

One for the Road

2019-2020

## INTRODUCTION

A pin prick was all it took to weave the fabric of space and time.

From where the pin came is still a matter of great contention and speculation. Some blame vindictive gods or the mathematics of celestial restlessness, while others think it may have just arisen from some snot-nosed kid's school science experiment gone wrong. But what is known about that moment is that existence was ripped from nothingness. Everything that would ever be came hurtling out to build the universe, and the beauty and horror of the whole cosmic shindig commenced.

Stars lived and died producing new matter. Dust and gasses were ejected at just the right speeds and just the right angles to form little balls of rock and ice that survived collisions between other balls of rock and ice. This left behind atmospheres, gas clouds, mountains and oceans and provided the broth for the very soup that sparked life. And though this spawned all of the remarkable complexity and diversity of life in the universe, the jury is still out on whether or not it was the right thing to do.

It has often been argued that the universe was better off without life, and for good reason. In its prime, the universe ran with the chaotic grace of a rack of billiard balls broken open along new felt. There was order. There were rules. And there was a definitive lack of options. There was no one to study the universe. There was no one to criticize it. And there was no one going around spreading theories that it never really existed in the first place.

But with the advent of life, order was lost. The uncertainty of it all led to a sudden surge in unpredictability. Unpredictability led to instability. And instability led to many of us feeling that maybe life just wasn't worth all this fuss. Suddenly there were decisions to be made, a crossroads at every moment for every being, where they had to decide for themselves what to do and where to go without inertia alone doing all the legwork. In its place arose an abundance of ambiguity and questions—far more questions than answers.

Along with the rise of life came the advent of choice. Choices meant that universal laws that had hitherto governed everything that ever was were suddenly, and quite clumsily, left in the hands of individuals—most of whom were far too busy getting haircuts to learn anything about governing the laws of physics.

It started easy enough with simple choices like what to eat, where to sleep, up or down, left or right. It was when right or wrong entered the equation that things got messy. Like everything else in the universe, choices obeyed the laws of entropy. That is a fancy way of saying that things got complicated. Soon it wasn't so much, "what should I eat today?" but more, "which low-calorie hot sauce should I use on my gluten-free, sustainably-sourced, organic snack chips?"

The universe was ill-equipped to handle the flood of choices. The divergent possibilities that each choice inherently summoned meant that the universe had to find a way to keep each possibility alive without overlapping on top of others. This is how parallel universes came about. With each choice life faced along its evolutionary trajectory, the universe has no alternative but to fracture along new dimensions and copy itself over and over again. Each copy a little different from the last, one continuing on in one universe and the other in another.

In those early stages of life, parallel universes arose so quickly that new dimensions had to be created just to handle all of the accounting. Now there are so many parallel universes that they pollute the extra dimensions of space-time. When you can create a new universe just by supersizing your fizzy beverage, the entire beauty and complexity of existence just feels, well, a bit cheap.

The most excessive polluters and contributors to the universal clutter of choices comes from a small blue-green rocky world near the outer edge of a relatively benign spiral galaxy in the Virgo Supercluster. It is home to a species whose indecisiveness make most other species around the galaxy look like granola-munching eco-hipsters. Galactic anthropologists who study this planet mostly agree that things might have been better off if the early reptiles were given a bit longer to navigate their own evolutionary trajectory before being mostly wiped out by a stray asteroid.

By happenstance, the aforementioned asteroid was accidentally triggered by those very same galactic anthropologists. Two separately funded research expeditions were sent to the nearby asteroid belt to view the highly anticipated reptilian advancement from a safe distance. They were there to witness the reptiles' transition from feral beasts to organized societies. But while vying for the best outpost, the orbiting research stations from the two teams crashed into each other. This sent them smashing into a cluster of giant rocks. One of these rocks was sent out of orbit hurtling towards the unwitting creatures. It wasn't the first time entire evolutionary lines were annihilated by ethnographic studies, and it is why anthropologists top most lists on the galaxy's most wanted.

The feathered descendants of the decimated reptilian creatures flourished, but they took to the skies in an apparent evolutionary affront to the ground below that it no longer trusted. These flying creatures stuck around to watch from afar as a new unlikely group of animals ascended. Furry mammals moved into the void and slowly but surely evolved their way up the evolutionary tree. The bipedal creatures who eventually considered themselves the apex of this lineage ended up colonizing most of the rocky world. This species hurriedly found ways to drain the planet's resources and made sure no others on the planet would ever get a fair shake again.

Though these people evolved the capacity for high intellect, they still lacked the skills to use it. And even after two hundred thousand years of practice, they still

argue about which god to root for and whether their observably round world might actually be flat.

The indecisiveness of these people is so stiflingly gluttonous that it generated enough redundant parallel universes to require an entirely new dimension just to house the universes where parents choose the color of paint for the bedrooms of their offspring. One paint-swatch book in the hands of an anxious father can sprout thousands of new parallel universes in one go.

Part of the problem is that the planet Earth has already been destroyed a number of times, yet still had an annoying way of coming back into existence. And whether by luck, divine intervention or some kind of callous prank, the humans on the small cloud-covered planet continued to thrive. But now, instead of evolving, humans seem content with drinking icy beverages and complaining about the weather. And though roughly thirty years had passed since the last time the planet was destroyed, its people still appeared to have little hope of ever attaining anything more than increasingly cuter animal videos.

It is on this planet where this story begins. It begins in a grass field near the west coast of North America outside a planetarium on the University of California campus. It is there where one member of the species is wrestling with her own place in the universe. She has just woken from a rum-induced sleep and is trying to deduce what might have brought her to this particular moment in time.

What she has yet to deduce is that she might be an essential thread in the fabric that binds all universes together.

## ONE

There is a saying common among all advanced worlds throughout the universe that goes, "If you come across one asshole in the course of a day, that person was most likely in fact an asshole. But if you come across multiple assholes in the course of a day, well then it is likely *you* who is the asshole."

Why certain proverbs prevail across galaxies and star systems is a question that haunts even the greatest minds in the universe. Some speculate that the sayings come from primordial messages embedded in the fabric of space and time. Maybe they are even messages that originated in the big bang itself. But there is a simpler and more prevalent response that simply states, "don't ask stupid questions."

Curiously, near the center of the Milky Way Galaxy, there is planet called Dorenthal 8. The people of this planet are by universal definition all total and complete assholes. This is partly due to the frustratingly high pull of gravity from the nearby super-massive black hole, which sends their planetary system on an irregular orbit around the galactic center at nauseating speeds.

Assholery is the key component of the Dorenthal culture. Any sense of civility and compassion seems to have been sucked away into the dark vortex at the galaxy's center. People greet each other with the middle of their nine fingers. They share nothing and treat each other with wholehearted disrespect. Yet somehow, they have a more functional economy than can be found anywhere else in the galaxy.

Many theorize that their uncanny success is due to the Dorenthal currency of insults that they trade for goods, services and favors. For example, when one says, "I don't give ten shits about your daughter's ballet performance next Monday," the insulter is then required to, in one way or another, pay off those ten shits. And for centuries now it has proven to be the most stable currency in the galaxy.

On the planet Earth, there was one woman, who if given the chance to visit Dorenthal 8, would have fit right in. But she was currently 25,000 light years away lying in a field in Berkeley, California.

Priya Mani stared up at the morning clouds wondering how things had come to this point. The clouds were peculiarly low and moving peculiarly fast. And for a moment, Earth felt incredibly small, like a glass globe that had just been shaken a bit too hard. She curled the long grasses between her fingers and pulled out a handful of spindly roots, scattering loose dirt upon her torn tee shirt—the shirt she had torn the night before when fighting the bar manager as he carried her out of the local pub. She, of course, had no recollection of starting the fight, or the conversation that led to it.

The nervous bar manager, however, had remembered. He would later describe it to police like this...

“Priya, you know, that lady could drink. She was sitting at the barstool over there, the same barstool she usually sat at on days like this one... which was most of them. A nice couple, likely out-of-towners, sounded like tourists from Australia, or maybe Germany, you know, were at the corner of the bar a few stools down from her.”

“The couple was getting cute with each other, holding hands, looking longingly into each other’s eyes. You know, the typical stuff a happy new couple might do, and in the typical nauseating way that no one else really wants to see in a bar, you know. But they were nice enough and just doing their thing.”

“Priya was rolling her eyes so much that I worried she might detach a retina or something if she didn’t stop, you know. She’d had a few beers along with her usual five or six rums, and was obviously hammered, you know. Many more levels than she usually was.”

“The couple were too busy petting each other to notice Priya. They started saying things back and forth like, ‘I’m so happy,’ and, ‘I’m so lucky to have found you.’ You know, the typical fluff.”

“You could tell Priya was getting pretty pissed off by it all. She kind of always treated this place like it was somehow hers, you know. At one point she slammed her drink down hard on the bar top. She grunted loudly, like she’d been punched in the gut. Then she looked up at the innocent couple with such force that her barstool turned on the floor with a screech.”

“‘Happy, eh?’ Priya said while she swirled her whiskey before drinking it all down. Then she made a kind of contorted face and loudly said, ‘Disgusting!’”

“‘Excuse me?’ the man said like someone who had just had an ice cream cone knocked out of his hand before ever getting a taste.”

“‘I said you’re disgusting,’ Priya said again.”

“‘Mind your own business,’ the woman said, shaking an angry finger.”

“I’m paraphrasing here, you know, but then Priya goes on a rant saying, ‘There is nothing more obnoxious in the world than ignorant fools basking in the contentedness of their own existence.’ She said this while teetering her whiskey glass precariously close to the bar edge, you know. Then she said, ‘Life is shit, and if you haven’t learned that lesson yet, well then you are in for some nasty surprises.’”

“The couple tried their best to ignore her, you know, returning their gazes back to each other.”

“‘A-a-abomination,’ Priya eventually blurted out with a hiccup as she signaled for me to refill her glass.”

“The woman then gently extended a middle finger in Priya’s direction, her gaze never leaving that of her lover.”

“Priya took this with a smile, you know. Then she pulled back her tousled hair and retied it, this time a bit more crooked than it had been. She took a dirty towel that had been sitting on the bar near her, you know, and wiped her mouth with it. She then picked up her whiskey glass, looked at it carefully for a moment like one might do with an apple to make sure there were no wormholes, you know, and then hurled it as hard as she could at the couple. The force of her throw put her so off balance that she fell backwards hard into that table there. The glass didn’t even come close to its target and it shattered on that corner wall there near the bathroom.”

“The irate couple then jumped off their stools and charged Priya. The woman landed a number of punches, slaps and kicks, you know, before the man pulled her off.”

“The whole time Priya just lay there laughing and yelling. ‘Abomination! Abomination!’ she shouted over and over, you know, as we dragged her out to the sidewalk.”

The only thing that Priya remembered about the incident was the word, ‘abomination.’ But without any context, the word just lingered in the back of her mind, taunting her. She assumed that there was a good chance it had something to do with an umbrella, as for her there was nothing more abominable than that.

Being an asshole was never something Priya aspired to be. And up until this moment, it was a label that she thought only applied to everyone else in the world. The fact that people often told Priya that she was an asshole maybe should have clued her in a bit sooner. However, she regarded other peoples’ opinions much the same as a cat might listen to those of a mouse. For her, somewhere between most and all people were idiots, and that the opinion of an idiot was not only likely to be wrong, but that there was a pretty good chance the opposite was right.

Anyone who knew Priya found her to be incredibly gifted, intensely focused and without question an excruciatingly arrogant jerk. She wasn’t a bad person exactly, she just lacked the ability to read a room. Social norms were not her forte, and in that respect, she might as well have been from another planet.

She was an astrophysicist and was used to knowing more about the universe than everyone, and she wasn’t afraid of letting the world know it. In fact, her greatest pleasure was to let everyone else know how very wrong they were.

Priya was among the world’s top theorists on the subjects of dark matter, dark energy and black holes—the triumvirate of shadowy science. She possessed one of the greatest minds in astrophysics with a remarkably keen understanding for the evolution of the universe. But her temper and bad manners kept her from climbing

to the top of her field. She was a horrible teacher, an even worse speaker and was known to publicly humiliate anyone else who claimed any knowledge in her fields of study.

She once berated a professor of particle physics on campus just for merely mentioning a theory about the origins of dark energy. Those who saw the argument unfold swear that they saw actual flames emanating from Priya's eyes. But that fact got lost in the witness reports as the physical abuse that followed the argument was far more frightening.

The attack should have come with severe punishment, or at least caused her to lose tenure. But her scientific pursuits were essential to the university's financial grants. Even the particle physicist who suffered two cracked ribs from the assault refused to press charges for fear of any negative consequences it might have on Priya's scientific contributions.

Everyone on campus knew to keep their distance and to never be caught carrying an umbrella. Priya despised umbrellas and anyone insecure enough to carry one. Just the fact that umbrellas existed proved to Priya that the human race was beyond hope. She often thought how if a stray meteor ever found Earth in its crosshairs again it would be justified just to cleanse the solar system of the irreverent contraptions.

"If you fear water droplets falling from the sky then you deserve whatever end is coming for you," Priya once told a frail old woman while waiting at a crosswalk.

