vacuum cleaners which could suck or blow with the flip of a switch. As it would come to be known around the world, a Shop Vac (depending on model) had the power of one and a half to six and a half horses in its engine. Adolescent boys delighted in the

possibilities of such a powerful toy. Some even experimented with their own body parts. There were emergency room visits and nasty bacterial infections; as is the case with just about any machine that adolescent boys get their hands on. Fortunately, word gets around the adolescent grapevine. These pioneering experiments were abandoned as far too risky to both body and pride.

Near the end of what most people on modern Earth called the twentieth century, a television advertising campaign in the United States of America broadcasted video footage of a Shop-Vac sucking the water right out of a toilet. The commercial proved to be a brilliant analysis of the popular American psyche. It marked a truly successful snare of a target market through suggestion. Widespread purchases of Shop-Vacs soon followed the enticing suggestions of formidable suck power. Satisfaction remained high among most all demographics. Mild post-consumer dissidence was not related to the excellent quality of the Shop-Vac itself; but from the discovery that sucking up the water in your toilet is only fun a few times.

Should a household member choose to suck up anything besides clean toilet water, they were soon rewarded by the discovery that the questionable material would remain inside the Shop-Vac until someone decided to clean it out.

In the case of little Raymond Pottles from Camptown, Virginia; the boy was bright enough in a guilty moment to lug the sloshing family Shop-Vac into the garage. With the power of five horses, young Raymond neatly disguised his turd water with the sawdust that accumulated around the base of his father's table saw.

"Thank you oh thank you caveman Ugg", is what Raymond would have said, had he known the ultimate truth. Fortunately for him, he was without a clue.

Some of Ugg's nephews circumcised themselves and some did not. This simple difference in penis appearance created divisions and later, war. The widening chasm between the clans of pickle dick and mushroom tip led, over time, to differentiations in hair, skin, body odor, diet, grooming, and more recently, religious custom. Females were strictly kept within their clan of their men. The city became angry, and divided many times. Peace was occasional, and fleeting.

The war began when a gang of pickle dicks killed a mushroom tip with a rock to express clearly that regardless of the actions of the late and venerable Ugg, pickle dicks were still the way to go. Wars continued to include disputes over diet, grooming, girlfriends, books, and - finally - whose god was the true god.

Penises of either type are rarely worn publicly. Opposing fashions and lifestyles are still condemned. Some men circumcise their son's penises and some continue to retain their foreskin. Some girlfriends bare their skin and dance, while others remain sequestered for reasons of self-preservation. The issue of God has not been resolved, and the fighting continues.

CHAPTER SIX

Something Sirius

Given the elaborate size and design of planet Earth, it has been concluded by humans throughout their various histories, that surely there must be something watching them. Science and religion can both be said to be exercises in this conclusion. Somewhere, something must be paying attention.

It is true after all.

Humans on Earth, like all other warm-blooded creatures, require attention. In the case of humans in particular, the species is well known to go to fantastic lengths in order to gain the interests of others.

There is a saying among Earth humans that if you are talking, you can't be listening too.

Sometimes humanity listens. Sometimes it talks. This has presumably been occurring in human history since before Zymphonous Bla was even an itch in his father's sheath.

So to speak of course. We know the story. Bla was about as autodidactic as one could be.

Modern Earth has taken again to listening. Not necessarily among the planet's inhabitants; but rather listening to the heavens, the cosmos, outer space, or whatever you want to call it.

Any beings attempting to listen to Earth will find that the planet's inhabitants enjoy tremendously, the pleasure of sitting in their cubes and watching TV. But it has not always been this way on Earth.

An amphibious race called the Nommos, have visited Earth a number of times with the benevolent purpose of lending a hand. Through their introductory efforts, humans learned numbers and alphabets. They learned how to irrigate and cultivate. They learned how to read and write and divide, and even spot the correct stars in the sky.

The Nommos hail from a star system known on Earth as Sirius. Their original attraction to the planet was an abundance of freshwater. Places now known in Earth history books as Sumer, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Timbuktu were once large lakes. Nommos prefer to land their spacecraft in water and remain close. Nommos like better to remain wet or at least damp at all times.

Earlier humans were much more receptive to alien spacecraft. Nommos were greeted with respect and honor and perhaps even some justifiable fear. Modern Earth, in contrast, is now surrounded by satellite

computers, global surveillance systems, and a huge network of radio telescopes known as the Very Large Array. There is radar, sonar, and Doppler. Optical telescopes can be purchased nearly everywhere by consumers.

Shortly before the rule of the ancient Egyptians, the Nommos erected three pyramids to mark the three stars of the Sirius system. When the structures were complete, the water surrounding them was drained into the Nile Valley. Modern humans marvel at the incredible precise symmetry the pyramids at maintain to the stars which they mark. Modern humans have only recently discovered the third star. Meanwhile, less modern humans in Timbuktu, known as the Dogons, have known about these amphibious angels for thousands of years. Ask any Dogon in Timbuktu; and he or she will gladly use a stick to draw a picture for you of the Sirius system with symmetrical accuracy and luminosity. In fact, it was from these primitive sand artists that modern man learned where to point his telescope.

The Dogons have been visited many times over the years. Unlike most of modern Earth, they are quite comfortable with the subject of visitors from other places. However, it is much more difficult these days for the Nommos to drop by and say hello to their old friends without being noticed. Not only would they face the hazards of modern Earth weaponry; but also the possibility that their arrival would cause social breakdown and anarchy. In the interests of peace, the Nommos now have grown content mostly to watch Earth from a cautious distance. Humans on Earth have come a long way, and they are a lot more paranoid and well-armed than they used to be.

In their heyday, the Nommos were a munificent and learned society where everyone felt great about being alive and part of the learning. Living in water allowed for a collective consciousness. Thoughts were shared. Empathy was a given. The amphibious race which lived around Sirius A maintained an actual visible glow. It was the glow of collective awareness, knowing, and respectful love. As you might expect, their planets were fruitful and their populations grew quickly and expanded into the solar systems of the smaller but still quite pleasant Sirius B. The glow doubled. The two stars and their planets were sisters winding a dazzling double-helix through their little corner of the universe.

Relative to most star systems, Sirius is close to Earth. However if you are from a race of beings which does not possess hyperspace technology, you will likely not be visiting the planets of the Dog Star anytime soon. Without a wormhole, even interplanetary travel within one's own solar system is a very slow, boring, and often suicidal commitment.

When last cycle of their programmed orders ended, the Imperial Army of Andromeda had found they were extremely well-armed, and also incapable of independent thinking. All of the soldiers had been fitted with military-grade Trolebian Mind Configuration Calibrators. Following the death of Emperor Zow, these ministers of military might acted exactly the same way anyone else in their situation would have done. Using their remarkably powerful weapons, they began to shoot the living piss out of anything in their sights.

Among the Imperial Army, there was an abundance of sights, each attached to very powerful weaponry. It had not been long before the operators of fusion-powered plasma cannons noticed a luminescent double-helix at a tremendous distance and opened fire.

The twisting orbital path of Sirius allowed the planets of Sirius A to escape damage. Sirius B and its solar system absorbed the entire attack. Atmospheres and biospheres on all her planets were sucked away into space within a few hours. Resident Nommos were seared by the radiation of open space and frozen simultaneously by the sudden drop in temperature. As the water on their planets evaporated and escaped, there was nowhere for them to seek refuge. The residents of planet A mobilized with astonishing rapidity and bravely rescued all survivors. But there were very few of them. It was quite surprising that there were any at all.

The Dogons of Timbuktu - along with the pyramids of Egypt - recognize three stars within the Sirius system. Sirius C is the least visible from Earth. Modern technology allows Earth scientists to detect the presence of the smallest; but Sirius C cannot be seen with the naked eye. It is a small and very dim star compared to her sisters. She is older and further into her life cycle. Her frigid planets do not sustain life. Whether they once did is unclear.

When the planets of Sirius B lost their atmospheres, they became immediately hostile to most life. The Nommos who had called these planets their home had mostly been killed during the mindless assault by mindless soldiers. The few who had been rescued were not much better off than their dead families. The survivors had been horribly disfigured. Although every technology had been implemented to ease their pain, their anger was a different story. Fights began to break out. Conflict was an alien concept to the Nommos. It was obvious for the survivors that their new living arrangements on Sirius A were not working out. Things had changed beyond even their impressive ability to deal with them. But they were still Nommos, and carried an inherent awareness within them. Despite their suffering of loss and pain of physical form; they were able to transform.

Leaders of Sirius A conferred equally with all parties involved. Under normal circumstances, Nommos communicated as a group united in water. Individual conversations had been simply unnecessary. However, the leathery forms of the survivors had forcibly created a distinction of self. Water was now painful to their scalded flesh. They were no longer amphibious, and further genetic transformation was needed for them to seek a new life in other distant places. All parties involved agreed that the best thing the residents of Sirius A could do for them would be to apply their genetic science and then say goodbye. This was done and that was that. The burnt ones were converted into something else; something closer to what they had become. They would again never return home.