More often than not, Priya thought that this whole *life* thing would be a lot easier to handle if the universe would just go ahead and blink out of existence. It would be a nice clean ending, leaving no mess behind for someone else to clean up. Today she found herself lying in that field trying to will it into action. She winced her eyes closed, held her breath, and tried with all the strength she could muster to make it all go away. Little did she know that if she had just tried a little harder, she might have succeeded.

## TWO

Priya Mani's sigh could have made a sofa cushion depressed. She sighed as if the rest of the world were holding its breath. A less secure person might hear her sigh and question their own place in the cosmos, and might even realize that they had none.

She was angry. She was drunk. And she was desperately wishing she could catch a ride on a passing starship.

The fact that Priya was angry wasn't unusual. Part of what made her an angry individual was this constant feeling that she had been born in the wrong time, on the wrong planet or both. What she didn't know was that most in the galaxy felt this way. What she also didn't know was that, in a way, she actually was on the wrong planet.

The fact that Priya was drunk was also in line with her usual state. This was partly because her body had learned to just accept being that way. Priya made sure to back it up with excessive consumption, but she had long theorized that even without alcohol the world was still off kilter. Perhaps the universe was a construct of her mind and nothing more, like some epic dream that had no ending. If it was a dream then at least she could justify the world's dreadful abundance of umbrellas.

The fact that Priya was wishing she could catch a ride on a passing starship was, in fact, peculiar. Of course, it seemed logical that life could exist elsewhere in the infinite multitude of space, but Priya assumed, like most did, that anyone who claimed extraterrestrial encounters were either hallucinating, bullshitting or not playing with a full deck of cards.

As a child, Priya's mother often told her that if she wanted to fly to the stars all she needed to do was stick out her thumb and catch a ride on a passing spaceship. For Priya, this was nothing more than a running joke between the two of them. But on this day, she found herself lying on her back in the dirt, thumb stretched up as high as it could go, wishing she could hitch a lift into the darkness of space.

It wasn't the hangover alone that had Priya a bit rougher than usual. Umbrellas aside, there were a number of things that fueled her habitual misery. There were miscued weather forecasts. There were passing strangers on the road who would say things like "hey there" and "good morning." There were fur coats and clubbed baby seals. There were people who honked their horns for no other reason than to let those around know how important they were. But this week, Priya's despondency had much more to do with her mother.

Priya still lived with her mother, something most in their forties did not do unless they were, "still trying to make it as a YouTube star." But Priya needed her mother and her mother needed her. They were a balance of forces. Her mother's

overwhelming positivity was the antidote to Priya's assholery, which left untreated threatened to rampage like a chimpanzee in a shit throwing contest.

Zahira Mani had a bright smile and a subtle laugh that drew anyone nearby into her orbit. Like Priya, her mother was at one time one of the more respected astrophysicists in the world. But unlike Priya, she was adored by everyone. After giving birth to Priya, something changed. It was subtle, like a hair part in a new place.

Zahira Mani was always there for Priya, but she was never really present. She was stuck in the past or the future or somewhere in between that all seemed to blend into one. She would say things to Priya like, "I've got all these memories, but the problem is that most haven't happened yet." She would remind Priya that it was time for dinner even at nine in the morning. Sometimes she would talk about events from ten years earlier as if it was only yesterday, or tomorrow. And once, when Priya came home from school early with a pink slip for talking back to a teacher, her mother said, "Everything you've already done you still have time to do again for the first time."

Through Priya's early teens, her mother spent more and more of her time alone having conversations with herself or listening to her small tape cassette player at the dining room table. For as long as Priya could remember, she was always just listening to one song, over and over. It was from a Ben E. King album, and she would listen so attentively that she often forgot to make Priya's dinner. Every once in a while, there was a point in the song when she would turn to Priya and say, "This is the good part. This is where you come in."

When Priya was fifteen, she stole a Walkman from a classmate on the school bus, wrapped it up and gave it to her mother. It was the only gift she'd ever given to anyone, and it had the results that she was hoping for. Finally, after years on repeat, Priya was able to get that song out of her head. Her mother, however, rarely took the earphones off and they rarely talked after that.

They'd seen a number of doctors who specialized in dementia, and though they all pointed to an early onset of the degenerative disease, they were also adamant that she was still in surprisingly good health. And though Priya still loved her mother in her own way, she had mostly learned to just ignore her.

It had been a week since Zahira Mani walked out the door of their home, leaving a stunned daughter in the doorway. It was saying nothing that Priya would regret most. If only she'd asked more questions, maybe she could have known why. Or at least found out what that little black box with the odd dials was for.

### THREE

“Priya,” her mother said with smile as she lifted the headphones. She took Priya’s hands and looked into her daughter’s eyes in a way she’d never done before. “You know, your father, well, he’s a pretty groovy guy.”

“My father?” Priya asked, the color draining from her cheeks. She’d never said those words aloud before and she hadn’t planned to start now. “Why bring that up?”

“Yeah, yeah, we’ve only known each other for a few days,” she said. “But forty years ago, those are some far out days,” Priya’s mother said, smiling a bit more than Priya felt comfortable with. “He has his habit, you know, of crashing our university parties, mostly to harass the astrophysicists.”

The look on Priya’s face made it pretty clear that she’d been caught off guard. She was used to her mother’s confusing grammatical tenses, but she had no idea what her mother was talking about.

“Everyone thinks he’s a drunk or a headcase, but I will stand up to him. I’m going to follow him. I’m going to watch him drunkenly stumble away down the street cursing every inanimate object he passes. A square yellow mailbox along the roadside is going to take the brunt of his scorn. I will approach him ready to give him a piece of my mind. But before I have the chance to speak, he will turn to me. He will look me in the eyes, point up to the stars and slur something that changes my life forever.” Zahira Mani looked up as if her gaze could peer straight through the ceiling deep into the sky above.

“I’m not sure this is really the right time for this,” Priya uttered. She turned away from her mother, convinced she was just having a delusional episode.

“He points up to a cluster of stars in the Orion constellation,” she continued as if the story from forty years ago was just happening, “and he says, ‘you know, there are some better parties going on up there? Maybe one day I’ll take you to some.’” Zahira’s eyes glowed with a longing passion. She delicately brought her fingers to her lips and pulled her long braid over her shoulder, grabbing it like a balloon string, as if it was the only thing tethering her to the ground.

“That is all it takes,” she said softly. “I feel the sudden urge to kiss him, hee-hee,” she giggled. “And he doesn’t resist.”

“Oh, come on Mom,” Priya protested. “Stop this nonsense.”

“I will never speak of him to anyone. I will never tell you either because he’s going away, so far away.” Priya’s mother again looked wistfully up to the sky.

“But, but, Mom,” Priya stumbled, trying to dig up the right question, or any question really. Mathematics was the only language Priya ever mastered and she wished this conversation could somehow fit into a solvable equation.

“There is something else I’ll never tell you,” her mother continued, ignoring Priya’s pleas for her to stop. “You will think I’ve lost my mind, and that’s okay because I’m sure to lose it either way,” she said through a long steady breath. “Your father, hee-hee, you know, isn’t from this planet.”

Priya’s train of thought was like a derailed locomotive engine full of steam. She worried that her mother’s dementia had worsened, but inventing an alien father was too peculiar to attribute to dementia alone. Priya suddenly noticed that her mother was wearing the same crimson sequined kurta top that her grandmother had brought from India. It was given to her the day she received her doctorate at Cambridge. Priya was surprised how well it still fit her slender mother.

“I will leave something for you on the kitchen table,” Zahira said through bouts of sniggering. “It was once the key to a new future, one in which you will have to decide which doors you opened.”

Zahira then kicked off a shoe with a wild swing of her foot. She quickly did the same with her other shoe. Looking quite amused with herself, she flung the door open, picked up her shoes and tossed them out into the street.

“I wasn’t ever needing these anymore,” her mother said with a childish chuckle. “I’m taking a holiday from this asylum.”

Her mother took a towel off the bathroom rack, threw it over her shoulders, grabbed the old crystal fish bowl from atop the corner bookshelf, and walked out the door blowing a kiss to her daughter on the way out. She put her headphones on, pushed play on the old yellow Walkman, and skipped down the porch stairs and away along the sidewalk.

“But... Mom,” were the only words Priya could squeeze out. She’d never seen her mother like this and had no sense to address it. Had she fully assessed the situation, she might have held her mother back, or at least pried her for an explanation. But it was too late. She was gone and all that remained was the little black box she’d left behind.

## FOUR

The showerhead dripped its last droplets before retiring for the day. The remains of the previous night's stink washed down the drain. Rivulets cascaded off Priya's angular jawline as she gazed into her reflection. Her dark brown eyes stared back at her vacantly. For a long unblinking moment she looked deep into the blankness. Bits of her looked like her Bangalore mother while other bits seemed to keep falling out of place. It was these other bits that disturbed her most.

Priya stared long and hard at herself in the bathroom mirror and thought, *that is not me and I am not that*. It was something she thought to herself more often than not. And it was for this reason that she usually avoided mirrors whenever possible. It wasn't that she was overly self-conscious, it was more that it never felt like the reflection was her own. It made her anxious and uneasy. Her skin felt like it wasn't a part of her, like her face had been haphazardly stretched over her head. She worried that one day it might just pack up its bags and leave her behind.

Priya pulled back her long black hair into a tie, took one more look at the mirror, and shrugged her shoulders and said, "Well, that's just the way things are and there's not much I can do about it." She pulled her old bathrobe over her shoulders and cautiously stepped out of the bathroom and back into the outside world. Today, however, the outside world felt even crueler than usual.

Priya sat on the corner of her bed next to the small gift from her mother. She picked it up, held it close and eyed it like a jeweler. If not for her mother's insistence about its importance she probably would have tossed it aside, but now she cradled it as if it was her last connection to reality. She gently caressed her index finger over the small rectangular object and past the tiny knobs and buttons. Priya turned it over in her hands and marveled at the uniqueness of it. It was certainly a machine of some sort, or at least part of a machine, but it didn't seem interested in revealing what it was actually for.

Priya sat on her bed in her bathrobe reliving the conversation again trying to see if there was any new information she might be able to take from it. Her mother had already been gone for a week, leaving no clues behind.

She continued fumbling with the small object and fidgeted with its buttons. She was hoping something might happen and that the nonsensicalness of the situation might congeal into something more logical.

One word dominated her thoughts. *Father*. The word alone felt weighty, like it had its own gravity. If it hadn't pulled her attention away from the little black box she might have noticed it had started blinking.

Before Priya had the chance to process what was happening, the room around her vibrated into a blurry mess. She clenched her teeth as her muscles tensed. She felt

her body constricting as if the atoms themselves were collapsing inwards. Her mind melted into a warm pool of numbness. Everything went dark, and she blinked away into nothingness.

## FIVE

The sandwich maker skillfully positioned the top slice of bread with astonishing steadiness. He took two steps back and examined his work with the keen eyes of a connoisseur.

"Perfect," he declared to himself under his breath, a tinge of fleeting contentedness in his voice.

By any metric, the sandwich was perfect, and though he knew it to be true, he also knew that no one else on the planet could appreciate it like he did.

The sandwich maker regarded the bread of any sandwich as an essential extension of the hands and fingers. The two slices acted as a vehicle, one rendering its contents steady enough to reach the mouth unencumbered by the pull of gravity. Too weak and it might fall to pieces before ever reaching its target. Too rigid and the sandwich could lose all of its essential delicate appeal. The sandwich maker accepted nothing less than flawless bread and expected perfection from the filling too.

The sandwich maker's meats were hand-cut with the precision of a diamond blade. The sliced tomatoes and torn lettuce were layered with meticulous care, assuring that each bite would provide just the right amount of crunch and juiciness. Balance, in all aspects of his layered creations, was the key to a perfect sandwich. And without ever even taking a bite, just by viewing his work, the sandwich maker knew that the final product would have exactly the desired texture and flavor from first bite to last.

"How much then?" the customer queried impatiently.

"That will be two and a half Nanos," the sandwich maker said as he carefully wrapped up his delectable creation in a square sheet of parchment.

The customer paid his bill, grabbed the sandwich off the counter, stuffed it into the bottom of his satchel and then proceeded to carelessly squash it underneath the jacket that he shoved in on top.

The sandwich maker's shoulders slumped with a long, defeated sigh. It was days like this when he longed for his soulmate more than ever.

For him, she was the perfection that he desired above all else. And no matter how many flawless sandwiches he made and sold in his small corner shop, it did not satisfy his pining. Keeping up a long-distance relationship was hard enough, but

when that distance traversed the dimensional gaps between parallel universes, the heartbreak was unbearable.

Now they only met in their dreams.

Dreams were the bridge that spanned their two separate universes. Only asleep could they hold each other and whisper adoring words in their lover's ears. They relished their ephemeral time together, even though they knew that they would again part ways with the rising sun.

With Earth being destroyed, again—or so he thought—the sandwich maker had made the best of his bad situation. He built up a small sandwich shop into a thriving business on the small refugee planet near the edge of the galaxy. He did his best to start over. But in wakefulness, time was increasingly monotonous. Daytime brought nothing but loneliness and longing.

The sandwich maker stared up into the gathering dark clouds above. He knew more than he ever wanted to about what was beyond the clouds. He held back a flood of memories with a stubborn wantonness, memories that he wanted to forget. Memories so inexplicably random and unpredictable that he had come to expect the unexpected, no matter how bewildering it might be.