Having lost the consciousness of water, anger and hostility were free to be indulged. Their new reptilian designs boasted extreme physical forms. Gentle amphibious nature has been purposefully transformed into well-armed enlightenment. *Go now*, said the voices of Sirius A as the star gates opened, *allow the universe to know your injustice, your fury.*

Each of these enormous reptiles entered the star gate and arrived somewhere else shortly after. Atmosphere, shmatmosphere. They could now take them or leave them at will. Now they were ready to get on the road and kick some ass.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Origin of Life on Earth

Living on the planet Troleve had its advantages. A boorish gadfly, for example, had chosen the career path of imperial dictator. The path had been mostly straight and his to blaze as he saw fit. Likewise for the successful dominion of an arthropod named Solar Trosneps. This tiny snail ran the microscopic biosphere of Troleve with a style similar to that of Emperor Zow himself. All bacteria lichen, and mold spores offered their young to the hungry mouths of Solar Trosneps. Its trail of slime was feared among all plants. Its mere odor in the wind was a source of angst for livestock, and a regular cause for retreat. Errant deaths of its own kind were viewed opportunistically as new food sources. Emperor Zow had terrorized Andromeda for a few short decades. Solar Trosneps had been king of Troleve for eons.

Unnoticed by both the miniscule kingdom in the sand and the hard-to-miss world that was springing up all around, a man lay on his back in the warm red sand. He was thinking, and it was a very large and recent luxury. Most every other planet in Andromeda was connected to the SAIM. Troleve, as the base of operations for this massive undertaking, would be the last of the planets to slide under the veil. He read the news at e-kiosks every day. The Imperial Army was coming soon. They offered three choices. Only one of them was popular.

The thought of crawling into a cube and sleeping forty to eighty hours each week was a spirit-crushing experience. Some people he e-mailed thought it was great. Most of them never seemed to think about it at all. He admired their decisiveness and harbored his own doubts about military service. Unlike most on Troleve, the man did not own a TMC2. When the product had become available, he had watched as everyone else suddenly became unavailable to things like conversations with eye contact. Even if he had been wealthy enough to afford a Troleveian Mind Configuration Calibrator, the man would never have bought one. His creative wild fire viewed any sort of mind control as enemy.

Even before the SAIM wove itself around Andromeda, it was difficult for creative types to find their way. The man's career as a screenwriter was a single withered branch dangling a feeble blossom. His poorly

edited documentary on the prevailing power of money had gone unnoticed. It had made him no money. Like a glacier with a purpose, it had carved a deep channel of hopelessness into his mind.

While editing the footage of “Cannons for Cash”, the man realized that a lifetime of sleeping for Zow E-Bucks was not a horrible existence, and it took away from his confidence. Still, he could not imagine sleeping so much when there was life to be lived. And he could not feel truly awake because if he were, he would have known what to do.

By his own proclamation he was a Spammingallow. A dodo bird. He had putzed and fidgeted in the editing booth, fighting nihilistic urges as the SAIM became instantly popular. He added special effects. Lots of them. Every mood accented with his creative wild fire. A crisply shot cache of video footage was blurred and sequentially distorted. Obvious meanings were encrypted and dissolved. Satisfying conclusions about the detriments of money were smeared to appeal to an audience that seemed mostly interested in Zow E-Bucks. By the time “Cannons for Cash” was ready; most all of Andromeda was asleep and getting paid. The SAIM had gulped the box office like a striped bass feeding at full moon. The Social Artificial Intelligence Moderator created dream sequences for its employees. It was reported to regurgitate old Andromeda entertainment in new and increasingly dull forms. The tedious nature of repetition lulled employees into a deeper sleep which paid very well.

At this point in Andromeda history, nearly one hundred percent of the population was employed by what could no longer be described as artificial intelligence. The integration between living beings and machines had gone far beyond to include one another. The SAIM already knew more than Andromeda had to teach it. As an employer, it boasted the highest rate of employee retention in the current universe. The rate of worker preservation was so close to perfect that perfect began to sweat in anticipation of physical contact.

A grand total of three employees had been fired for misconduct. According to the e-kiosk news reports, the perpetrators had begun serving coffee to unsuspecting employees in an act of mutiny. The victims had enjoyed the coffee and conversation; and then complained to the Central Neural Network when their paychecks suffered. This rebellious act had led to the three arrests; and the former employees had been locked up. They did however, continue to hack into CNN and add a mostly unwanted spice into the daily news.

These lighthearted rebels were certainly an inspiration; but the man was determined not to meet the same fate. He felt he lacked the frame of mind necessary to stay cooped up in a prison pod. He wanted, very simply, to make movies and be loved and paid for them.

He could not sleep at work; and so even in the SAIM workplace, he would make a paltry earning of Zow E-Bucks. He was already one of the poorest residents in the Andromeda galaxy. Due to the enormous salaries paid by the SAIM, inflation had breached levels of theoretical mathematics. And strange to him, no one seemed to care. News reports provided comical numbers. The numbers seemed to make the workers of Andromeda feel safe. As long as astronomic inflation could be explained somehow, employees were content to go back to sleep and continue earning.

The man had a name; but lying there on the warm sands of Troleve, he couldn't remember it.

He was lost in fatalistic exhilaration. Soon the Imperial Army would connect Troleve to the SAIM and he would have to make his choice. He had just managed to convince himself to choose death when his handheld communication device vibrated in his pocket. A text message appeared.

dear director,

we really enjoyed “Cannons for Cash”.

a great mind wishes 2 meet u.

*writing from prison. not so bad. no shackles. ha!
heard you could use a hand. transport arriving now.*

Behind him a breeze ruffled his hair. He turned around to see a small aircraft with its staircase extended. It was option four. The man walked up the stairs without hesitation.

The aircraft was magnetically driven, and the pilot was a series of computers. He found his face pressed against the window from takeoff until landing near a large glass terrarium. Inside was the enormous outline of Zymphonamous Bla.

“Greetings, director”, said Bla.

“Hello”, said the man.

Bla was quick to explain that he was familiar with the man’s work. When the man asked how that was possible, Bla merely tilted back his enormous head and laughed. The shockwave sent the director to the sand; but he was laughing too, even though he didn’t understand yet. Bla motioned with arms that seemed much too small for his body for the man to be seated at a table sized for humans and overflowing with food. The man ate with a ferocity that surprised him. The new food made him aware of just how hungry he had been. When he had worked his ways through proteins, carbohydrates, and the indigenous fiber sources of Troleve, Zymphonamous Bla properly identified himself as the creator of TMC2. Even with a recently full belly, the man was taken back. Bla continued to explain that they had something very powerful in common.

“You see director; both of us are of no interest to the inhabitants of Andromeda”.

And it was true. Residents were now sleeping in exchange for fantastic incomes, courtesy of a rate of inflation so enormous that the Chief Financial Theory Computer had recently summarized the situation simply as “WOW”.

The incredibly rich employees of Andromeda were quite satisfied with the answer “WOW”, and soon returned to their sleeping and earning. Prices were so high after all. They needed the money.

As dinner settled in, and the two began to speak freely, a bond of friendship was formed. The man was confused, certainly; but he had been offered a way around death, soldier hood, and employment. Zymphonamous Bla was patient as the director asked question after question about TMC2 and the SAIM. When it was his turn to listen, the man learned about the rise of the emperor gadfly and the roles Bla had played.

With each exchange, their affection grew for one another. Sleep finally courted the man beyond his curiosities and he was left to rest in soft sand which contoured to his body and buoyed his unpaid dreams.

The next morning, the man called now called director watched as Zymphonamous Bla ushered two very sexy life forms through the front entrance to its terrarium and announced this day to be a spontaneous life acknowledgement day.

“Director, I’d like you to meet my friends. Girls, this is the director.”

The man found himself stammering hellos and mumbling incoherently. Before his very eyes, the supreme sex symbols of the Andromeda galaxy smiled at him. They were unmistakable, and famous far and wide for their ability to create extraordinary physical pleasure. Their bodies were covered by shaggy silken tendrils, and matched the translucence of an amethyst on Earth.

The twins giggled at his embarrassment and brushed against his cheeks with the gliding touch of a cat's tail. He had to work very hard at not falling down. The twin orgasmic fur worms were even hotter in person than in any e-kiosk photographs he had ever seen. Yet Zymphonamous Bla had no trouble booking them with half a day's notice. They were, explained Bla, the last clients left in Andromeda to enjoy their excellent services.

Intimate pleasure for most of Andromeda had recently become a hindrance. It was completely impossible to oversleep in the presence of extremely horny female creatures. Less sleep meant less neural output. Less neural output meant less money. Physical stimulation borrowed blood from the brain. Sex, regardless of the situation, was no longer conducive to making money.

The twins had been available, and Bla had invited them to stay for awhile. Troleve was to be the last planet to connect to the Social Artificial Intelligence Moderator. Zymphonamous Bla had insisted to the Emperor Zow that Troleve needed to be free of the network until the last possible moment.

Emperor Zow had been happy to agree without question. He could have cared less actually. He had been too rich and fat to care about anything except his next meal. Zymphonamous Bla already knew that the Emperor - like itself and the rest of the galaxy - only had a short time left to live. And it had a plan already in action. A life-acknowledgement party was the perfect way to enjoy some of the time that was left.

The man was rejuvenated in the presence of such constant, sexual bliss. His body crawled all over the twins. Their unique body designs allowed them to connect completely with their lover and envelop them in their amethyst aura. Orgasms were not the result of penetration; but thrumming tides of vibrant ecstasy washing over his *chi*.

When they were not busy enjoying pleasures of the flesh, the man talked with Zymphonamous Bla over regular meals. He marveled at the size of Bla. By his best measurements (sighted, and not very accurate), Zymphonamous Bla was fifteen thousand cubic meters of pan-dimensional brilliance. Its ability to transcend the time-event horizon was a most interesting subject of inquiry. Most of the man's efforts to understand – purposeful or otherwise – maintained a comic nature. With the twins around, it was hard to be serious. Their energy was playful and enthusiastic, and full of life.

At mealtimes, they often enjoyed poultry. The man's favorite selection was the robust and delicious Fandolemic Chanticleer. Its taste and appearance when roasted was not so different from an Earth chicken. The bird itself however, was slightly larger and distinguished itself from its Earth cousins with a triage of heads, thick-webbed feet, and a single eyeball which rotated very slowly and made the bird very easy to catch.

“They don't fly very well either” Bla had laughed, with the others joining in.

The table scene was raucous fun. One of the twins always insisted on feeding Zymphy a drumstick. Then the man would howl with laughter as Zymphonamous Bla ate and shat the same drumstick at the same time. It was for this reason that Bla only ate for entertainment. The twins would giggle and beg to repeat. After a few more indulgences, Bla would lock gazes with them, shrug, and with a twinkling smile,

say

“Girls, if you’ll excuse me, I can’t seem to keep my food up.”

They laughed until they cried.

Four weeks passed happily like this. The man was rejuvenated with the sweet love of the twin orgasmic fur worms. When the girls finally fell asleep, Zymphonous Bla would share stories of its earlier days on Troleve. During their last conversation, Bla had told the man the story of its pan-dimensional lobes and its childhood as a human boy on Venus.

That next morning, the man found his inspiration daydreaming in the warm sand of Bla’s terrarium. Gazing at the ceiling five kilometers above, the man envisioned an entire planet machine functioning as a set for his next movie. It was a silly idea really. He was never going to make movies. Bla had assured him that the Imperial Army was indeed about to return to Troleve and complete the network.

The man had already chosen in his mind to die; and was lost now in a creative reverie. If life like this were to end, there would be no point in continuing. He was exceedingly grateful to have had this time to spend with Bla; and had expressed his heartfelt gratitude each and every night of his stay with his enormous friend.

Now, his intelligence wandered. Free for the last time to imagine, his mind’s eye pictured scores of dolphins somersaulting through the air and plunging back into their blue ocean. He envisioned human actors living lives far removed from computers. In this empyrean of his thoughts, this reverie of creative bliss, he saw they were happy.

Moments later Zymphonous Bla recorded its message to the director, let out a large sigh of relief, and died.

CHAPTER SEVEN

There Is No Dog

Discussions of things like the pyramids have carried into what most humans on modern Earth call the twenty-first century. It is not in any way peculiar that this would be the case. No one in the twenty-first century really knows how these colossal icosahedra were developed.

Schoolchildren are taught about the pharaohs who became mummies and were discovered by the British in the nineteenth century. Curses of Tutankhamen were collectively feared by those in touch with the excavation. Skeptics, of course, proclaimed that there was not even a coincidence. A skeptic, in extreme form, ignores the fruits of skepticism.

Commonly among the coursework of young school children on modern Earth is the historical concept of slavery. Sinister egos of Egyptian rulers enslaved an entire population of mushroom tips, their mates, and their offspring. Somehow, the legend contends, the ruthless architects were able to beat them enough that they found strength to lift large boulders to very tall places. Truly, the theory is abundant. A modern Earth scientist from the country of France earned news headlines when he proposed a scaffolding design which accepted the inward sloping verticality of the pyramid's construction.

Less recently than Jean Pierre Houdin's theory was that of the late author Kurt Vonnegut. With a simple wit which suggested a reincarnation of Mark Twain, Mr. Vonnegut proposed simply that the Egyptians were able to build their pyramids because gravitational force in that ancient time had been less than the present day. Slaves could carry stones in each hand, like a restaurant server portaging trays.

Vonnegut's theory was far closer to the truth; and carries with it the lingering suggestion that not only gravity, but also time and space may have fluctuated over time in their intensity.

Still, the Nommos are an amphibious race. Had ancient Egypt been desert, they would have chosen a different location. The Egyptian empire, with its hieroglyphs and impossible structures, is certainly cause for mystery. It may be a mistake to assume that it was the Egyptians themselves who created this intensely detailed system of pictograms. Compared to the English Roman alphabet of twenty-six mundane letters; hieroglyphs suggest a power of written communication superior to any common form on modern Earth.

The imagination bridges the hypothetical to the factual with fascinating possibilities. Even on modern

Earth, where technology is sharp, the mysteries unfold like circus mirrors. Distorting and then replicating the distortion before bouncing back into further illusion.

Imagination will advise that the Egyptian pyramids are a dormant star gate which requires both an ability to read the instructions within; and also, a lot of water. Science fiction on modern Earth claims a number of wormhole scenarios; but few, if any, acknowledge the necessity of water. A deluge to place below the surface, the tips of these four-dimensional triangles which point with stunning accuracy to Sirius A, B, and C.

Neither Kurt Vonnegut nor Jean Pierre Houdin has any written idea on how the pyramid stones were quarried in the first place. Unfortunately, because of the existence on modern Earth of things like surface-to-air missiles, the Nommos do not drop in to verify that the stones were cut from ocean shale with high-powered lasers. Nor can they confirm or deny the postulation that their telekinetic ability made short work of these confusing erections.

Who was this Ramses? What was the purpose of the Sphinx? The questions abound on modern Earth. Truly it is an easier life to crawl into a cube, sleep, and get paid well. Speculation, by popular belief, is better utilized in things like the stock market. Fortunately, concepts on modern Earth grow popular rather than becoming universally accepted as true. Modern Earth has nasty words like cult, to identify harmful homogenous guesswork.

The imagination has the advantage of being free from the specific provisions of factual evidence; although its credibility benefits from them tremendously. Here is an example.

The Nommos of the surviving solar system of Sirius A found themselves consumed with guilt over an event completely beyond their control. Their guilt could not be assuaged by the burnt ones. Circumstance had dictated their unplanned departure. It was an open wound among the water-dwellers. Their adjustment to the pain included a strong collective impulse to help others. The Nommos visited Earth to lessen the pain of the primates.

The pharaohs of ancient Egypt had been fortunate to receive their status from the genetic science of the water-dwellers. The most capable codes were favored, and a number of tall and lithe men found themselves presiding over a dynasty whose waters had receded. Their egos required slavery and obedience; and their powers were formidable. However, their love of power betrayed the side of them which was not amphibious. While they were not themselves circumcised, the Nommos had taken care to install countermeasures in the slave population. The mental prowess of *Musa* succeeded in destroying most of Egypt before liberating the prisoners of situation. Mushroom tips again roamed free in new, fertile lands.

The leaders of the pickle dicks, when faced with the loss of their slaves, behaved in a manner similar to any other primate species on Earth which has had its DNA reconfigured by aliens. The Sphinx meanwhile, was carved by lasers long ago. Within the last hundred years, its nose had been removed in a frustrated epiphany of artillery by a soldier of the Third Reich. The soldier, along with his unsupervised fellow Nazis and their French enemies had chosen for a short time to give up trying to kill one another and just get drunk. Boys will be boys, and drunk boys with big guns will always find something to shoot.

Kings of ancient Egypt gained specific instruction on how to embalm and preserve their bodies for interstellar transport to the Sirius star system. Their ornate egos were easily led to spend their later lives constructing elaborate tombs within the pyramids. With all the riches and advantages of Egyptian technology, they felt certain to ascend to further greatness.

They were mistaken. It is the same with any human on Earth who takes himself or herself too seriously. There is no ultimate knowledge of the universe which could be processed by the human brain. Zymphonamous Bla in ancient Andromeda was formidable in its ability to see, create, and comprehend; but even his slice of awareness pie was very thin. God has become – on modern Earth – a very difficult term as more and more levels of awareness are being discovered every day.

Zymphonamous Bla was a very lucky being. A fact it often acknowledged to itself and to the larger universe. A million years would pass before those on Earth would actively gather to praise the forces they recognized to be far beyond their own capabilities. Words offered to these forces were an acquiescence of dominance, which would eventually emerge as prayer.

Thank you for saving my life. And so on.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Ice Age Cometh

Due to past complications, reptiles of any significant size or magnitude are no longer allowed on Planet Earth.

Plain and simple, that is the rule. Large reptiles of any kind do not belong on a movie set. And neither does a film director if he doesn't know where he is.

It was over a billion years ago when the Director received a thirty-second hologram from Zymphonamous Bla which told him so long, thanks, enjoy your new home, and try to relax. Then a large whooshing darkness sucked him into what seemed like oblivion until he woke up and everything was dark.

Large reptiles – especially the ancient ones – do not have a concept of fear. The director was a human. He didn't know anything about wormholes. He didn't know where he was. He was afraid of the dark, and so began doing what most any human would do in complete darkness.

He freaked out.

Descriptions of panic include trembling, shivering, quaking, yelling, crying, flailing, howling, thrashing about; and of course, throwing the highly embarrassing hissy fit. The man performed these expressions equally, and with sheer dread.

He thought the Imperial Army of Andromeda had come, and he was already dead. If this was the afterlife, it was terrifying. Mercifully the human body can only handle the intensity of trepidation for short bursts. Then the robot must recharge. Finally, his batteries ran down and he collapsed in an exhausted and fitful dream state.