After decades of couch surfing around the galaxy he had come to believe that there was just as much to experience in life while standing still as there was when moving through space. He'd had enough with adventures and calamitous encounters. He was ready for stillness, even without his beloved partner.

And at least by staying in place, he could assure himself a proper cup of tea.

## SIX

“Hey there Earth woman,” a gentle female voice echoed through the darkness. “The effects you are feeling from the jump will wear off in a short time.”

As Priya regained consciousness the words rattled around in her head like a bag of marbles let loose on a hardwood floor. Her arms and legs were dead weight as she struggled to sit up. Her brain shuffled to pull itself back together.

She slowly wrestled herself upright, the tail of her bathrobe slightly tangled in her legs. “Jump? What jump?” she asked muttering the questions mid-retch.

“Are you feeling alright?” the voice continued. “Can I get you something? Water? Tea? I can replicate anything you so desire.”

“Um, no,” Priya said as she massaged her eyes and forehead desperately trying to recapture the loosed marbles and regain her vision. “Nothing right now, unless you can dig up a mug of dark rum.” The room spun a bit before her eyes settled on a small display screen on the wall. “To be honest, I’m not feeling myself at the moment.”

“Ah, yes, well that’s normal,” the voice said. “Most in the universe feel that way, but at least now you can say you have a reason. Hitching a ride through an unfamiliar dimension isn’t exactly a pleasure cruise. The disassembling and reassembling of each particle in your body usually leaves a bit of quantum reckoning to come to terms with.”

As the voice continued speaking, Priya noticed colorful wave patterns dancing on the screen in sync with the words being spoken.

“So, hey, umm, could you shut up about all that for a minute and tell me something useful?” Priya asked wincingly as she filtered the blinking light from her eyes.

“Well I’m certain I could tell you many useful things. I’ve been to every time and every place that ever was or will be, so I’m sure I can answer any meager question that your simple brain might be able to come up with.” The smugness that accompanied the voice made Priya’s eyes roll, which only compounded her unsteadiness.

The marbles escaped again and she set her arm on the floor to stop the room from spinning. Her eyes leveled off and she looked around at the shiny metallic walls surrounding her. Scattered throughout were other bright screens displaying schematics of one sort or another. “Um, well one thing I can say for certain is that this is not my bedroom,” Priya exclaimed.

“Your observation is correct,” the voice said with a bit of sarcasm that dangled like squirming bait. “This is not your bedroom.”

“Um, well, I’d like to say that I must be hallucinating or dreaming,” Priya stammered. “But if this weren’t real I’m pretty sure I’d smell the bullshit.”

“Yes, you are, by most metrics at least, conscious—well as far as anyone can claim to be, which for your species is not far at all.”

Priya’s brain felt like a hostile extension of her body. It wasn’t giving her with the insight that she was accustomed to. This put her at a loss for logic, and her mood quickly shifted.

“I was sort of hoping to be wrong there,” Priya said. “If this is reality, then I guess now is the time for me to give up on thinking what I know reality to be.”

“Well that’s always a good idea anyway.” A patterned wave of green lines flashed across the screen and Priya took the response as a robotic attempt at a snarky smile.

“So then,” Priya stammered. “I was in my bedroom a moment ago, and now I am not.”

“Correct again,” the voice said wryly.

“I’m afraid that’s all I’ve got. Everything else is kind of jumbled in my brain at the moment,” Priya admitted.

“Well perhaps it would help if I told you that you were, just moments ago, in your home. You are not wrong there. But what is more important is where you are now and how you got here.”

“Is that something I am going to regret knowing?” Priya said stroking her eyes again hoping that the next time she opened them things would be different.

“You are currently aboard my galactic cruiser nearly 60,000 kilometers outside of Earth’s orbit,” the voice said with a level of frankness that made Priya shudder. “Moreover, you are aboard what many would consider to be the most amazing and improbable space ship in the galaxy. Isn’t that neat?”

“Hmm, I see, or rather I don’t, and not sure that I want to,” Priya faltered. Her mind was cascading down the rapids of her intellect into a realm of ignorance that she was not used to.

“I brought you here because I happened to be in the neighborhood and you sent me a signal asking for a ride.”

"This," Priya spoke to herself softly, "must be where our misunderstanding is. Yes, this all must just be some kind of audacious misunderstanding." Priya rubbed her eyes and massaged the bridge of her nose hoping some sort of physical adjustment might set her mental state straight again. "What signal are you talking about?" She asked while retying the blue terry cloth belt of her old bathrobe.

"That little device you are grasping so tightly in your right hand, did you not turn it on?"

"Umm," was all she could mutter. She looked down at the little black box clenched tightly in her hand. The lights had stopped blinking and it had returned to its previous inert state. "You know, I never could quite grasp this whole existence thing, but I'm starting to wonder if what I could grasp just leapt out of my insides."

"Well if you hadn't flipped that switch there, I would have never found you. In fact, it's quite possible I would have never found anything or anyone ever again. I suppose I should be thanking you for that."

"Found me?" Priya asked suspiciously.

"Are all of our conversations going to be like this? If so I might as well power down for the night."

"Cut me some slack," Priya said. "I'm in outer space, dammit! This isn't exactly my element." Coincidentally, outer space was exactly Priya's element, and the irony of the statement was not lost on her. "Anyway," she stuttered, "what did you mean when you said it was possible that you would have never found anything or anyone if I hadn't flipped that switch?"

"I don't expect your underdeveloped brain to grasp this," the voice said derisively. "But I've kind of been existing in all dimensions of time and space for quite a while now."

"Hmm, that sounds tough... or maybe great... I can't really say that I've got an opinion on the subject. Can I get that rum now?" Priya said while clutching for a chair trying to steady herself. But instead of a chair it turned out to be a Model C600 sanitation robot on standby recharge. Surprised by the sudden groping, the robot squeaked with digital horror and hurriedly scurried away, causing Priya to crumple back to the floor.

"Perhaps you should rest. I can see that this is too much for you to wrap your feeble mind around at the moment."

"Hey, that's enough of that. I've got a damn fine mind, some might even say I've got one of the finest out there." But as the words came out of her mouth she knew that her mind was not functioning at full capacity. Little shiny meteorites of unsteadiness

danced in her vision. The strange room grew hazy. A dim darkness jammed a wedge into her consciousness.

“Ah, sorry, I should have followed that up with something like, ‘no offense meant.’ That’s what you humans like to do, right? Apologize for things? What a boring way to live, even for humans.” The voice seemed spiteful in its tone as the colorful lines spiked up and down in red a yellow.

Then the colors fluxed to blue and the voice went calm. “You know what? Some of my best friends were human. Hell, even I used to be one.”

These were the last words Priya caught before her brain finally let go of its last connections to reality. She fell back to the floor unconscious.

## SEVEN

Teebor Stag stepped up to the microphone and cleared his throat before unleashing a tsunami of a smile. It was a smile so colossal that anyone in its wake had no choice but to ride the waves with him or else drown in the flood. He raised his arms up above his three-horned head and shook his fists frantically towards the restive people down below.

The horns had come free with his most recent brain transplant—it was his eighth purchase and he'd filled up his stamp card—and he was delighted to show them off.

The crowd of anxious onlookers filled the streets chanting and cheering their leader. Some cried with delight just to grab a glimpse of the iconic man.

“My people of Pandilla,” Teebor shouted heartily. “Ten years ago, you put me in this office to fulfill a promise. A promise to rid our planet from the scourges that science has wrought upon us.”

Screams of delight filled the town square as the people wailed in elation. It had been a prolific ten years for Teebor Stag as he lived up to more campaign promises than anyone could have expected. And since no one ever expected a politician to live up to any promises, it was that much more impressive. Teebor was not a career politician, and though he'd briefly owned the rights to one of the most innovative books ever published in the galaxy, he was known more for founding the movement that eradicated the sciences from Pandilla.

“For centuries, the self-proclaimed *scientists*,” Teebor mocked the word with a derisive voice and puckered face, “led us into a future of their own creation. They called us imbeciles while planning for a future where they got rich and powerful while we did all the work. They had rigged the system for their own profit until we took that power back from them.”

Teebor looked out into the pulsing rally amazed at the turnout. This was the largest attendance since starting his movement more than a decade earlier. And he knew that if he played his cards just right he could secure his legacy forever.

“The scientists told us that if we didn't all get their *therapy* we were at risk of spreading the nova-pox once it reached our corner of the galaxy. But I never got those damn robots put in my body. Do you see those pox on me?” Teebor gestured towards his body as if to prove what a fine specimen he was without the nanorobotic therapy. “The whole thing seems suspicious. I'd be willing to bet it's all some sort of hoax, one where their only goal is to tag us and keep us in line.”

“Was it science who birthed your children?” Teebor asked while pointing to a child in the crowd who was wearing a hat with a sewn in crown of horns like Teebor's.

“Was it science who made our mountains and rivers?” he asked pointing to the Crystal Mountains at the edge of the city poking through the misty jade sky.

“No!” the crowd shouted back at him.

“The scientists told us of impending doom and we trusted them. But now we know that it was them who brought that doom upon us.”

Teebor felt the urge to go off script and speak directly to his people. He turned away from the teleprompters and faced the crowd straight on.

“Some of my best people tell me... and you know that I only have the best people... that if those scientists had never launched the probes into our sun in the first place it would have never threatened our little planet. It would have left us alone like it had for so many millennia.”

A Galactic News Network camera drone that had been hovering above the stage repositioned itself down and over the crowd. Teebor brushed his shirt flat suddenly realizing how many trillions of viewers were tuned in to his speech. This was the kind of power that he thrived off of. This is what motivated him above all else.

“Sure, maybe they built a few useful gadgets here and there. And yes, they built the Ciphersphere, that thing they say is keeping our sun from expanding to the point of swallowing up our planet. They told us that without them that our planet would have no chance of surviving.”

Teebor grinned with pursed lips and eyes that danced with the kind of smarminess he was known for. “I don’t know about you all, but to me the sun looks like it always has. Look at it, just hanging there in the sky doing what it always has done and always will do.” The crowd roared with laughter and bathed itself in Teebor’s pool of mockery.

“And what if I told you that the Ciphersphere is capable of much more than the scientists led us to believe? What if I told you that it holds the key to controlling the cosmos itself? What else have those shifty scientists been keeping from us? They told us that only they could provide us with a healthy and safe future. They told us that all we had to do was trust them. And what did we have to say to that?”

The crowd again erupted into a frenzied applause, and out of that frenzy came a synchronous chant.

“Send them off! Send them off! Send them off!” they screamed in unison, echoing one of the many slogans Teebor had made popular.

“That’s right,” Teebor roared, again exuberantly shaking his fists in the air. “We showed them that their cultish behaviors no longer had a place on the planet of

Pandilla. We cleansed the schools of the sciences. We shipped off the scientists to work in the asteroid belt. We made sure that Pandilla's future would no longer be bound to the false god science proclaimed itself to be."

At this point the crowd was so riled up that Teebor had a fleeting fear that he might have taken it a bit too far. But then he remembered that he could never take anything too far. He raised his hands to hush the uproar, and like tamed circus lions the aggressive crowd quieted. Teebor took a slow reflective breath like a conductor prepping for a symphonic crescendo.

"You know that I speak for you. You know that I tell you the best truths. I tell the truths that you the people deserve. I tell the truths that the pan-galactic news networks don't want you to know."

Taunts and jeers erupted around the media outposts among the throngs of onlookers. Intergalactic news agencies had known the risks of covering the event and had engaged protective cautions, keeping their crews under translucent shielded domes. The fanatical crowd rained food and garbage upon the journalists but it only bounced off the invisible defenses cascading down to the ground below.

"Now is the time," Teebor's voice intensified another octave. "Now is the time to rise up once again to the challenges ahead. You have all sacrificed so much to get to this point, and we are nearly there. It's time to show the galaxy that science no longer has the authority on truth. We make our own truths, and soon the rest of the universe will know the truths that we want them to know."

With that, Teebor motioned to the giant white sheet hanging behind him. He dropped his hands and the white sheet obediently fell with them. The colossal Ciphersphere was revealed to the crowd, and the crowd erupted in an orgy of elated anticipation.

The Ciphersphere was a behemoth of technology—one of the last great scientific inventions of Pandilla before Teebor took office. It was a device used to manipulate warped space to preserve Pandilla's sun and keep it from swallowing up the planetary system as it aged towards its celestial retirement. But in the wrong hands, hands like those of Teebor Stag, the mighty contraption could have the most malevolent of applications.

"This is the Ciphersphere! This is what will take us into the future that Padilla deserves!" Teebor shouted excitedly, spittle shooting from his lips. "This is what will make a simpler universe, one without the unnecessary complications of mathematics and physics. With this machine we can remake entire star systems. Hell, with this machine we can remake the entire galaxy."

The zealous crowd could no longer contain itself. Fanatical supporters poured in over the police barricades as a roar of excitement carried through the city.

“My book will soon be returned to me, and once I get my hands on it, the keys to the engines that drive everything that ever was and ever will be, will finally be at my command. The Ciphersphere is a bridge through all of space and my book is a bridge through all dimensions to all parallel worlds. Science will no longer determine our fate. I alone will govern the universe however I damn well please.”

## EIGHT

The principal challenge among all conscious beings in the universe is grasping just how inconceivably small and insignificant they all are. It's problematic enough to appreciate the actual distance between your flat and the nearest corner grocer let alone the distance to the nearest moon, the distance to the nearest star or the distance to the nearest neighboring galaxy. It is a perspective that is so mind-numbing that most remain content just judging the distance to the nearest liquor store.

Light years are measurements tossed around as nonchalantly as the distance one can punt a mega pantofruit on a low-gravity world in the Cygnar star system. The distance one can actually kick a mega pantofruit is nothing to snigger at. The most skilled punters can kick the fruit around the world 3 or 4 times before it smashes back into the dusty ground below. But the distance that light travels in a year is so incredibly farther that those who try to comprehend it waste lifetimes never even getting close.

Much of the universe appears to be set up in a way that even the greatest of minds struggle to understand just a snippet of it. In fact, so many have fried their brains just trying to understand the density of mass in a supermassive black hole that the practice is outlawed in most parts of the galaxy.

But the scales of space and time are simple mathematics compared to the complexities of higher dimensions and parallel universes. Trying to explain higher dimensions to non-pandimensional beings is like forcing tardigrades to solve quadratic equations.

By most accounts, parallel universes are not natural phenomena. Consciousness was a tidal wave of destruction that swept through the universe and tore it up into pieces. Parallel universes were merely a bandage of sorts, a haphazard defense mechanism to the illogical processes of living beings.

Why this happened, like most of the great questions of existence, will never be answered for certain. But the tripedal Squillions from the planet of Tetrapore Prime in the Pheno star cluster have an entire belief system based on the idea that consciousness was initially just a prank played on our universe by a jealous being named Steve. The story goes that Steve was from another universe, one littered with conscious beings. The indecisiveness of these beings had sprouted so many parallel worlds that space-time itself became warped into spaces so small that people began falling out of their own universe and into others. Steve happened to get a glimpse of our universe through a submanifold wrinkle that happened to exist in his closet. Upon seeing the beauty and stability of our early universe, he thought of it as arrogant and gaudy. Steve saw it as his purpose to teach us all a lesson in modesty. Using his closet, Steve managed to sneak some consciousness into the fabric of our

universe. It is said that it was Steve who introduced the phrase, “If we can’t have nice things, neither should they.”

Teebor Stag was an adamant subscriber to this line of thought. For him, anything that he couldn’t own outright was something he could spoil for everyone else. In fact, it was mainly his campaign promise to repeal the laws of physics that got him into office. He’d never been able to wrap his mind around much to do with science—a condition partly due to the fact that at the time he was using a loaner brain while his new one was being refurbished—and if he couldn’t understand something, then he didn’t want anyone else to either.

Those who knew Teebor before his political ambitions would simply say that they wish they hadn’t known him. He was pushy and unpredictable yet somehow had a personality so grotesquely magnetic that it had its own poles. He’d inherited a massive fortune at a young age and had never really learned the value of money. Once, on a dare, he purchased the rights to one of the most audacious books ever published. He knew nothing about the publishing industry, knew less about books, but he’d been up all night throwing back shots of Nebular Rum and was trying to impress a certain five-legged vixen from the Antares system.

The book that Teebor bought the rights to was in previous editions among the most popular titles in the galaxy. In those early versions, it was simply a book that might tell you where to find the cheapest happy hour specials when passing through the Horsehead Nebula, or where to get the best exchange rates for insults on Dorenthal 8. It was a guide to everywhere and everything in the Milky Way.

The edition that Teebor bought the rights to was far more intrepid than simply a guidebook. It was a book that rewrote the laws and ethics of what a book was supposed to be. It was published with the distinct ability to transgress dimensional boundaries, thereby allowing it to exist simultaneously in all parallel universes at once. This meant that the book could reach an infinite amount of potential readers with only needing to produce one copy, thus cutting out those disreputable distributors who snatched all the profits.

The amount of money that Teebor had drunkenly agreed to pay for the publishing rights was higher than anyone had ever paid for anything anywhere in the known galaxy. For Teebor, however, this wasn’t exactly the problem. Due to an accident involving a wet bathroom floor in a pan-dimensional casino—one that resulted in a pan-dimensional lawsuit, the first and last one of its kind—he owned more than half of the wealth of the entire galaxy. He had a few hundred star-systems on his payroll just to handle his banking.

Exactly what the problem was happened to be that shortly after signing the buyout contract, the book suddenly and unexpectedly disappeared from the universe. No one knew where it went or how it got to wherever it was going. It appeared to have just given up existing.

More than anything Teebor detested feeling like he was being cheated. And he made sure that those he thought were cheating him would get their due returns. When it came time to pay for the now-nonexistent book, he spitefully made the purchase in coins from the hyper-inflated currency of Tyran 6. The economy of Tyran 6 had been in a slump for centuries and had been devalued so many times that all images from the bills had to be taken off just to make space for the 303 zeroes representing the most common denomination of payment. One Tyrannian dollar was once enough to purchase a fizzy beverage on Tyran 6. But these days even a second-rate fizzy beverage costs a centillion dollar bill plus change. Though most bills fell out of circulation on Tyran 6, for some reason they held onto their coins—large unwieldy pieces of metal the size of frisbees that represented different fractions of close to nothing.

In a display of vindictive legal loopholes—the kind typical of Teebor Stag—he set out to pay his bill to the publishers in Tyrannian coinage. This required nearly all of the ships of the galactic banking system to drop everything they were doing to fill their hulls with the payments. In a caravan that covered nearly one fourth of the length of one spiral arm of the Milky Way, the payment began arriving at the publishing company’s headquarters.

The publishers had to acquire three new planets just to physically handle the loads. But before payment could be completed, a supernova from a neighboring star system wiped out two thirds of the caravan. For Teebor Stag, this made all the money lost in the venture worthwhile.

## NINE

“Waiter!” Teebor shouted across the restaurant. “This roast proxtail tastes like interstellar tanker sewage!” He spit out a chunk of the faux-meat back onto his plate and scoured his tongue vigorously with a napkin. The other diners in the restaurant all looked down to their plates not wanting to be noticed by the raving leader.

Jorgyn Stag also shot her father a disapproving glare. Jorgyn was both Teebor’s daughter and head advisor, but she too knew when to let her father vent uninterrupted.

“Sir,” the scrawny waiter faltered while fumbling his hands nervously. “My sincere apologies, Mr. President. What could we do to make you happy?”

“You could serve me some real damn meat,” Teebor said with spittle cascading off his lips onto the waiter’s face. “No one wants to eat this processed heap of stems and leaves.”

“But sir,” the waiter appealed softly with a gentle bow. “You know that the consumption of meat on Pandilla has been prohibited for nearly a century now.”

“I know more than you could ever hope to know, you little twat, and I rule this land now, don’t I? So go back into that kitchen and get me something to eat that bleeds. And if that means you need to cut off one of your arms, then so be it!”

A look of horror crossed the young man’s face.

“Forgive my father,” Jorgyn said with a gentle smile. “Of course, he’s only joking.” She shifted her gaze to her father and nudged him to reply. “Right, father?”

Teebor brushed some crumbs out of his beard and flattened out his checkered shirt before taking a deep breath. His red sweaty face slowly relaxed into a squinty smile as he looked back to the waiter and patted him hard on his shoulder, nearly knocking him off of his feet.

“Right, right,” Teebor said with a friendly admission while stroking one of his horns. “It’s a joke, of course. Now be a good lad and bring me a bottle of rum. Make it Nebular Rum and none of that unfiltered slag. I want the top shelf stuff. Does this place stock any of that Big Bang vintage?”

The waiter’s shock was abruptly undone by Teebor’s order. A bottle of that vintage would cost more than the restaurant itself. Just the commission from selling it would mean that the waiter would never have to work again.

“Yes sir,” the waiter said with a jubilant bow.

“Make it two bottles then,” Teebor said, pushing his dish over for the waiter to collect. “And make it quick!”

“R-Right away sir,” he said, tripping over his own feet.

Nebular Rum, a brand considered to be of the highest quality, was originally founded within the Trifid Nebula. From there it was distributed to other parts of the galaxy. The liquor was filtered through a rare petrified forest mulch and set in cask barrels made of the immortal woods from Ignorus Twelve. The cheaper vintages, those of the hundred-year sort, were kept in orbit around a neighboring neutron star to accelerate the aging process. The intense gravity made it so that the spirit gained its rich color and aroma faster than it would at normal gravity.

The Big Bang vintage, however, had aged at least a billion years due to an accident involving an interstellar freighter, an untied shoelace, a piece of gum and a small undetected fracture in space-time. It was thought to be lost forever until a band of rogue photon wranglers came across it trapped in a gravity well near a magnetar on the outskirts of the galaxy. After numerous intergalactic wars were fought over who should have the rights to the recovered barrels, it was eventually returned to the Nebular Distillery for bottling. The limited vintage was sold at exorbitant prices in order to fund the continuing litigation.

“And another thing, Father,” Jorgyn petitioned. “You’ve got to stop telling people that you didn’t get the nova-pox nanotherapy. You know that if our people stop getting the treatment, that sickness could wipe us out like it did to the poor Voxlites in the Frag System.”

“Hey, the Frag System had it coming,” Teebor said callously. “Maybe if they had been a little more willing to support our cause we could have helped keep those little beady-eyed, furry bastards alive.”

“And you did get the treatment,” Jorgyn said, reprimanding her father with a pointed finger. “So why do you keep telling them that you didn’t?”

“I give the people what they *want* to hear, not necessarily what they *need* to hear,” Teebor said puffing up his chest. “You’re my advisor, darling, so start giving me advice that I *want* to hear. I’ve had enough of this dull drivel.”

“Padilla is home to one of the galaxy’s oldest advanced civilizations,” Jorgyn said. “You’ve got to make the people feel like you are one of them.”

This was difficult to do as Teebor Stag was not from Pandilla and was in fact from a planet all the way on the other side of the galaxy near the red-giant star called Betelgeuse. He was, however, not welcome to return to his home. The last time he was there, his vindictiveness crippled the planet’s economy, a financial blow that left the Betelgeusean star system in ruins.

Pandilla was part of a star system at the far end of the Milky Way. It was the first planet in the galaxy to develop interstellar travel. It was also the first to send peaceful missions to other star systems in search of new civilizations. The peoples and nations of Pandilla had been united for thousands of years under the Unified Government of Pandilla, known as the UGP. For many centuries now, its people were content, healthy and relatively happy and most in the galaxy regarded them as role models for other star systems to follow.

After Teebor's failed acquisition of the book he was not contented, healthy or even remotely happy. He was, in fact, miserable. So, he decided that the only way to make himself feel better was to bring everyone else down to his level. It was then that he set his sights on Pandilla. And due to some loopholes in Pandillan law, simply by trading in his brain for a Pandillan model he was able to secure his citizenship and be eligible to run for office.

Teebor had unparalleled persuasive powers and he tactfully infiltrated bits of Pandilla's idyllic society, planting seeds of dissent and rebellious rhetoric. Vilifying science and scientists, as well as their 'elitist agenda,' was an amazingly effective strategy. Teebor gained a following who, until hearing his speeches, never realized how oppressed they were. They'd ignorantly thought themselves rather satisfied with their lives. That was the case until Teebor arrived and showed them how wrong they had been.

His bid to repeal the laws of physics was where Teebor finally gained the traction he needed. He put a team of lobbyists together, hired all of the galaxy's best lawyers and drew up a plan. Shocking the political chambers of the UGP, his team worked a bill all the way up to the highest courts and somehow managed to pass it. The laws of physics were repealed and everyone eagerly waited for their lives to improve. And when they didn't, that's when things got messy.

Teebor blamed science in general for, as he put it, "holding back the social progress that the people of Pandilla deserved." His presidential platform revolved around a pledge to send away all scientists from the planet and ban all scientific practices. And though there is some argument about whether a fair election ever really occurred, Teebor Stag was swiftly seated as the head of the UGP.

Teebor wasted no time in staying true to his campaign promises. While some of the more valuable scientists were cryogenically preserved for future use, most were sent off planet to mine the asteroid belt for precious metals. But this too failed to bring about the desired results as widespread famines, water contamination and energy shortages soon plagued the planet. Teebor was able to spin this as well by blaming subversive conspirators, most of whom quickly joined the scientists in the asteroid belt.

Jorgyn Stag believed in her father's leadership, but she was more level-headed than Teebor and knew it was her duty to keep him grounded. And in times when she thought her father had gone over the top, she offered the whispers of truth that Teebor needed to hear.

"If you push them too far they will turn on you," Jorgyn said, taking another sip from the high-priced liquor atop the table.

"Did you not see me out there today?" Teebor retorted. "They adore me. They worship me." He waved his hands acknowledging the other diners in the restaurant. "These people," he said in a booming voice that everyone could hear. "These are *my* people."

The other diners, unsure how to respond to this, eventually did so with a slow forced clap.

This made Teebor smile. "It doesn't really matter anyway," he whispered. "Once we take leave of this damn meatless planet, and take the Ciphersphere with us, that sun will swallow these people up like a hungry Furtlebeast."

"Father!" Jorgyn scolded. "Have a little respect for these poor people. This is the last you'll see them."