While his robot lay in the dark, the director's delta and theta waves tapped into a world beyond material dimension. He was a child, wandering down foggy hallways full of adults. No one knew who he was. Their faces would beckon him closer, and then turn away in disappointment. When he woke from his nightmare of frustration, he felt empty inside. His surroundings were still dark, but his panic was subdued. He regained his wits and began to use his sense of touch and ability to think critically.

The floor was soft and comfortable. Too supple and pleasant, reasoned the man in the dark, to be hostile. With that in mind, he began worming his way slowly in different directions. There must be a light switch here somewhere.

Crawling around in the dark was slow and tremendously frustrating. The prisoners of Ourfolk Nine were glued to the screen, snarling back their laughter as the man bumped into this chair and that console. They had the advantage of infra-red cameras. While the director's audience had been discomfited by his earlier hissy fit; his new found determination was quite hilarious and went on for hours until a snapping point was inevitable. They clutched their stomachs and silently chortled as the man began cursing everything he thought he knew about life. And then his brain offered a potential solution which, in this dark situation, might be worth a shot.

Garnering his body in a classic pose of frustrated agony, the man stood. Arms outstretched and head thrown back, the director inhaled deeply and screamed "LIGHTS!!!"

Not long after, planet Earth was humming along in what modern archeologists would call the Cambrian Age.

Land was bare. Seas were warm. Jawless fish slurped up clouds of algae and bacterium. Trilobites scuttled about the ocean sands. Earth was a reconstructive motion machine. Life on Earth had begun.

Zymphonous Bla had been looking out for him alright. When the man had adjusted to what he was seeing, a hologram appeared from his friend to explain it all. The collapse of the Imperial Army; the end of the SAIM; how to use the equipment; where the bathroom was; and how he would eat and drink. The thing about the lights was just a little practical joke meant largely to please his audience. The director was amused. Eventually.

Reptiles first found their way to Earth during a time that modern archeologists call the Carboniferous Period of the Paleozoic Era. The reptiles involved had no idea they were part of Carboniferous history. They just knew there was a lot to eat. Earth was delicious.

By this point, swampland had developed, playing host to tender amphibians and enormous juicy insects. Dinosaurs of all sizes ate very well. The oceans meanwhile had grown abundant with shrimp and trilobites. The Ichthyosaurs and Plesiosaurs who would later evolve into dolphins and sea lions ate their fill anytime they pleased. Word got around, as it does.

There was also the Mosasaur. These types, like many of the carnivorous dinosaurs, were neither

pleasant nor peaceful. There was no competition for giant sea lizards in the oceans. They were at the top of the food chain. It was a twenty-four/seven all-you-can-eat seafood buffet.

Large flying reptiles also roared the skies of Planet Earth; but their populations declined steadily when the early humans learned to fight them. After losing his eldest son to a swooping pterodactyl, Caveman Ugg threw rocks and spears to knock the creatures from the sky. Their efforts were enough to defend his family and reduce the local population of child-eaters. Caveman Ugg held high status for his surface-to-air weaponry.

The director had considered making modern weapons available to these early humans. Their suffering and loss from attack was also his. Fortunately the prisoners of Ourfolk Nine were able to talk some sense into him. Had the director given Ugg and his family the technology of automatic shotguns and rocket-propelled grenades; there would not be anything large enough in the fossil records for modern archeologists to interpret as the skeletons of dragons and pterodactyls. Besides, the tribe of Ugg may have hurt themselves.

Far into the future and much closer to the present moment, Stanly Pottles eventually figured out that the smell of poop in the garage was emanating from his Shop-Vac. A thick, ripe sludge had formed in the canister, prompting him to wear gloves and a snorkeling mask as he hosed the dark mush into the backyard shrubs. His ordeal required dish soap and a quart of lemon-scented bleach to finally purge the lingering odor. As Mr. Pottles would report to the family that night over dinner, "It looked like gravy and it smelt like shit!"

This was not, of course, an insult to his wife's fine cooking; but a reference to the turd water of his son Raymond, which had been blended with a fine roux of sawdust and left to thicken. Both parents had giggled when Raymond explained that he had gotten the idea from the television commercial for Shop-Vacs. Mrs. Pottles giggled more than her husband Stanley. That's because she didn't have to clean it up.

Raymond Pottles is a true Earth human. He is a gentle mammal. Raymond likes listening to French pop music in cyberspace. As of a result of his exposure to French pop music, young Raymond Pottles prefers to be called "R'monde", with the same spelling. His mother and father both humor him. They think it's cute.

Reptiles don't think things are cute. Cute is strictly for mammals. Reptiles have armored exteriors, toxic venoms, and nasty teeth. They do not maintain a specific body temperature. Many have sensory organs which are not present in mammals. Designed with harsh survival in mind, they are children of the burnt ones. Those ancient ones who remain alive maintain extraordinary physical and mental powers. Their scaled hides can survive open space and they understand the quantum mechanics of teleportation. Most importantly, they fear nothing. Soon after Life on Earth began, the ancient reptiles used the new planet as a hatchery.

Many Earth years before internet radio and pop music and even France itself; the director chose to reboot the land sequence of Life on Earth. At the time, there was much ocean and little land. Resident dinosaurs were causing massive environmental catastrophe.

A trio of teenage Triceratops could trample a forest of tropical trees. A bitchy Brontosaurus could bungle an infant juggle. The dinosaurs had been tolerated peacefully by the man running the show; but now they were trashing the set. They had to go.

Ichthyosaurs and Plesiosaurs who would later evolve into dolphins and sea lions were welcome to stay,

along with anything else that could survive underwater. This unfortunately included a ferocious spawn called the Mosasaur.

Before the asteroid collided with Earth, hid the sun, and froze the land; the director created a final scene with a climax of tragic irony. Melodramatic device was staged as a last conversation among the locals. Indeed, the exchange was a desperate plea for survival.

TRAGICALLY IRONIC FINAL SCENE BEFORE THE IMPACT OF AN ASTEROID ON PLANET EARTH WHICH WILL HIDE THE SUN AND FREEZE THE LAND

gentle green Oviraptor: “You’re stomping and eating everything! If you don’t stop, there won’t be anything left for anyone! You’ll kill us all!”

big mean Tyrannosaurus Rex: “ULP!”

And so the voice of reason was transformed into T-Rex shit. After a short digestive period, the turd of reason dangled in the wind for a fleeting moment before hitting the forest floor. At that moment, with the press of a single button, the ice age arrived.

That is why the director is the director.

The three prisoners on Ourfolk Nine were stupendous in their enthusiasm. The scene had all the right ingredients. There was a ruthless protagonist, a hapless victim, impending doom, frantic dialogue, and special effects that were – quite literally - from out of this world. They rose to their feet like the appreciative whiz kids that they were. They smacked their hands together tirelessly. They shouted “Long Live the Director!” loudly and often.

Life on Earth continued its forward path. The director continued to direct. Obviously no human could manually operate all the intricacies of a planet machine. There were far too many details for a mere human. Zymphonous Bla had designed a computer within the studio to handle the day-to-day affairs. The computer’s name was appropriately titled PLOT. This name was not an acronym. PLOT was plot.

The following is the way that the late Bla, through one of its many posthumous holograms, explained PLOT to the director:

PLOT was designed to reflect algorithmic principles through multi-faceted crystals. You will find an inestimable capacity here for the generation of life forms. PLOT has been inspired totally by human imagination and genetic memory. Some is mine, some is yours, and some belongs to the former residents of the Andromeda galaxy. As the director, please know that PLOT is always your friend. The interconnected factors on Earth are too numerous for the human brain to process. You will find the forecasting functions to be of great use when you choose to introduce new characters. Take the wheel anytime you want if you think it’s important. It is required by PLOT that the whiz kids review and approve manual overrides. Please understand that you are my friend, and that I have created this governance to assure that your movie will continue. The whiz kids are your best friends now that my time is past. They are your council, your audience, and the guardians of Earth. Entertain them well, and your dream will prosper.

Much later in the movie, the ancient reptiles again became a threat. There was a Mosasaur who had survived on the set longer than any living thing. Sitting in the deepest corners of the oceans for millions of years, the Mosasaur has evolved into a vast network of independent brains which conduct business with the rest of Earth telepathically. There was a time or two when humans had discovered and physically confronted this creature; but they had always lost its shadowy form in the mighty depths of water.

Humans believed it was the devil itself. They were both correct and deceived, for the devil has many faces. Some called this frightening sea monster by the name Leviathan. As their weapons developed, they succeeded in driving the terror into deepwater seclusion. The monster retaliated by manipulating greedy minds from its dark sanctuary. Its influence has been kept in check by the goodness of human nature; but as humans proliferate, so do the opportunities for deception. Leviathan enjoys misleading these warm-blooded love children.

Folk lore tells stories of the Dark Ages on Earth. A time ruled by a dragon and her human cohorts. Famine, pestilence, and war persisted for hundreds of years in Europe and Asia. It seemed the humans would be extinguished. According to the tradition, something very bright appeared and dragged the evil dragon queen into the abyss. Shortly after, the sun came back out and humanity began a new stage of growth.

Leviathan had watched it all happen. While he was impressed by his sister's audacity in claiming the land for awhile, he was likewise delighted that humans began again to believe they were safe. His sister had been trapped for a thousand years now; but like all things on Earth, that too was about to change. Recently the one called Leviathan had summoned one of the remaining ancients to Earth. His half-brother.

A tropical storm in Guam was arranged to prevent satellite cameras and human eyes from seeing the splash that a six million pound reptile makes when it enters the ocean at ten thousand miles per hour.