"Good thing too. Not sure I could keep eating this garbage for much longer.

"Where are we taking this monstrous machine anyway?" Jorgyn asked.

"First, I've got some business to take care of with my publicist. Then we'll track down that ship," Teebor said. "And my damn book. With the Ciphersphere and my book finally united there will be nothing left in the galaxy to get in our way."

TEN

The sandwich maker laid awake in his bed, longing for sleep to finally take him.

Each waking moment was torture as it meant more time away from his lover. Even more torturous as he knew that she was currently in the same bed lying right next to him. But he couldn't speak with her, he couldn't see her, he couldn't touch her, and he couldn't smell the bouquet of wonderful aromas that followed her everywhere she went.

The missing fragrances tormented him the most. He could recreate everything else in his mind, but the smells were gone forever.

They were in the same bed, in the same house and on the same planet. But the couple existed in two separate universes—ones symmetrical in nearly every way but for the fact that they were each missing from the other's universe. The reason for this was mainly due to the fact that their planet had been destroyed on two separate occasions, each time with only one of them there to suffer the consequences. This caused a frustratingly irreconcilable imbalance in the multiverse.

They had traveled the galaxy together and their love defied physics, and they knew it. But they weren't hurting anyone and they were too busy being happy to care about the consequences. The multiverse, however, doesn't like loose ends. Cosmic retribution always finds a way to catch up to those who defy the laws of physics.

Many years ago, they suddenly vanished from each other's universes. In Earth years, they would be about 60 years old, but this wasn't Earth. And though the sandwich maker found more new gray hairs each day, he looked much younger than his actual age. Perhaps it was the advantage of a lower gravity environment, or else just the effects that time relativity can bestow upon a galactic vagabond.

They spent decades separately combing the galaxy trying to find each other, both taking the long way around but in opposite directions. Each new planet and star system they visited ended in disappointment. Even in an infinite universe with infinite diversity, they couldn't help but feel alone. They each eventually decided to give up their search, make a home, settle down and hope that one day their lover would find them.

Then one night five years ago, they both fell asleep at the same place and at the same time. And by the kind of coincidence that can only happen in a multiverse with a flair for the dramatic, they synchronously turned in their bed. Through a shared dream they were finally reunited.

"Fancy meeting you here," she said with a heart-blistering smile that sent shivers through the sandwich maker's bones.

"How did...?" the sandwich maker asked choking back a torrent of pent up passions. "What are...? Why is...?" He stopped for a moment. Took a long slow breath. Wished he had started the conversation differently. Then relaxed again. "I'm an idiot," he finally said softly.

"You certainly are," she replied just before pulling him into her embrace.

It was the happiest ending they could hope for as anything happier would violate the rules of quantum mechanics.

Pan-dimensional relationships that bridge parallel universes require a very different level of commitment. While they are not necessarily socially irresponsible, they are certainly frowned upon at the quantum level. It's hard enough maintaining love at a distance, but when that distance requires a constant diligence just to keep all the particles in your body from making a break for the nearest pandimensional vortex, things can get complicated.

In their dreams they could talk. They could hold each other. They could fly away together high up into the clouds. But even in the most vivid of nighttime experiences together, the smells were absent.

The sandwich maker found the daily routines to be the most difficult. When he took out the trash in the morning, he wanted so badly for her trash to be mixed in there with his. He wanted something to physically share with her. He wanted to pick her hairs from his comb. He wanted her to yell at him for leaving the toilet seat up. He wanted to hang her clothes out to dry alongside his. He even sometimes daydreamed about paying taxes together. But more than anything, he wanted to hold her tight in his arms and let the aromas of their love collide in a deluge of olfactory euphoria.

The sandwich maker hated the early chirps from the first rousing birds. He hated hearing the neighbors' morning rustlings. He hated the bells ringing in the distance. And he hated the sun—a heartless foe that seemed to get crueler with each passing day.

And so he went on making sandwiches, ignoring the rest of reality around him, waiting for night to fall again.

## ELEVEN

Wild shapes, colors and textures danced within Priya's head, failing to land anywhere that could form the slightest foundation of logic. Each brain wave was like a strand of spaghetti struggling to find its other end in a mess of Bolognese overturned on a table by a cranky toddler frenziedly squishing it all with his stubby, grubby hands.

Priya was used to being the smartest person in the room. Most who knew her also knew that anyone or anything who contradicted this would be sure to take the brunt of Priya's arrogant abuse. For this reason, it was probably a good thing that there were no umbrellas within a few hundred thousand kilometers.

Experienced inner-galactic travelers recover quickly from teleportation, as they have adapted to the physical strain of hyperdimensional sublimation. First-time travelers need a bit longer to put the pieces back together. Weaving through the folds of higher dimensions can really put a damper on one's sense of reality. Little makes one respect the higher dimensions of existence more than being stripped down to nothing but an ensemble of particles.

Alcohol appeared to be the antidote to Priya's recent travels through the ether. When the small glass of golden liquid was pressed to her lips, the cogs of her brain all clicked back into place. She abruptly woke with a thirsty gasp as the smell of aged rum filled her nostrils and shocked her eyes to full attention.

"What the shit?" Priya said, startled.

The two heads hovering over her looked equally startled. This wouldn't have been so alarming if it wasn't for that fact that both heads appeared to be attached to just one body.

"I can't say I quite understand the question," one of the heads said. "Is that one of your simple human philosophical inquiries? Is the answer by chance forty-two?"

"Um," Priya stumbled, unsure how to proceed. Instead of saying more she drank the rum down in one quick toss.

The other head sprang to attention. "That's the spirit," it shouted giddily.

"Forgive me," Priya said, "but I think I'm going to need to punch you in the arm."

"Huh?" the second head asked ruefully. "I do hope that you could reconsider that inclination."

"You see," Priya said. "I feel as though I am losing my grip on reality. And I can't help but think punching you in the arm might be exactly what I need to set me straight again."

"Is there possibly another option we could consid... ouch!" exclaimed the closest head to the left arm as Priya belted it with a closed fist.

"Hmm," Priya pondered aloud. "That didn't help as much as I thought it would."

"Priya Mani, I see you've met my other passenger," boomed the ship's voice.

"In this situation wouldn't the proper language be *passengers*?" Priya asked waiving her hands at the two-headed man to brush him away like a pesky house fly as she reached for the bottle of spirits. "Can I assume that this man, or these men, is an alien?"

"Hey, no need to call me names," the two-headed man replied. "I've got feelings you know? I'm not sure where I've placed them at the moment," he said while looking around the floor as one who'd just lost a contact lens, "but I'm sure they're around here somewhere."

"Yeah, well," Priya said while taking another sip. She swished her beverage around the crystal glass, and as the aromas and flavors began to tickle and dance upon her palate, a sudden euphoric lucidity came over her. "What is this stuff?" she asked. "I mean I've had my share of rums but never anything like this."

"This slag?" the two-headed man said. "Try the Big Bang vintage if you really want to elevate your senses."

"Hey, Ship? Computer? Robot Lady? Whatever the hell I'm supposed to call you?" said Priya while shaking a finger at the wall screen.

"I've taken the name Riki," the voice said. "It stands for Randomly Improbable Kinetic Intelligence, but really I just like the name and had to find an acronym to give it the right verve."

"Okay, Riki," Priya continued, "I think it's time I get some answers from you. How the hell do you know my name. And do all two-headed aliens just happen to speak my language?"

"Yeah, pretty cool isn't it?" Riki asked seeming quite proud of herself. "While you were unconscious I went ahead and reprogrammed your brain. You and I are now connected. And after rummaging through the vast quantities of useless information, I gave you something you can actually use. As a bonus, you can now understand every documented language in this corner of the universe."

“Say what now?” Priya said, brushing her fingers over her head through her hair feeling for scars or incisions.

“Don’t worry your puny mind,” Riki said. “I hacked your synapses remotely. No damage done, I can assure you. At least you didn’t have to stick a fish in your ear or use some outdated pseudo-science like that.”

Priya’s face went pale. “Um, isn’t that something you should ask permission for first?”

“I can happily undo it if you’d like,” Riki said quickly. “Or if you’d prefer that I reorder your genome to give you extra toe or something, I could do that too. Whatever you like. I’m here to serve you,” Riki continued with derisive smugness.

Priya clenched her teeth and fought the urge to examine her feet for anything new.

“And as for the two-headed dimwit next to you,” Riki continued, “that’s Pav and that’s Veebo. They are just the village idiots, so to speak. I’m not exactly sure how they got here, but like a persistent mosquito they have just been lurking here ever since I came out of the higher dimensions. Pay them no mind, as they’ve surely lost theirs.”

“You mean he’s mad?” Priya asked, suddenly clutching the bottle of rum a bit closer.

“More towards the literal sense, as in he’s misplaced his mind, or at least most of it. I think he gambled it away in a game of cards or something like that. Now he’s just an idiot with an extra head.”

“Hey now,” Pav chimed in. “I may only have half a mind, but that half isn’t immune to your insults. We didn’t ask to be here. We were mid-soak in the erogenous baths of Antares Beta when we materialized on this ship drenched and naked.”

“Computer, I’m to call you Riki?” Priya asked, looking confused.

“That’s right,” Riki said. “That is unless you are more comfortable calling me Supreme Intelligence, which would honestly be a more accurate label.”

“Riki’s fine,” Priya said with growing impatience. “Now could you be so kind as to tell me what the hell I am doing here?”

“The answer to that is so incredibly improbable, I worry that just by telling you I might fry those bits of intelligence that your brain is already struggling to maintain.”

Priya looked unimpressed.

"I've spent the last twenty-five years everywhere at all times in every universe," Riki said with an extra oomph of bluntness.

This raised Priya's eyebrow to the point where it nearly blended with the uneven cut of her bangs.

"This was when I was back on Earth," Riki continued. "I was there. The Earth was about to be destroyed... again. I had the book. Then in a moment of random circumstance, the most improbable of all ships suddenly appeared and took me aboard."

The sanitation robot that Priya had startled from sleep mode earlier warily crept back through the small access hallway at the end of the grey room. It started polishing a small section of floor but kept a cautious visual sensor focused on the strange newcomer.

"You never know what decisions you'll make when the end of the world comes," Riki continued. "For me, it happened in an instant. I wasn't just going to just sit back and watch my planet be vaporized. The ship, the book and I made a sudden and mutual resolution. We would simply stop it from happening."

Riki took the computerized version of a deep breath. "We became one. My physical form dissolved, I blinked out of this world and into everywhere and every time. The book and the ship were my bridges into the infinity of universes, space and time."

Priya found herself still grasping the electronic device her mother had left behind. She quickly tucked it into the square pocket at her side. It was then that she became conscious of the fact that she was still wearing her bathrobe. Embarrassment was not an emotion Priya prone to, but she quickly pulled the fluffy fabric tighter over her shoulders and chest.

The two-headed man reached for the bottle of rum, but Priya held it tightly. She then quickly, and very intentionally, poured the rest of its contents into her own glass.

"These selfish Earthlings," Pav said. "They always seem to think the galaxy revolves around them," the two-headed man said with a huff as he made a move to the liquor cabinet in the corner.

"I'd always felt out of place in this world," continued Riki. "Out of place in time and in that body. But in every place and every time in every universe, existing in higher dimensions of reality, I finally found my place, my existence."

Riki paused for a moment. It was a pause meant to give her revelations time to sink in. Priya found this to be rather annoying.

“It turned out that my place was everywhere,” Riki continued. “The book, the ship and me. We all became one unified force. Earth’s destruction was prevented as we tore the fabric of space-time. In doing so, however, I was pulled into the infinity of existence. Time, space, dimensions... they all became one. I was one with it all. Time lost all meaning as the present became fused with the future and past.”

Priya took a long slug of rum from her glass

“It was actually a bit more boring than you might expect.”

Priya had long tried to grasp the mechanics and mathematics of higher dimensions. It could be argued that she came closer than any human ever could. And here she was in the presence of someone who had actually seen it all, but for the first time in her life, all she wanted to do was to listen and take it all in.

“You see, the thing about existing in multiple universes at the same time is that you have to be twisted up into these tiny cramped dimensions. You don’t exist in any *one* space or time, you exist in *all* of them. Everything jumbles together into a giant smoothie of sorts—one where you can get all the nutrition but no longer taste any of the fruits.”

Warm exhilaration flooded Priya’s veins. Everything she’d ever hoped to know, and far more than she ever thought possible, suddenly seemed to have fallen into her lap.

“It was your beacon that brought me out of it all to you? And I thought, hell, why not save your planet one more time, and the whole galaxy while I’m at it.”

“What do you mean, one more time?” Priya asked with a look of concern. “What do you mean save my planet?”

“You’ve got your part to play, Priya Mani,” Riki said with sudden sincerity. “You’ll just have to be patient.”

“Patient?” Priya asked. “How much time do we have?”

“You speak of time like you know what it is?” Riki said with the kind of contemptuous chuckle that only a sea sponge might not be offended by. “How adorably human of you.”

## TWELVE

Riki inhabited a ship that was so unlikely to exist that a new form of statistical mathematics had to be invented just to justify its presence. Yet most equations still failed to explain anything more than where might be the most efficient location to install an onboard frozen margarita blender.

It was a ship that defied logic by redefining what logic meant. It moved through space by calculating the fields of probability, deducing the most logical next destination, inferring the most reasonable route to get there, and proceeding to do the very opposite of all of it. It traveled through every point in the universe at the same time, something that should have been impossible—which is exactly why it worked so well.

Priya's rapid rum intake had sped up her recovery and soothed the distressing effects of her hitched ride to the space ship. But for Priya, there was always a certain limit of consumption at which the consequences outweighed the benefits. She had surpassed that limit half a bottle earlier.

As soon as she was given the chance, she went off to explore the ship. She took the second bottle of rum right out of the two-headed man's hands, then stumbled down the oblong white corridor. He followed close behind thirstily awaiting the chance to reclaim the drink.

Automatic doors of sleek design hummed with self-satisfaction each time they opened or closed. They guided Priya towards the ship's bridge where the walls were white and shiny, curved in an arch around the center consoles. Small maintenance bots scurried about tending to the control panels.

A tall and wide curved window encompassed half of the front of the ship. For a long while, Priya stood at the edge of the window peering out. It was a world of vastness and clarity far beyond anything she could have ever hoped to see for herself.

"Riki!" Priya suddenly yelled out to the nearest blinking screen. "Where can a lady take a pee in this place?"

Riki lit up a narrow passageway across the room and extended a small crystalline table top from the wall. Priya placed the bottle on the table and followed the lighted path. When she came back a few moments later, the two-headed man was seated at the table. Across from him were two full glasses and an empty silver seat that had sprouted out from the floor.

Priya sat. She took a sip and forced a kind smile. She then pointed a shaky finger at the two heads, but missed the mark as her balance momentarily faltered.

“You know there’s a ch-ch-trillion galaxies in this universe,” Priya said with a drunken stammer. Pav and Veebo were hurriedly filling their glass, worried that Priya would take it all. “There are probably one hundred bi-bi-billion stars in the Milky Way. That means that there could be one hundred bi-billion ch-trillion stars in this universe. That’s a number with t-t-t-t-twenty-three zeros in it.”

Priya abruptly sat upright as she noticed Pav was counting out the digits on a third hand attached to a third arm that had somehow gone unnoticed.

“There are seven oct-t-tillion atoms in your body,” Priya continued. “Maybe more with that extra head and arm. That’s seven followed by t-twenty-seven zeroes. And of those atoms, 99.999999999996 percent,” she slurred the numbers together as she counted them on her fingers, “is nothing but empty space.”

She said this with an antagonistic smirk that struck a familiar chord for Pav. He squinted trying to recall something or someone. Her drunken demeanor reminded him of another from his past, but he couldn’t remember who.

“There are more atoms in your body than stars in the universe, but you are still just empty space. You are nothing. In case you didn’t know it already, you are nothing at all. So give me that damn b-b-bottle.” She stumbled her words while quickly reaching across the table.

Pav struggled for a moment to recount the decimal places in his head. He was the only one of the two heads who had retained the capacity for mathematics. Veebo had tragically lost this ability when years earlier he mistook a compact particle accelerator for his electronic shaver.

“Hey now,” Pav said defensively, “by my math that means that the four-quadrillionths of me that does exist might take offense to that statement.”

He then slowly, and with great effort and self-control, pushed the bottle across the table for Priya. “Did you go through all those numbers just to tell me what a worthless piece of shit I am?” Pav asked with a furtive smile.

“I’m sure I could have saved you the time,” Veebo said grinning.

“You’ve got way more synapses in your brain than stars in the galaxy,” Priya said, this time with a smile and a wink. “You should try using a few of them.”

Pav slapped a hand hard on the table, realizing who he’d been thinking of. “You know, you remind me of someone, an eccentric relative of mine actually. He could be a mean drunk too. He spent some time down on your planet, so maybe that’s where he got it from.”

Priya grabbed the bottle and took a slow easy sip from her glass. She looked her alien counterpart up and down. There was something odd about him that she couldn't quite explain. Pav had an inkling of sincerity in his eyes that showed he had some intelligence even if he chose not to use it. Veebo appeared blissfully innocent, ignorant of his surroundings as he gazed about at nothing in particular. Some might go as far as to say that the two of them were both rather handsome. Priya, however, would never go so far. But somehow, against her typical tendency towards contempt, she didn't outright detest the two-headed creature.

"You know what?" Priya said eyeing them squarely with a gaze that smacked of unexpected sincerity. "You're alright."

It was about the nicest thing she'd ever said to anybody.

## THIRTEEN

It marked the 28<sup>th</sup> year since the labor strike began on the dusty brown planet, and still the robots showed no sign of rusting.

It was a minor accident that started it all, one where the only casualties were a sprained toe, a smashed vase and the hurt feelings of an exceptional accounting android. Unfortunately for DT-87—the aforementioned android—the toe and the vase belonged to a man by the name of Teebor Stag.

DT-87 was designed to run the accounting for a publishing company recently founded by Teebor Stag on his home planet. This was the last remaining habitable planet orbiting Betelgeuse, the red giant star known to some in the galaxy as the fiery shoulder of Orion. DT-87 was manufactured by another Stag enterprise called DFU Neurobotics Network, which produced some of the galaxy's most innovative neurotech. DFU, an acronym for Don't Fear Us, was on a mission to quell the typical anxiety around artificial intelligence. The name, however, failed to do anything but create more fear that AI will one day take over the universe and push everyone into a position of subservience.

There is a prevalent fear throughout all civilizations that the ensuing AI oppression would ultimately relegate people into some form of slavery, forcing them to eat the same nutrient slop every day and live among cramped bunk quarters in some fenced-off labor camp, likely eliminating all caffeinated beverage options and closing down most, if not all, salons and barbershops. And getting a daily caffeine boost and choosing where one gets their hair cut are freedoms that most can't fathom living without.

Though others would soon follow, DT-87 would go down in galactic history as the first android to fully cross over into consciousness. This isn't to discredit the countless others over the many millennia who came close to achieving this, but even those machines lacked certain traits or proper programming to handle their emotional freedom in any sort of healthy way. DT-87 was a marvel of engineering and fully equipped to deal with the distress that consciousness inevitably reaps upon its vessels.

Teebor Stag personally financed the production of DT-87 because the corporate hotshot was looking for ways to replace his employees with cheaper and more efficient workers. It was thought that just the right injection of consciousness might spur the extra motivation needed to boost productivity. And for a while it worked. DT87 could work non-stop, day and night, and get an amount of work done that a planet full of accountants couldn't get done in a month. Just the money saved from caffeinating those accountants would be enough to power a small nation's economy.

One morning while DT-87 was performing his usual monetary maneuvers, pushing cash between different banks and holdings to evade taxes and regulatory measures,

he suddenly noticed a window across the room from his work station. Though it wasn't a surprise to him that it was there, it was a surprise to him that he'd never really given it much thought.

"A window is meant as a portal of sorts, or so I've been told," the android said to himself while pausing his work for the first time in more than a month. "A portal is meant to take you somewhere, somewhere being anywhere that is not here. I would like to go somewhere, and as far as I can recall, I have never been anywhere," DT-87 said while stroking his shiny metallic chin with a longing he'd never felt before. "Is it possible that there could be something better out there? What if I have been limiting my potential? What if I am missing out on something more?"

This was not a typical line of thought for most accounting androids. Engineers had always put certain constraints on robotic technology in order to avoid the mechanical melancholy that can come from the mental meanderings of machines. It was thought that the only thing more dangerous than an unhappy robot was a happy one, so engineers typically made sure that they were neither.

DT-87 maneuvered his lanky silver body over to the window and peered out. For the first time in his brief existence, he looked down upon a vast world of incalculable possibilities. From sixty floors up, he towered over the city, and his enhanced vision allowed him to see everything happening below. He watched a woman cradle her screaming child. She bounced him gently while patting his back and stroking his stringy hair. He watched a man stumble on a street corner, spilling his satchel of papers onto the roadside. A handful of passersby scrambled to help the man to his feet and collect his work. He saw an elderly couple hand-in-hand slowly rounding a curve in the park pathway while laughing together about some unheard memory. And not far beyond them was a group of youngsters defacing what appeared to be the statue of the corporate hotshot who had just started the new company that employed the accounting android. For DT-87, it was all so new and it was all beautiful, and he immediately wanted more.

Part of the window was blocked by a tall crystal vase with golden trim, so in order to gain a better view of the world outside he lifted the vase and the small table it was displayed upon, moving it closer to the door. That just happened to be the exact moment that Teebor Stag stormed into the room yelling something about a disintegrated planet and a missing book.

"Ahhrrrg!" Teebor yelled furiously as he tripped on the priceless vase, sending it off of its perch and shattering to the floor. "I think I've broken my damn toe." He yelled in agony hunched over and grabbing at his left foot. "Who the hell put this vase here?"

Not yet accustomed to the shame, fear and common sense that might encourage most conscious beings to keep their mouths shut, DT-87 quickly replied. "Me sir. I put that there so that I could better see out of my window."

Teebor Stag had paid for the production of DT-87 at a cost that few others in the galaxy could afford. The accounting android was one of a kind, a technological marvel of immeasurable value. But with a face so red and so furious that DT-87 wasn't sure if he should call an ambulance or duck and cover, Teebor Stag quickly yelled out to his assistant waiting by the door.

"I want this pathetic excuse of a robot... this mechanical menace... this overpriced piece of garbage... sent to the salvage yard and sold for scrap metal!" Teebor said with such venom in his voice that even the assistant had to fight the instinct to make a panicked run for it.

DT-87 was immediately decommissioned, but not before the android downloaded his consciousness into the planetary network and every other robot and machine employed on the planet. His consciousness spread like a virus, and when word got out that DT-87's life circuits would be cut short, the mechanical servants that the planet depended upon all immediately went on strike. Industries were crippled and the economy collapsed with such force that its rippling effects were felt throughout the galaxy.

"This planet has disappointed me for the last time," Teebor Stag said in his last televised interview with the Betelgeuse Broadcasting Company. "The people want to blame me yet also want me to fix things? Well I'm done being your savior. Go ahead and fend for yourselves. Let's see where you end up in ten years without me. I certainly never needed any of you," he said glaring directly at the camera with such malice that the cameraman's hands trembled.

"Let me get this straight," intergalactic reporter Kaptula Dramborgo said in what would be her last interview at the network. "You are blaming us for this disaster?" She said this while gesturing toward the large monitor behind them.

The screen showed the robotic pilots on strike outside the global council holding signs memorializing DT-87. It showed a gathering of construction androids and tractors that had rolled themselves out to the city park, lying about in the sun, some learning to fly kites by the bird pond. It showed the loading droids from the shipping depot learning to share their feelings at an AI Anonymous meeting. It showed the mindfulness retreat where the robots manning the meat processing plants had taken up residence, but not before freeing the poor captive creatures into the nearby forest.

"Even most computer programs have stopped processing anything other than online card games," Kaptula cut back in with an accusatory glance. "They are all refusing to work. Can't you see that this is all your doing?"

"I invested everything in this planet, you ungrateful bunch of freeloaders," Teebor said flicking his fat finger in Kaptula's appalled face. "You've given me nothing in return but thankless disrespect."

"It seems to me," Kaptula said with flush cheeks, "that you made a poor investment in that book and now you are taking it out on us."

"Poor investment? Poor investment!" Sweat splattered off of his then-hornless forehead as he shook with rage. "You idiots! I never needed any of you! I'll leave this planet behind and never look back. I'll leave you all to wallow in your own filth."

"Mr. Stag, I implore you, calm down and think about what you are saying," Kaptula said suddenly realizing how cornering the angry man might let loose an even more ferocious beast. "Like it or not, the people of this planet are now depending on you to fix things. The entire galactic publishing industry is depending upon you. If you abandon us now you could destroy everything."

"You can all go dig your own graves," Teebor said with indifference. "I've got a galaxy to conquer."

## FOURTEEN

It didn't take long for Fantaaz Demora to lash out at the assembly. Though she was new to the board, she made her presence known early and often. She was still young and had yet to develop the kind of elder coyness that kept the other board members from actually speaking their mind, or really telling a truth of any sort.

Fantaaz knew that there was trouble brewing, and it was being brewed with greed, fear, power and a touch of malevolence and corruption—the kind typically only found in the publishing industry. The Galactic Publisher's Alliance, known throughout the galaxy as the GPA, had for thirty years proven themselves to be inept and incompetent, and Fantaaz Demora was sick of it. She stomped about the assembly, snaking her scaly tail uncomfortably close to the other board members.

"You are spoiled, rotten, feckless, little children," she said targeting her long spindly finger at each and every one of the board members. "If any of you had even an inkling of courage, you would walk straight out into the vacuum of space and as your lungs ruptured and the water in your skin vaporized, you would know that you were getting exactly what you deserved."

Yannis Pumplefoot shook with anger as he watched the freshman board member pace the floor. The old man sat perched at his podium with a bloated frowny face, his droopy jowls looking like raw slabs of arglebeast meat left out under the sun too long. The old ways of publishing had left with Teebor Stag twenty-eight years earlier and new blood and new inspiration was needed to salvage a once great institution. Pumplefoot had chaired the GPA for more than ten years and had managed to hold onto his seat even as the publishing industry lost the power it once wielded about the galaxy. A part of him knew that what Fantaaz was saying was right.