His half-brother had visited Earth before to join in the fun of the Dark Ages with the love of his life. The humans had even given him a name. They called him Lucifer. Unlike his brainy half-brother, Lucifer is all brawn. Magnificent to behold, he spent the last millennium in seclusion behind the giant Red Spot of Jupiter. Not even the humans with their vigilant technology could find him there.

The whiz kids on Ourfolk Nine were buzzing with excitement and apprehension. When the ancient beast made its historic kerploosh into the Pacific Ocean, they cheered like sports fans to drive the fulcrum of momentum.

Whiz Kid 1: "Long live The Director!"

Whiz Kid 2: "And if The Director should die..."

Whiz Kid 3: "Free Manuel the manic-depressive Mexican potato farmer!"

The three whiz kids had been tight from the start with Zymphonous Bla. They shared an intense dislike for the Emperor Zow. With Bla's help, they had engineered an escape from Andromeda. They would remain in the confines of their prison pod; but they were able to communicate freely with the worlds outside. Their prison pod, Ourfolk Nine had followed the director through the wormhole and placed itself in orbit around Earth. It was invisible to all observational technology on Earth. Only the director knew of their existence. While it was true that from time to time, a medicine man in Peru in a deep trance or a desert hippie tripping on mescaline would glimpse a set of golden orbs orbiting the

planet on an astral plane; their hallucinatory revelations would be immediately cast in doubt upon the return of sobriety.

The origin of the whiz kids remains unknown.

CHAPTER NINE

More of the SAIM

The Social Artificial Intelligence Monitor maintained an incredibly high rate of employee retention. There were no firings, layoffs, or cutbacks. Raises were given often and without adding further responsibility. Salaries were enormous. And although employees were unable to exit the system once they entered, no one wanted to leave their new job. Most inhabitants of Ancient Andromeda had previously been entrepreneurs with poor health and miserable rates of failure. Thanks to the SAIM, employees were finally getting enough sleep. They were healthy and wealthy, and presumably safe. The Imperial army of Emperor Zow was large and extremely well-armed. Their prefabricated dream sequences would remind them of this any time worry would cross their minds. Over time, the employees also began to stop worrying and even take pride in their galaxy-trouncing military of drones. Besides, excessive worry led to lack of sleep. Lack of sleep meant a smaller paycheck. Things were so expensive that there was not enough time in a day to think about things. Acts of contemplation – even in places like the shower – were eventually muddled into randomness. Everyone in the SAIM, human or not, eventually quit thinking about things. Homes were cubes. Cubes had beds. Sleep made money. And dreams.

During sleep, most mammals will activate their cerebral cortex. The personal experience is of course, dreaming. It is unknown why people dream what they dream. Approaches from the scientific to the anecdotal all succeed in illuminating parts of the whole explanation. Fortunately there is imagination to bridge our way to the Land of Nod. While imagination is even less-well understood than dreaming, it does (we know) allow us to discuss the dream world and the brain while we are awake.

Electromagnetic waves are emitted from the brain during both sleep and wakey-time. These various

waves have been unoriginally named alpha, beta, delta, and theta. The SAIM made use of all of them. Alphas and Betas were the energy for the Central Neural Network. While it was no secret that employee body heat was the primary energy source of the SAIM, alpha & beta waves were collected and arranged as dream sequences. An employee could wake up wealthy, well-rested, and informed on all the SAIM things employees liked to hear about.

Still, the cerebral cortexes of Andromeda continued to produce delta and theta waves. For a dependable and steady machine like the SAIM, dreams can interfere from daily operations. The Social Artificial Intelligence Moderator was not a creative-type. SAIM old SAIM old. Zymphonamous Bla had planned brilliantly. It had first mentioned the problem to Zow as if it already hadn't been solved. Neural sewage was piling up everywhere around Andromeda. This was a real danger to Zow's wealth and power. Bla's underhanded sales pitch was a twisted slimy web of deception which had the desired psychological effect on the emperor gadfly. After the ranting and raving was finished, Bla patiently explained that the mighty emperor would not be able to apply his proboscis to an electromagnetic problem. The emperor's proboscis had sucked up some very large members of the Andromeda galaxy. His ability to suck and swallow on the material plane was undisputed, but neural sewage was not a material issue. After ranting and raving some more, Zow ordered Bla to fix the problem immediately and by any means necessary.

Perfect.

Bla was the only one who knew the whole truth. And it would stay that way until the end of the SAIM. Which, at that point, was not very far away at all.

Following Zow's order, Bla returned to its terrarium and did absolutely nothing but lie around for the next week or so until the Emperor Zow showed up outside his door demanding results. Zymphonamous Bla innocently expressed its surprise that Zow had not gotten the message. Bla was of course lying; and it was a satisfying experience considering the company. It enjoyed watching Zow being confused but relieved as the emperor learned that a neural sewage system had been up and running since last week. The system sent the delta and theta waves far away from Andromeda. Never would neural sewage again be a problem.

Emperor Zow was not the type to ask where exactly the cranial crapola was headed. The giant gadfly could have cared less about the destination or the means. Zymphonamous Bla therefore withheld sharing its name for its creation.

It is unknown if Zymphonamous Bla actually created the Shop-Vac of Nothingness, or if he just knew it was nearby and how to put it to work.

Much later in the history of the Universe, humans astronomers in the Milky Way galaxy would point their radio telescopes at a black hole they called Cygnus. They would be fascinated by observations and swept away into fictional realms of theory in an effort to understand what exactly this dark hole in the universe is. Many more black holes have been found since the incorrectly-named Cygnus. Theories are more abundant than ever.

Caveman Ugg, standing at the entrance to his cave on a chilly morning in 30,000 B.C., would be struck by a vision of a giant machine sucking up stars and blowing out the planets. His sudden awareness was primal and innocent; and in many ways far beyond Galileo, Einstein, and even Hawking. In many ways, Life on Earth is but a dream. A dream made of dreams.

And it was dreams in fact which were vacuumed up by the Shop-Vac of Nothingness. Beyond the time-event horizon, a surreal fusion of matter and wave energy occurred, and the whole lot was blown

out through a wormhole. It was a similar to human digestion in a single way. What came out the bottom rarely looked like what went in the top. A movie studio was created in the core of a new planet. It was undeniably the greatest movie set in all existence; and it had been a thank-you present from Zymphonous Bla to an unknown director who had been prepared to die for his creative freedom. Later, as he managed the Cambrian Age of Earth from deep within, the director had written this poem in tribute to his late-friend and benefactor.

Life on Earth is dreams and dust.

It works this way because it must.

*Venus to Mars, then across the stars
And back again through dreams and dust*

It works this way because it must

Life has moved so many times

Here on Earth I scratch these rhymes

To a friend from the end

Who sent me away to live and to play

For awhile.

Life on Earth is dreams and dust.

It works this way because it must.

The director was fond of poetry as it stimulated the imagination. Where the dream sequences in the SAIM had been designed to replace dreams; poetry created visual and audible blossoms of expression. The director didn't bother much with prose. There was never enough time in the modern day. Still, in the slow evolution of early Earth, a daydream or two was common for the young man at the center of the Earth. After the Earth was complete and evolving nicely, the Shop-Vac of Nothingness was disconnected from the Milky Way and stored upright in a quiet corner of Andromeda. When the modern Earth astronomers pointed their radio telescopes pointed at Cygnus, they were able only to see a dark void and a lot of electromagnetic energy around the entrance. The scientists could not see where the exit of Cygnus was pointing. It's tough enough to use a radio telescope and find galaxies. Finding a cosmic vacuum cleaner in another galaxy's utility closet is the Earth equivalent of trying to read a book located two thousand miles away.

If Caveman Ugg were to be raised from his tomb on the West Bank for the holidays, it would be most excellent if he could join the Pottles family at their home in Camptown, Virginia. Should this unlikely union take place, it is extremely probable that Caveman Ugg and Mr. Pottles would find themselves in the garage drinking beer and watching college football. They would exchange stories of bodily functions, power tools, and kids. Stanley Pottles would admit to Ugg that he's worried about his son Raymond's lack of focus. He has concerns about ADD, but he does not trust child psychiatrists or medication. Raymond is ten years old. His son is not going on drugs. The two men would drink another beer.

Caveman Ugg would probably ask if he can smoke a cigarette in the garage. It is cold outside this time of year in Camptown, Virginia. Mr. Pottles, because he's a little drunk, says yes. He steps around the family's Subaru hatchback and turns the handle on a metal storage locker. He grabs a pack of Lucky Strikes from the top shelf and tosses one to Ugg. Trying to be cool, Stanley pulls out a small propane

torch, clicks the switch, and lights his entire cigarette on fire. He and Ugg enjoy a good laugh over that one. Stanley Pottles knows he's not cool. But sometimes when he's had a few beers, he has fun trying.

Ugg would inspect the propane torch and marvel at the clean and easy flame.

The men would smoke their Lucky Strikes.

There might be some long pauses.

And then finally...their eyes would come to rest on the Shop-Vac in front of them. More moments would pass as the two men arrive at the definitive male-bonding, beer-drinking question. This existential inquiry regards all Life on Earth. It is the decisive question.

Stanley Pottles and Caveman Ugg would begin to glow softly as they pondered the machine which had somehow created everything they knew.

Standing there in the garage sipping beer and smoking Lucky Strikes, the two men would drift seamlessly into the ultimate question regarding the Shop-Vac of Nothingness.