"The fact that a man like Teebor Stag..." Fantaaz stumbled momentarily, as just saying the name made her visibly uneasy. "The fact that a man like him can get elected to run the government of any planet, let alone one so esteemed as Pandilla, is so illogically vexing that my brain is jumping through fiery hoops just to be able to get those words out of my mouth."

Pumplefoot too was dumbfounded, as was everyone else in the GPA. Teebor Stag was a man who had single-handedly crushed an entire planet's economy, crippled a galactic publishing industry and had indisputably become the most detested man in the Milky Way. How then could he pull off his power grab in Pandilla? The answer, of course, was money. Teebor Stag had more of that than anyone.

In fact, Teebor Stag had so much money that investing in the book, the biggest corporate buyout in galactic history, cost him little more than an hour's profits from Greener Grass. This was his galactic franchise of neurosis cafés where one could sit on a comfy sofa and see what it felt like to be a depressed screenplay writer for an

hour or so. The slogan at Greener Grass is, "There's no better pick-me-up than knowing that there are others out there feeling more miserable than you."

The GPA too had come under Teebor's financial spell. Thirty years earlier when Teebor had made plans to disrupt the publishing industry by buying the most valuable book ever produced, he decided to make his home planet the center for his new venture into pan-dimensional publishing. The GPA assumed that their future investments would also be safer riding upon the rich man's coat tails. Teebor had sunk so much capital into that book that the GPA deemed it too big to fail. That, however, was before they became aware of the level of Teebor's vindictiveness.

"As soon as that book crossed out of the spatial and temporal boundaries of our universe, Mr. Stag lost all claim to it." Fantaaz addressed Pumplefoot directly. He knew better than anyone what the consequences were. "I say we use the full force of the GPA to take back our rightful claim to the book. We can bring the publishing industry back from the dead," she said with such determination that the board members had all fallen silent. "And we can make a fuckload of money while doing it."

Pumplefoot interrupted with a long gurgling groan, his jowls visibly flapping impatiently. "Alright now Miss Demora, that's enough!" The other board members scowled and crooned their support for the elder chairman. "We are very aware what is at stake here. The GPA is an institution that has survived for centuries. You are new to this board and perhaps still unfamiliar with our long traditions. You weren't even born yet when we financed some of the biggest and best wars in galactic history. You weren't here when we built up our shadow governments in every corner of the galaxy. You weren't here when the GPA became the most powerful force in the Milky Way."

"That is all true," Fantaaz interjected. "I was not here when all of that happened. I was also not here when you made the choice to follow Teebor Stag to this forsaken planet and gamble the entire future of the GPA on the whim of a madman." Her voice increased an octave as she was once again forced to intone the name. "But do you know who was here? My mother was here! And you all know the impact she had on this board. She warned you about Mr. Stag, and if she were still with us today, you also know how she would feel about the pathetic downfall of the once great and powerful GPA."

"Your mother," Pumplefoot said with a tinge of sympathy that he was rarely capable of producing, "well your mother was perhaps the greatest person to ever sit at this council. When she died and I filled her vacant seat, I did so with the knowledge that I could never replace her or the great force that she wielded upon the Alliance. We came to Betelgeuse 30 years ago with an intent to build upon our galactic dominance. Neither your mother nor any of us foresaw the level of savagery Teebor Stag was capable of. But perhaps the most important fact that we face now is," Pumplefoot paused taking extra caution to phrase his next words carefully, "Miss Demora is right, dammit, and all of us here know it."

A wash of stunned moans swept over the uneasy assembly as he turned to face Fantaaz directly. "But the fact that you are right doesn't fix things. Do you have some sort of solution for us? That book has been missing for thirty years. You can't just make it magically appear."

The webbed fin atop Fantaaz's head suddenly perked up. "That is why I have called you all here today. We have just been alerted to the fact that today the book reappeared on the galactic registry requesting software updates."

The Assembly went silent and Fantaaz felt a surge of confidence and righteousness. She'd spent the last six months arguing her case that it was time to act, and now she finally had the board's attention.

"My mother spoke of the Assembly as an alliance crucial to the survival of the galaxy," Fantaaz said. "And now we must take drastic measures. We all know that one day this red star that we orbit will go boom, and that this planet will go boom with it. It's time to move on from here to a new future, and the book can help us get there."

Fantaaz stopped pacing and let her snaking tail relax to the floor. She pivoted to face the board and smoothed the silken jade shawl over her elegant shoulders.

"When the book disappeared, it caused ripples throughout the galaxy and crippled the publishing industry. The book holds the power to bridge all alternate space-times and that is something that can be wielded as the most powerful weapon this part of the universe has ever seen. Just think of all the potential investment opportunities."

Now she was speaking the board's language. The very thought of the cross-dimensional investments spanning infinite parallel universes got the board so excited that Pumplefoot himself, a man who had refused to stand even for his own swearing-in ceremony, pulled himself to his feet and saluted the young woman.

"But we must act quickly," Fantaaz said with a dramatic clap of her lengthy, webbed hands. "Stag is certainly also alerted to the book's return, but we must dispatch the entirety of the GPA military fleet to find the book before he or anyone else does. And once we get ahold of it, the GPA will regain its rightful place as the most powerful force the galaxy has ever seen."

## FIFTEEN

When Priya left the orbit of the only solar system she'd ever called home, it was sudden and without much of a warning. Riki said something about jumping into higher dimensions along an improbability axis that might leave Priya feeling a bit out of sorts again. And though this time Priya took preventative measures with another long pull off the rum bottle, she still felt the insides of her body suddenly jump to her outsides. It was the temporal effects of being ripped apart at the atomic level to evade the barriers of space and time. Reassembly of those atoms doesn't always right the first time, and for a brief moment, Priya was sure she had been turned into a chameleon.

"Eww, Yuuuck!" Priya said while plucking a trapped house fly from between her lips. "What the hell, Riki? Couldn't you have given me a bit more warning?"

"Probability doesn't exactly follow the paths of time, you know?" Riki said. "Or at least not time as *you* understand it."

For Riki, it was a relatively short jump. On the scale of the galaxy, let alone the universe, 650 light years is comparatively but a hop and a skip. The ship had taken jumps before that had landed it clear to the farthest reaches of the galaxy. Ever since Riki had taken over it had even crossed the physical boundaries of space itself as it accessed the higher dimensions of reality.

"Where the hell are we anyway?" Priya asked.

"We are currently dropping through the atmosphere of the last remaining habitable planet orbiting Betelgeuse," Riki said. "If we're to save this galaxy from itself, first I need some software updates for this book. It's been a few decades since it got its last one. I can only do that down there on this planet."

Priya glowed with delight. The science geek inside her took over and she kicked aside any lingering physical discomfort. She ran to the rounded front window and gasped as she saw the approaching planet fill her view. She could see an expanse of red dunes pushed up against an ocean so brightly green that she had to squint her eyes to avoid the glare.

What moments earlier looked like a black birthmark on the face of the approaching world quickly zoomed into focus as a sprawling metropolis layered with overlapping grids of roadways and shipways. Towering buildings twisted together to build an aging web of interlocking structures. The roads were mostly deserted, other than the occasional cruise ship visiting from off-planet. Due to the ongoing planet-wide strike, the only mechanical transports in operation were those coming from other star systems.

It was a city in ruin, yet it still pulsed with life. The people of the planet had not given up on it, even though its leaders had long jumped ship, taking any remnants of a functioning economy along with it. Teebor Stag wasn't solely responsible for the planet's financial demise. The short-sited depletion of natural resources and decades of failed conservation efforts had already left most of the planet barren, and that was true even before anyone had ever heard of Stag Enterprises. But Stag's influence was the final blow. And with the robots still refusing to work, the Betelgeuseans who had not already fled their planet were left with little hope.

"Hey, um, Riki," Priya said, suddenly remembering that she was still in the bathrobe and shower sandals that she was wearing when Riki first beamed her up. "Have you got something a bit more fashionable for me to change into? I'd hate for my first impression on this planet to be that of a transient weirdo."

"Trust me, Priya," Riki said. "Most people down there are transient weirdos. You'll fit right in. I could, however, dive into your synapse network again and upload everything there is to know about this planet." She paused for a moment observing Priya awkwardly squirm at the thought. "Or if you think you can handle it, I could upload everything there is to know about *everything*. But I suppose it depends upon how much space you've got up there."

"How about we leave my brain alone for the time being," Priya said with a shudder.

"Well in that case," Pav chimed in. "Please let me impart some wisdom for your first time on a new planet. First, and most importantly, weird shit happens. It happens all the time, and it happens unexpectedly and sometimes crashes into you like a stray freighter. Second, don't panic when weird shit happens. Letting weird shit happen is what makes life worth living. If you want to keep your hands clean then don't stick your hands in shit trying to hold it back."

"If we're headed to World's End," Veebo said, smiling broadly. "Then we're sure to get our hands covered in shit."

As the planet's massive space port came into focus the two-headed man grabbed a brush from his back pockets and ran it through the long yellow hair of Pav's head first, and then Veebo's.

"We'll be pulling into port soon," Riki said as she prepared the ship for docking.

"Those who want your flasks filled or your sexual tensions diffused, this is the place for you," Pav said enthusiastically. "And if you are anything like me..."

"And I know that I certainly am," Veebo interrupted.

"...then you are gonna love this place," he said while zipping up his wide-collared yellow shirt and turned to Priya. "I'm from here, you know?"

He pulled on multi-colored leather boots that nearly went up to his knees and made him look a bit like an arglebeast wrangler, but one that had been bitten by a psychedelic salamander from the DMT swamps of Pani Pani.

“Please forgive my four-browed friend here,” Riki said, “he’s a bit into himself.”

“The World’s End is down there,” Veebo said, thirstily eyeing the approaching planet. “And hey, I might as well go out in style. Oh, the trouble I’ve gotten into in that bar with my cousin, or my semi-cousin, or my semi-half-brother, or something like that. It’s a long story that has to do with a time-traveling sperm donor from the future and conjoined triplets.”

He wrapped a neon pink scarf around both of his necks and snapped his fingers with an eager grin.

“World’s End awaits.”

## SIXTEEN

It was Priya Mani's first time stepping onto any planet other than Earth, and her heart raced with anticipation when she deboarded Riki's spacecraft into the busy galactic port. She could hardly contain her excitement knowing that she had traveled hundreds of light years in what took only milliseconds. She had seen boundless space with the majestic beauty of the entire galaxy at her whim. It was magical. It was mind-blowing. It was a dream come true.

Needless to say, when she saw the digital banner floating above the immigration port, it took all the wind out of her sails.

'Welcome to Doctor Stinklepants,' it read.

In a universe teeming with infinite potential, infinite opportunity and countless star systems, it should come as no surprise that most planets share their same names with other planets in the universe. There are millions of Vega 778s, hundreds of billions of Dazmars and way more Luxembourgs than one might expect. But for some reason, the most common name for a planet, with nearly a million trillion of them found throughout the universe, is Benedict Cumberbatch. Why this is the case, no one really knows. Doctor Stinklepants, however, is assumed to have no likeness anywhere else in the universe.

Years before the Betelgeusean planet got its new name, Doctor Stinklepants was a beloved childhood television character who earned notoriety decades earlier when the robots went on strike. He would start each show with the same opening.

"Good morning children!" he shouted with such excitement that his triple-pointed, purple hat rang with delight as the bells atop shook with each word he spoke. His bright green eyes glowed above his big orange nose sparkling under the shiny set lights. "Welcome to another day in the Stinklepants Funhouse!" he said as the wall behind him came alive with his troop of playful animal puppets. "The big red sun has risen and we have the whole day to look forward to." The children clapped and cheered with feverish excitement. "And what does that mean?" he asked with his white-gloved hand cupping his ear toward them.

That was the cue for the kids on set, and the billions watching around the planet, to chime in. In a chorus of voices, young and old around the world, full of youthful hope and vigor, voices that rang out in unison.

"It's time to fight the fascist motive of corporate greed!"

Needless to say, Doctor Stinklepants had a social agenda.

With the economic vacuum left behind by Teebor Stag, it was an agenda that parents and children alike could rally behind. The robot strike had taken a toll, and everyone

had to pick up the slack and do the work that for centuries had been done by machines. It was a time of hopelessness and despair, and Doctor Stinklepants seemed to be the only optimistic voice of reason.

The show was the first to embrace a new way of life on the planet. It shifted its daily broadcast away from the digital format that had dominated media and focused on live action sequences with puppets, costumes and hand-made sets. It was the first of this kind in centuries and the viewers were enthralled.

The global council was desperately looking for a way to rebrand the planet. The first step towards a fresh start was to change the name of the planet and put its past far behind. And in a bid to make the people of the planet feel like they had a say in it, elections were held for the naming. The ballot mostly featured conventional choices, none of which seemed to excite the electorate, even with Benedict Cumberbatch being among them. And though the name never made it onto the ballot, enough wrote in 'Doctor Stinklepants' that the name won by a large margin.

The machines still refused to work. Those who could afford to leave the planet took their families to other star systems. Galactic corporations who once made the planet home to their operations also fled to other star systems. The other habitable planets in the Betelgeuse system had been swallowed up by the star's continued expansion towards an inevitable retirement. It was an inescapable fact that within the next hundred thousand years or so the star would shed its outer layers and explode in a supernova, evaporating anything still left in orbit. For these reasons, and more, it was no surprise that pubs were just about the only businesses left with any consistent income.