How many horse power are required to run a contraption that size?

CHAPTER TEN

Gifts from the Sky

After screaming through the atmosphere and plunging into the Pacific Ocean, the ancient reptile was nearly halfway down Mariana's Trench before it had to swim under its own power. Its giant wings unfolded and the creature descended the Southern wall. Mariana's Trench extends 36,198 feet underwater. Over 11,000 meters below the surface of the ocean.

Some call this inner space. It is even more foreign to modern surface dwellers than outer space. Outer space is beyond the Earth's atmosphere. Inner space is thousands of atmospheres compressed under miles of water. From the surface, we call Mariana's Trench the deepest place on Earth.

At the bottom of the deepest place on Earth, there are two doors. Behind door number one we have the bad stuff. In order to create compelling reading material, the bad stuff of course has to escape for awhile. And behind door number two, we have good stuff that will soon be invaded by bad stuff only to have ok stuff make good stuff. There is also a door number three.

The plot thickens. Perhaps it was a tablespoon of saffron or a golden roux which thickened the gumbo. Perhaps it was only leftover rice. A gelatinous mass would indicate the misuse of corn starch. Arrowroot is too straight for what is about to happen.

Back on the surface of planet Earth, it is the present moment. Some 7500 miles east of the South Pacific, a man awakes for yet another day in Individual Purgatory Capsule XP481. Manuel the manic-depressive Mexican potato farmer stands on the parched clay of the Mexico desert and cracks the seal on a bottle of potato vodka. It's a good batch. He swills deeply on the vodka and swishes it around in his mouth. Then he spits it out, aiming his head up at the sun. It is his morning routine: a defiant homage to existential depression.

Purgatory sucks. There is nothing to do but drink and try in vain to grow potatoes. Manuel the manic-depressive Mexican potato farmer has no idea how or why he is stuck in the desert trying in vain to grow potatoes in the parched clay of the Mexican desert. Each and every morning, Manuel faces off with the sun in his usual stance (right foot forward and a scowling face dripping with potato vodka). What's different today is that something actually happens.

Manuel the manic-depressive Mexican potato farmer was leaning towards depressive when he went to

sleep last night. However he seems to have woken up on the wrong side of the parched clay. Now he is fired up. He spits another mouthful of vodka at the sun and thinks to keep a swig for himself. Manuel is immediately ashamed at his selfishness and hurries to refill his mouth for another rebellious discharge of frustration. As he is titling the bottle to swig, a bottle of Jose Cuervo Gold tequila falls from out of nowhere and breaks his nose.

The impact flattens Manuel in the dust. There is a satisfying “coink” which dissipates unheard into the air. He lies motionless for a few minutes. Finally, he gets up. Slowly. His broken nose is bleeding.

He wipes the blood off on his dusty shirt sleeve. Now both his face and his shirt look worse.

Manuel surveys the desert around him. Through slightly hazy vision, he spots the tequila. He walks towards it and picks it up, wondering if the glass is still intact. It is. Manuel cracks the seal and begins to drink. By his third swig, he forgets that his nose is broken. By his fifth swig, he has an *agaves*-based hallucination of a sofa pit lounge and a large video screen. The video screen and the sofa complex are inside a golden ball that’s flying around Earth.

Manuel is seeing directly inside the prison pod of Ourfolk Nine. He’s looking directly at the whiz kids, who are waving. Unfortunately, he has no idea what to look for in a satellite prison pod. He sees three guys sitting on a couch watching a screen. When Manuel’s face appears on the video, the men face him and cheer. Manuel takes his ninth swig of tequila. He belches and blinks twice. The whiz kids are still there. And they are still cheering.

The whiz kids wave and shake their fists and shout “*¡Estar loco por tequila!!!*”

They give him a group thumbs-up. He is standing in their wormhole after all. Manuel continues to stare at the sky long after the wormhole dissolves. The last thing he heard from the citizens of Ourfolk Nine was “*¡Buena!!!*” and “*¡Loco!*”. Then he is standing alone again in the desert. Just like any other day. Except that for some strange reason he has in his possession not only a broken nose, but a bottle of Jose Cuervo Gold tequila. Pessimistically, the bottle was still over half full. He takes his tenth, eleventh, and twelfth swigs in rapid succession.

Extraterrestrial contact and all he can do is get drunk. Such is the purgatorial life.

In his defense, it was the whiz kids themselves who gave him the booze and the broken nose. Manuel the manic-depressive Mexican potato farmer has never had tequila of any sort until now. Presumably the whiz kids know exactly what they’re doing here.

By this time, the ancient six million pound reptile named Lucifer had reached the bottom of Mariana’s trench and entered the Earth’s core through door number two. His half-brother Leviathan had provided the exact coordinates and dive trajectory. A crystal key inside door number two was set in motion, and door number one ground open for the first time in a thousand Earth years.

Hubert T. Exerhoff was at this point stepping onto the platform of a city bus in Boston. His first air biscuit of the day will soon be acquainting itself with the passengers seated around him. He is unhurried and pleased to be finished with work for the day.

Manuel the manic-depressive Mexican potato farmer is currently hallucinating. His rapid ingestion of new and volatile cactus liquor has led him so see a potato patch growing rapidly over his boots. He is laughing and trying not to trip over the vines or fall down. He sings a garbled melody to the sky in praise of the new vegetation. Manuel’s vocal efforts are presumably in Spanish, but at this point he is so drunk that no actual words are being formed.

If Alvin the Chipmunk ate a bottle of Quaaludes, stuffed his cheeks with buckshot and peanut butter, and sang “Bohemian Rhapsody”, he would still be cuter and easier to understand.
Make no mistake here. Manuel is FUBAR.

“FUBAR” meanwhile is exactly the term a young radar operator used when trying to describe the signal he was receiving from deep Indonesian waters. Had his commanding officer preferred more description, the young sailor would have explained that the recent disturbance below the surface had fried his screen.

Somewhere near Allentown, Pennsylvania two second shift steel workers are saying hello.

Steel Worker #1: “How the fuck did you get uglier overnight?”

Steel Worker #2: “I had a dream about you asshole!”

(together): “HAAAA HAAA!”

A coffee pot spurts and burbles to the end of its brewing cycle. It is located in a call center in Houston, Texas. The office manager has signed twelve-month contract with the exclusive provider of brew pouches. There are eight months left on the contract, and so far no one has complained about the coffee.

Customer Service Specialist, Bob Barker (no relation) pours a cup for himself as his lovely co-worker Jane Fonda (no relation) enters the scene. Jane is taught, curvy, and speaks with a sweet cowgirl accent. She is very competent and appreciated around the call center. Recently she surpassed her volume quota and was promoted without pay to be the call team leader. Her direct supervisor has assured her this is the next step to her growing success. Jane Fonda is 28 years old. Bob Barker is much older, and happily married. But sometimes when he sees Jane Fonda pour coffee, he wishes he wasn't. Jane smiles reflexively upon seeing Bob and greets him the way everyone greets everyone. It is a required procedure of their employment at the call center. The reason is not sinister, but rather an effort by Human Resources to

“...accommodate the various accents and natural heritages of our Customer Service Specialists. By following a standard protocol for personal interaction, our team members are assured of positive and productive working environment.”

Now it is of course no secret that the above reason is bullshit. All of the team members knew that the rules were in place to reduce conversation and avoid the sort of lawsuits that can arise when, for example, Mr. Habib's joke about the little man at the water cooler was considered funny by both Nancy Preston and Natalia Kurchevnya; but had been misinterpreted completely by Lateesha Bottoms as a strong sexual innuendo. Lateesha had been fired, while Habib kept his job; but the company did not like paying \$50,000 to Lateesha Bottoms and \$70,000 more to her lawyers. The standard greeting was soon to follow.

Jane Fonda and Bob Barker are both African-American. Both retain a distaste of ghetto-speak in their culture and have learned to pronounce their words clearly. It helps a lot to improve their careers and salaries. But it is not the words they speak which lights up Bob Barker. It is Jane Fonda's sweet Texas accent that makes all the difference.

JANE FONDA: “Good morning Bob. How are you today?”

BOB BARKER: "I'm fine thank you. And you Jane?"

JANE FONDA: "Fine thank you."

Same old, same old.

A restaurant worker in Reno, Nevada spills coffee on a customer while a hospital worker in Englewood, Colorado mops up the floor behind a discharged patient. Life on Earth, with a few dramatic exceptions, is perfectly normal.

The one called Leviathan had grown very big indeed. A creature armed for the deep ocean, but built to think. Leviathan had many, many brains growing out of his body which were busy doing many, many things. The ancient Mosasaur had recently gotten up to racing speed. Each of his brains was a pyramid, and each had an eyeball top and center. Nothing on Earth was smarter than this ancient creature, and few had more eyeballs. There was not a single form of human technology which could physically approach undetected. When threatened, Leviathan would not fight. Not usually anyway. He preferred to teleport around the oceans, leaving the local operators of deep-water sonar and radar with equipment that was FUBAR, to say the least.

As Leviathan grew larger, he has become much easier to locate Leviathan was finding the situation enormously inconvenient. His thought channeling power was greatly reduced on the run. He needed to sit still, and recently that had become very difficult. Norwegian submarines were tracking their coastal waters aggressively. They knew the sonar profile (huge) and also to stay away. Quite a few sleek nuclear submarines had detected Leviathan. Those which had foolishly attempted a rendezvous had never been recovered. The Norwegian Sea had cold, clear water, and Leviathan enjoyed being near to his cousin Nessie.

She was a monster all right, just like his sister; and he loved them both.

At the first ping of deep water sonar waves, Leviathan chose to exit the Indonesian depths and relocate offshore the Canary Islands. These were safe waters without much in the way of naval fleets and underwater listening technology.

Leviathan had exactly one brain of his millions dedicated to compassion. Why he even had one is a mystery; but likely this anomaly of kindness is a carryover from his young life as a Nommo in the Sirius star system. It was heavily outnumbered, but persistent in relaying sadness that deep water sonar was killing the whales and dolphins. Meanwhile, a brain dedicated to taste reported that it too was sad about the whales and dolphins and all the other fish; but only because they tasted good.

Leviathan was a very busy Mosasaur, and he was running the show on the fly

Lucifer meanwhile, is twenty thousand leagues under the sea. He is thousands of miles below the city of Boston, and preparing for a fight as he opens door number three at the center of the Earth. This is the fight that the whiz kids have been waiting for since the beginning of Life on Earth. The whiz kids are the only audience. They're a small crowd; but they bring game. Volume is paramount. They stamp their feet and shout:

WHIZ KID #1: "Long live the director!"

WHIZ KID #2: "And if the director should die..."

WHIZ KID #3: "Free Manuel the manic-depressive Mexican potato farmer!"

Swaying and staggering around the parched red clay of the Mexican desert, Manuel the manic-depressive Mexican potato farmer has no ability to perceive what is happening at the center of planet Earth. He is drunk on the tequila that fell from the sky and broke his nose. He has finished the bottle. He has drunk every last drop. Any blood lost in the breaking of his nose has now been replaced

by Cuervo Gold.

Manuel is plastered, pickled, polluted, and pie-eyed. He is ripped, smashed, bent, and totally trashed. There is an imminent threat to the entire planet thousands of miles below his boots; but Manuel is so utterly wasted that he can't even feel his boots. Or even his legs really.

Swaying in the gentle desert breeze, there is only one thing that Manuel the manic-depressive Mexican potato farmer knows for sure. He would like a cigarette.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

What was (until recently) Behind Door Number Two

The basilisk had discovered planet Earth shortly after the Nommos had built the pyramids. The director and the whiz kids worked with the amphibious race anytime they wanted to stop in, and say, teach people how to irrigate and farm. And so the Tigris and Euphrates rivers were diverted. The water surrounding the pyramids drained and created fertile delta lands. These deserts in the north became bountiful along the river banks.

The basilisk did not have another name, and she preferred it that way. After avoiding Lucifer and his fifty-foot penis for millions of years, she had found a perfect place to reproduce. In this lush and fertile land, humans were fruitful and they multiplied quickly. The basilisk would wait for their lovemaking to subside, and when the lovers left their nest in nature, she would slither along the fluids which remained. Her young tended to be on the small side. Usually they grew less than ten feet long. It was not the size of her offspring which had concerned the director and the whiz kids. Rather, it was the velocity of her breeding cycle.

During early discussions with the director, he was clear with this immigrant reptile that she was to breed only once per year. She of course did not abide, and her young began to encroach on human life. As a result she found herself in prison. How this was accomplished is not known. There are anecdotal accounts of bright lights at sea; and also the biblical tale of Saint Michael the Archangel whipping her ass and taking her into custody. The basilisk was locked up tight with no way to get out. Unless she were to become the subject of a truly spectacular jailbreak.

With a little help from Leviathan to summon and direct the operation, and a daring maneuver by Lucifer came all the way from Jupiter just to dive down Mariana's Trench and set her free, the basilisk knew only one thing. She was hungry. Being in prison for a thousand years will have that effect on a lady.

She was a lady, at least by technicality. She maintained the reproductive organs of her original form. Her genetic output had been altered in a mighty fashion, but in her gonads, she was one of the unfortunate Nommos who had been horribly burnt when the Imperial Army of Andromeda, acting without a leader and in total chaos, opened fire on her glowing planet and destroyed the atmosphere. She and her brother had survived, and had undergone the genetic surgery which provided their burnt flesh with reptilian forms. They were smart, pissed-off, and well-suited for both interstellar travel and fighting.

Apparently, Leviathan had convinced Lucifer that the basilisk would mate with him if he set her free. The one called Lucifer has always been a sucker. The basilisk has promised him children many times, but always in the future. She is a big girl, but Lucifer weighs six million pounds. Even a basilisk has her limits.

The director meanwhile, had this very Lucifer in his custody by having done absolutely nothing. Due to his enormous size, the reptiles' wings had wedged against the walls of Mariana's Trench. His head was jammed in the opening to door number three. It was very much like fat Santa stuck in a chimney.

The director pointed this out.
Lucifer was not amused.

After he calmed down, the director pulled up a wooden stool next to Lucifer's head and they had a little talk. This was not an interrogation. More like a getting-to-know-you kind of talk. It was a man to giant reptile kind of talk. And talk they did.

Lucifer told the director about the atmospheric collapse around Sirius B. He also spoke about life before the attack. When he had a different name and did not weigh six million pounds. When he was a normal-sized amphibian called a Nommo. He had been a happy child who glowed steadily. Then the Imperial Army of Andromeda had ended it all on a few short minutes. Some of them had been rescued, but were permanently disfigured. He and the others called themselves The Burnt Ones. Water felt caustic to their melted, leathery forms. Their consciousness had been isolated and they were angry. Living on Sirius A as a survivor refugee was torture as they watched the others enjoying life with slippery skin.

He and the other survivors had conferred with the leaders of the Nommos. The exchange was polite and to the point. The Burnt Ones had requested genetic transformation and the freedom to leave Sirius A forever. The residents were presented with the request, and also agreed that this was a solution. The Burnt Ones were obviously in great pain. The request had been unanimously granted.

Lucifer told the director that saying goodbye to the Nommos was the most difficult thing he has ever done, including swimming down Mariana's Trench to where they were having this little chat. He was surprised to learn that the director was also from Andromeda.

Eventually the conversation rolled around to door number one and the fact that it was now both unlocked and open. Lucifer admitted his surprise when the basilisk simply slithered past him. He asked the director if she left a message for him. The director replied that she may have been a little hungry.

Lucifer hadn't thought about that. He had been thinking about mating with the only female in the universe potentially capable of withstanding his colossal girth. He thought she would have been happy to see him.

Oops.

The basilisk had indeed slithered by her erroneously endowed liberator. Straight to the surface she shot, and teleported for the first time in a thousand years. It felt great, but she was out of touch with modern Earth. Acting on information that was centuries-old, the basilisk had determined that the locality of Boston would be a wonderfully unsupervised wilderness where she could slither freely and eat all sorts of wildlife and natives.

She ended up instead inside a city bus which was much too small and smelled very bad. Still she was too hungry to wait for dinner, and so devoured the locals before bursting the frame of the bus into shreds.

The bad taste in her mouth was getting worse. She was a big girl and a good eater, but her choice of dessert was unlucky, to say the least.

The basilisk kept burping up the taste of Exerhoff.
Her victim's full name was Hubert Theodore Exerhoff, and his large intestine was stuck in her teeth. She could not teleport, and she had no dental floss.

The large intestine of Hubert T. Exerhoff continued to brew thick clouds of Moroccan curry fart. It did not seem even slightly affected by having been removed from its owner's body.

Today is not the same-old same-old. On this particular day of Life on Earth, television news breaks early across the Eastern seaboard. A seemingly incompetent bystander is interviewed on-site; and he will swear that the belch of the basilisk is the worst thing he has ever smelt in his entire life. While the man weaves in and out of focus, a caption pops up on viewer's screens.

"Dwayne – truck exploded".
Now the TV viewers of Bostonian news know that the guy on the news is Dwayne.

What TV viewers don't know is that Dwayne is a semi-driver who pulled into Boston after driving over three-thousand miles in sixty-five hours. This is his normal routine and regular route. Dwayne leaves home late Saturday night. He drives inland of the Atlantic coast all the way to Miami International Airport. After backing into an available service dock at the American Airlines Cargo Terminal, Dwayne loads up with salmon fillets from ocean farms in Chile. The farm-raised Atlantic salmon fillets are skin-on. Wrapped individually in plastic bags and placed in lined Styrofoam boxes with gel cooling packs, the Styrofoam boxes are sealed with packing tape and shrink-wrapped on wooden pallets.

Dwayne prefers to arrive in Miami before ten AM so he can be loaded up and out of Miami before afternoon rush hour starts. Dwayne has a fifty-three foot trailer for his Volvo VN. Gross Vehicle Weight for the return trip to Boston was 73,508 pounds. Thirty-six tons of South American fish, European built semi, and North American driver made their way into Boston at 5:30 this morning. Now it's 5:30P.M. Dwayne has been awake for sixty hours. To compensate for the sleep loss, Dwayne snorts crystal methamphetamine when he's on the road. The round trip takes forty-eight hours, and twelve more after that to make his stops and help unload the shrink-wrapped pallets of individually-wrapped and farm-raised Atlantic salmon fillets. Dwayne has to stay awake for all of it. If he took on another driver he never would make enough money to be what he mistakenly considered "happy".

When Dwayne is finished with his work, he heads to a bar to drink off the speed before he returns to his wife and family. He parks his rig at an empty loading dock next to Maverick's. It's a city bar that he chooses because of the parking. He'll sleep in his tractor's bunk tonight and drive home when the alarm wakes him up. His family knows the routine as well as he.

Dwayne stops in the alley to light a Lucky Strike.

The cigarette slips from his hands and falls into a puddle.

Good thing too.

The basilisk in the parking lot had been bloating uncomfortably. Her vast biological systems compensated by letting loose a series of tremendous belches. The gas buildup was too near the front end of the ancient snake for any other solution. The burp of the basilisk blew out all the windows in Maverick's Bar. Patrons found themselves deaf, nauseous, and surrounded by an unmistakably foul cloud of ass gas.

As eyewitness Dwayne will tell viewers of TV news:

“This giant snake lizard thing was burping up yellow fart clouds that was making my eyes water! I'm sorry. I know I'm not supposed to say fart on TV. Sorry kids. But that dang lizard just kept on gettin bigger and bigger and burping louder and louder. The smell got so bad I couldn't see. Then she just exploded and took my rig with her.”

TV viewers watch as the camera pans the surrounding area...

(Voice of TV news reporter)

“As you can see, the site of the incident is completely covered with raw salmon. As far as we can tell, there is no evidence of reptile parts. We're just left with a blown-up semi, a lot of raw fish in small pieces, and the truly obnoxious smell of someone passing gas.”

The news camera is back again now with Dwayne. Dwayne's face is partially eclipsed by the large microphone in front of his mouth. Dwayne is more than a little tired, but he remembers clearly what he saw and heard and smelled in this parking lot.

TV NEWS REPORTER: “Dwayne, it you couldn't see because of the smell, how do you know what happened to the giant lizard?”

DWAYNE: “I heard a big POP! And then it started raining fish.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Redemption of Manuel the Manic-Depressive Mexican Potato Farmer

The life, death, and times of Manuel the manic-depressive Mexican potato farmer are indeed nebulous. As the police report would go, a teenage boy named Manuel Valdez had an encounter with two angry jazz musicians and died in the parking lot outside a private club. There is more arcane information on the cause of death and the nature of the incident, but it is extremely rare and painfully difficult to validate.

Regardless of circumstances involved, Manuel Valdez - age ten - had died.

As a baptized Catholic, the soul of young Manuel made his way up to see Saint Peter, who promptly banished him to Individual Purgatory Capsule XP481.

Desert theme. Potato farming.

He's been there ever since.

Manuel the manic-depressive Mexican potato farmer is awake on the parched red clay of the Mexico desert. The sun is shining like it always does, and the hot rays beat on his face.

The entire scene, hangover and all, is business as usual.

Usually when he wakes up, Manuel drinks the potato vodka that appears while he sleeps.

Saint Peter is not without mercy in purgatory.

Today however, Manuel the manic-depressive Mexican potato farmer is, for the very first time in his life, hung-over from an excessive quantity of tequila. As he stands up and looks at the empty bottle on the ground, he remembers that it fell from the sky.

The bottle is empty. The tequila is gone. His nose is broken.

There is more bad news. In their orbit around Earth, the Galactic Trash Geniuses sit on their prison-pod sofa in a stony kind of silence. Another way to describe it would be open-mouthed shock. The director is dead. His body is slumped over his readout panel, still sitting in his large black chair at the center of the Earth.

The director may have been running the show on Earth, but he was still a man from ancient Andromeda who had been shot through a wormhole by his friend Zymphonous Bla. He was human. His body was still vulnerable to physical attack. The one called Lucifer is very capable in spite of being stuck between a rock and a hard place. Even trapped in a deep hole, he has his ways. The sharp barb on the end of his tongue was enough to penetrate the director's spinal cord and end his life.

The director has been inside the Earth for thousands of years. While he has aged more slowly than humans on the crust, he still has experienced the passage of time. He's in his early seventies, by surface standards. No wimp, just no match for a barbed tongue to the spine. Really, even in his younger years, he was no match for such a large creature.

Lucifer uses his barbed tongue to manipulate the director's body. Every moment that passes, the most powerful of The Burnt Ones learns more about Earth and how to destroy it.

It takes the whiz kids several minutes to regain their composure. Geniuses or not, they never saw this coming. Now that it's here, they come around quickly to the truth. It sounds strange. And so it is.

WHIZ KID #1: "Long live the director!"
WHIZ KID #2: "And if the director should die..."
WHIZ KID #3: "Free Manuel the manic-depressive Mexican potato farmer!"

A blue light begins flashing inside Ourfolk Nine.
The hi-res flat screen flickers and goes blank.
A strange device rises out of the floor...

aaaaarrrrrrrrRRRrrrrp!

Standing on the Earth's crust, Manuel the manic-depressive Mexican potato farmer lets loose a belch that could scare off a hungry dragon. We're talking a tequila burp that starts from the lower intestine. By all rights, the belch would have made a better fart. Judging by the taste in his mouth, Manuel would agree.

aaaaarrrrrrrrRRRrrrrp!

Some time passes as Manuel stares up at the incessant sun. He weaves slightly with each passing breeze. There is no potato vodka today. His head is pounding. And more than ever, he would like a cigarette.

aaaaarrrrrrrrRRRrrrrp!

“Thank you for freeing Manuel the manic-depressive Mexican potato farmer. Ourfolk Nine will be landing shortly. Accommodations have already been prepared for you.”

aaaaarrrrrrrrRRRrrrrp!

MANUEL: “¿Por qué San Pedro? Por qué!?!”

aaaaarrrrrrrrRRRrrrrp!

“Welcome to the Office of Saint Peter.
For instructions in English, press one

Para las instrucciones en español, prensa dos... ”

aaaaarrrrrrrrRRRrrrrp!

Manuel the manic-depressive Mexican potato farmer has reached the basement floor of possible depression. He pushes himself along the desert floor with his arms at his side. His face, his chin, his shoulders, all pressed in the sand. As he wriggles and squirms, Manuel speaks a prayer to Saint Peter who imprisoned him here. He explains that he is a coward and a lowly snake that crawls on the ground and eats dust and could he please have a cigarette? Please?

aaaaarrrrrrrrRRRrrrrp!

MANUEL: “¿Por favor San Pedro... por favor!”

aaaaarrrrrrrrRRRrrrrp!

“*Our offices are currently closed. Please call back Monday thru Friday
from 10AM - 8:30P.M. Central Standard Time*”

aaaaarrrrrrrrRRRrrrrp!

Fortunately for Manuel the manic-depressive Mexican potato farmer, the basement floor of depression triggers a manic reaction. The anger builds for a minute or so and then culminates as Manuel picks up the empty tequila bottle and screams as he throws it at the sun.

There is a terrific explosion and everything goes dark.

By shattering the illumination system of Individual Purgatory Capsule XP481, which to him looks exactly like the sun, Manuel the manic-depressive Mexican potato farmer has unknowingly sent a signal to the Earth's core.

As Lucifer is working on finding the planetary self-destruct sequence, five doors open in the core and fill the director's studio with screamingly hot lava.

Even a six million pound Mosasaur is no match whatsoever for trillions of tons of molten rock. The one who some call Lucifer took a little longer to melt than the director did, but not that much longer. A few seconds maybe.

aaaaarrrrrrrrRRRrrrrp!

When the lights come back, Manuel the manic-depressive Mexican potato farmer is no longer. He is a boy again. His name is Manuel Valdez. The late afternoon sun reflects off his face. His mother is calling him for dinner. He can hear his brother and sister calling too. His father must be home. Manuel drops the rotten potato at his feet and runs to them. As he runs, he smiles and silently says thank you to San Pedro.

aaaaarrrrrrrrRRRrrrrp!

It was nearly ten minutes of continuous applause by the whiz kids until the man standing before them sheds a tear. He wasn't really a man anymore, just the image of the man. A soul animated enough for the whiz kids to see him, and offer him a place on the sofa.

The man sits among the whiz kids. They are beaming with pleasure at his presence in their prison pod. He stares for a moment at the screen in front of him, and remembers lying in the warm sands of Planet Troleve. Since that time – and with a lot of help - he had followed his dream.

Now he was seated in spirit among his three dearest fans and friends, watching his creation for the first time as a member of the audience.

In the distance, a woman's voice echoes off the rooftops.

Usually her voice is spoken, with words.

But tonight, there is melody to drive her nameless proclamations.

*There is music. There are words.
She is pleasantly plump or obtusely obese, depending on your point of view.
And she is singing with abandon.*

It is a beautiful sound indeed.

- THE END -

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tom Schimmel has recently been listening to a lot of country music. He has never owned a pair of cowboy boots in life, but he knows how to ride a horse, shear a sheep, and change the oil on the old truck. Tom sings and writes and blogs when he is not engaged in the practice of manual labor. His home studio recordings, old movies, and blogs on current events are available through all his websites.

MySpace: www.myspace.com/tomschimmel

Blogger: <http://tomschimmel.blogspot.com/>

ReverbNation: <http://www.reverbnation.com/tomschimmel>

Author Profile: <http://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/tomschimmel>

Tom has also completed another e-Book called “1500 Miles on a Scooter”. This is a travel narrative of Tom’s journey through the southeast United States on an eight horsepower/single cylinder scooter. [“1500 Miles on a Scooter”](#) is a strange and difficult personal story which grows into a journalistic inquiry into the effects of abundant wealth on the natural environment. Take a vicarious road trip at 45miles per hour. Ride 1500 miles in seven consecutive days. Downloads are available in most all formats, and you can set your own price to pay. Enjoy the ride!