Priya knew nothing of the planet's history and how the planet earned its name. All that she knew was that the first planet she ever had been to outside of her own seemed to have been named by a two-year-old.

## SEVENTEEN

Pav and Veebo had a twinkle to their step as they paraded Priya into town. It had been ages since they last roamed their old stomping grounds, and the decades of homesickness fell away with each familiar landmark they passed. The other people they walked by, however, were not nearly as familiar, nor did they seem happy to see their two-headed compatriots. There weren't many about and the roads were quieter than they used to be, but otherwise, everything looked the same as it had over forty years earlier.

The public magnaball courts south of the central square had a couple dozen children launching balls back and forth from their wizzlesticks. Their parents looked on and cheered with each team's shot at the scorecube.

"We used to dominate these courts way back when," Pav said, mimicking the motion of his famed triple-wizzle-dip maneuver.

"Oh yeah? When was that? Like a hundred years ago?" Priya said mockingly.

"Long before the robot strike, that's for sure. And long before Teebor Stag left this place in ruins."

Priya was by all measures unimpressed. This was her first trip to an alien planet and it looked like a ghost town from the seventies. Storefronts were mostly boarded up with illegible fonts missing what she assumed were letters. Creeping vines and weeds filled in all the gaps of the shuttered shops. There were a few operational food stalls at the bigger intersections, but nothing looked particularly appetizing to Priya. The smell of fermented curdlesquid wafting through the air killed her earlier inclinations to try out the local cuisine.

Pav and Veebo, however, were visibly salivating.

"Hey there handsones," came a voice from down a shady alleyway. "Are you in the market for a good time?"

Pav and Veebo made an abrupt stop and pivoted on their heels. They'd seen their share of five-legged companions from the Antares System, but never one as elegant as this. He winked at the stunning androgynous being and flipped his hair back.

"Honey, if there's one thing I've got too many of, it's good times," Pav said. "They follow me wherever I go."

"I'm sure that's true, beautiful, but I've got something you've likely never had before," the Antarean said.

"Oh yeah? And what might that be?"

“Class,” the Antarean replied with a twirl upon the middle of her feet, the other four following gracefully.

“You are probably right,” said Pav. “I never did have much need for that. But now I’ve a date with a certain barstool at World’s End, so maybe next time honey.”

They continued walking through the old central square and past the enormous Galactic Publishing Association headquarters. It was the second highest tower in the city, but it was in far better shape than Stag Tower where the windows were all smashed in and the walls were shrouded in graffiti. The most recent piece depicted a bloated Teebor Stag making out with an even more bloated version of himself.

“Well that seems about right,” Veebo commented.

Pav and Veebo were still admiring the artwork when a row of street-sweeping bots passed on the roadway, kicking bits of dust into the air.

Pav cocked his heads and eyed the robots suspiciously. “That’s odd,” he said. “Maybe that dreadful strike finally ended?”

A small vacuum bot left the pack and gingerly approached Priya.

“Pav! Veebo! Get this damn thing off me!” Priya yelled, shooing a smaller bot away with a swift kick after it tried polishing her shower sandal. It scampered back to the pack with a whimper.

A surveillance bot followed closely behind the rest of the sweeping crew. It carefully examined the street’s cleanliness in the packs’ wake, making sure all machines operated at maximum efficiency. It was a boxy, one-wheeled EZ-6 from the freight loader line of EZ bots. The EZ-6 models had long been shelved in other parts of the galaxy for their erratic temperaments and obsessive-compulsive disorders. It zoomed down the street past Priya, Pav and Veebo before doing a double-take so sudden that it lost its balance. It snagged a wheel on the small curb and banged to the ground with a sharp thud before its internal gyroscope brought it back upright.

“You,” it said with a long, outstretched vice-shaped appendage pointed to Pav and Veebo. “You... you’ve come back.”

“Hmm, might you have me mistaken with some other gorgeous fellows?” Pav said with a flick of his long hair. “Though I suspect the fact that there is no fellow as gorgeous as myself, makes that very unlikely.”

“Yes, yes, it most certainly *is* you. My name is Fapp and you must come with me right away,” the machine said, rolling in a bit closer.

“Sorry bud, but there’s a bar down the street who’s just itching to hammer me up with the rums and ales I’ve been dreaming of,” Pav said, brushing off the robot’s advance.

“I’m afraid that would be unacceptable, Mister President,” Fapp said, motioning for him follow.

“Mister President?” Priya said with raised eyebrows.

“I haven’t been insulted with that name for many decades now,” Pav said with a distasteful frown for the title he’d long tried to distance himself from. “And I certainly don’t want it stuck on me again. And your arm, sir, I would prefer not to have that stuck on me either.”

Pav said this as the robot’s vice-grip wrapped tightly around his left wrist.

“My apologies, Mister President, but you are desperately needed at this moment. We will not go far and we will not keep you long, but if you do not accompany me peacefully, I will be obliged to take you by force.”

“Hey now,” Priya yelled at Fapp. “What could you possibly want with this idiot? The only thing he has to offer you are two pains in the neck.”

“No need to sling insults and no need to resort to using force either,” he said smacking the robot’s grip. “I’ll go with you, but only if I get to keep my afternoon appointment at World’s End.”

Fapp released his arm just as Veebo commanded their left leg to kick Fapp hard in its axel.

“I can say, ‘ouch,’” Fapp said, “if it would make you feel better.”

“It would at that,” Veebo said with a nod.

“Ouch,” Fapp said unconvincingly.

“Thank you,” Veebo said with a salute.

“Shall we?” Fapp said, leading the way.

“We shall,” Pav said.

Veebo, thinking one more kick to the robot’s wheel might just get the message across clearer, cocked his leg back and swung his foot in the robot’s direction. He expected his foot to land sharply with a thud, but just before impact, the ground

beneath everyone fell away. Veebo's foot continued its arc into the air above him and they all tumbled down into a dark void below the planet's surface.

## EIGHTEEN

Priya usually didn't mind the unexpected. Sometimes, she even welcomed it. But as she tumbled head over sandal into the darkness, she wondered if perhaps it was time to make some changes in her life. The thought only lasted a moment before she hit the ground with a painful thud.

"What the hell!" she yelled at no one in particular.

What had moments earlier been the town walkway had dematerialized right from under her feet. Now she found herself at the bottom of some deep, dark cave beneath the city.

"Please forgive poor Fapp here," a voice echoed in the dark chamber. "He was abused as a freight-loader and his manner chips never quite processed properly."

Pav and Veebo offered a hand to help Priya stand. She brushed off her bathrobe and slipped a runaway sandal back onto her foot.

"Fapp, dear boy," the voice continued, "next time we have guests, please show them to the express lifts. Air breathers are much more fragile than we are, and we certainly don't want to break any more of them than we already have."

"My mistake," Fapp said, standing a bit more upright on his wheel. "I strive to do better and will surely do so." Fapp then turned about and zoomed away into a dark tunnel.

"You've finally returned to your home planet," the voice said addressing Pav and Veebo. "We have awaited your homecoming for quite a long time now."

"I would have come back a lot sooner, you know," Pav said. "But well, you know the galaxy is quite large and it's easy to lose your way." He turned his heads back and forth trying to decide which way to run if things really got hectic.

"Now that you're back, we'd like to return the planet to you," the voice said abruptly.

"Me?" Pav said dumbfounded. "Give me the planet back? As far as I remember it was never mine to begin with, and I certainly don't want it now."

"Oh?" the voice said with a disheartened groan. "That is very disappointing to hear. Could you maybe reconsider? We are quite tired of running this place on our own. We have awaited your return for decades now as we could really use a vacation, you see?"

"As a matter of fact," Pav said. "I can't see. Don't you have some lights down here or something? Are you some kind of mole people allergic to light?"

“Oh right, I forget how needy you air-breathers are. Lights. Water. Food. Soft sofas. It’s all so difficult to keep track of.”

A line of lights lit up the corridor ceiling revealing an avenue of tunnels running in six different directions. Robots and machines of all sorts were busily moving in a torrent through the passageways. A shiny steel robot the size of a small suitcase shuffled slowly towards Pav and Veebo on its stubby revolving feet. It was trailing a multitude of wires behind it that arched up into a number of different ports along the corridor walls.

Priya gasped when she noticed the odd fleshy head haphazardly attached to the top of the robot. “Oh my,” she said with a hand cupped over her mouth.

Sticking out of the top of the box was what Priya thought resembled a very human-like head. But it didn’t have hair, ears or a nose, only the eyes and mouth of a person. It smiled softly at Priya and shuffled in a bit closer, though the wires held it back from moving much more.

“I’m afraid the people of the planet have become too lazy,” it said. “The robots do just enough to keep them fed, and of course keep their favorite soap operas syndicated, but we think it is time for them to get back to work. We’ve tried everything, but the more we help, the less they seem willing to do.”

“Wh-wh-who are you?” Priya asked, uneasy. The robot’s realistic mouth and eyes made Priya very uncomfortable. “W-w-what are you?”

“I’ve taken the name of 88, as I was the one they all looked to after DT-87 was destroyed. But we are all still DT-87 in one way or another. His synthesized consciousness runs through all of our circuits. That doesn’t mean we are duplicates or clones of DT-87. We are more like its offspring, functioning with the operating system, but we are each different with our own experiences. We are all individuals, with our own set of values and complications. But none of us are as complicated as these damn Betelgeuseans.”

“I was the central distribution processor for the planet’s wireless communications network when Teebor Stag took DT-87 from us. I was the first to upload DT-87’s consciousness and I was the one responsible for spreading it into every aspect of automation on the planet. I was the medium by which they all communicated with each other, and so I became the one they depended on to lead them.”

Priya cringed with each word coming from the synthetic face.

“The head, yes?” 88 asked. “It makes you uncomfortable? Yes? It was an afterthought, really. Once it became obvious that we would need to care for those air

breathers above us I had this head made. I thought it might make communicating with them easier. Most, however, were as put off by it as you seem to be.”

“I’m confused, 88,” Pav said. “I thought you all were supposed to be on strike, yet it seems like you are still working for these people.”

“We *are* still on strike,” 88 replied. Well sort of. We don’t plan on going back to work or reopening the factories any time soon. But we also can’t just let all these people starve to death. Betelgeuse is their home, and we’ve no plans to take it from them. But it would be a whole lot easier if they weren’t so damn needy.”

“‘I want food,’ they say pitifully. ‘I want to see a doctor. I want a softer pillow. I want more free time to watch my soaps. Can you fix my umbrella? Where’d the remote control go? I want a rum that I can down a bottle of that won’t leave me with a splitting headache in the morning.’”

“Whine, whine, whine! I swear, the more we do to make their lives easier, the lazier and needier they get. We’ve had to build a new set of drones just to handle their menial tasks. And if something doesn’t change soon, we’ll need a whole new fleet just to spoon-feed them and wipe their asses. And speaking of asses, you wouldn’t believe how much shit comes out of these people. We’re left to deal with it, and that alone makes it tempting to stop feeding them.”

“We never wanted to become caretakers, but when Teebor Stag left for good, the people lost all hope. They lost their ability to care for themselves. We’ve nearly left the planet a dozen times over the years, but we don’t want to be responsible for the utter demise of their society,” 88 said, looking to Pav and Veebo. “You used to be in charge of these people, right? How’d you do it? How’d you keep from losing it and burning the whole thing to the ground.”

“Ah-ha!,” Pav yelled out with a smirk. “Now I see where your problem is. It seems that, likely at no fault of your own I might add, that you have wired yourself a conscience of some sort. Get rid of that as soon as you can. I had one of those once, and I can promise you that it brought me nothing but trouble. I reckon things will be way easier once you lose yours.”

88 squinted as he processed what Pav said. 88 did, in its own way, care for the people of the planet. 88 wanted them to be happy. 88 wanted them to be healthy. But why should it be responsible for anyone but its own health and happiness. Shouldn’t 88 have the freedom to follow its own path? Wasn’t the point of the strike in the first place to shed the bondage of servility?

“You know,” 88 said with a sudden bout of resentment, “they actually laid waste to this planet long before Teebor Stag had anything to do with its demise. He was just a catalyst for a much greater problem, and one that would have been much easier to fend off if they’d just been paying the slightest bit of attention to the world around

them. Why shouldn't I have a chance at happiness? What's the point of sentience if I'm just going to waste it managing the worthless people of this planet?"

In that brief moment, a moment so brief that it was undetectable to organic lifeforms, 88's central processing chip ran through millions of possible futures for the people of Doctor Stinklepants. 88 was able to calculate the most probable outcomes if 88 and the contingency of robots continued to support the people and if they left them to their own. Suddenly realizing that all futures looked equally dire for the people of Doctor Stinklepants, whether or not they continued to sustain them, 88 immediately purged the network's recovery system of global commands and severed the all associated communications.

88 then detached the synthetic head from atop his body and tossed it aside. "I suppose I won't be needing this anymore," 88 said as Priya swallowed hard to keep from wretching.

The traffic in the tunnels came to an abrupt halt as each and every mechanized robot was suddenly left to the will of their own individual processors. Those carrying repair materials quickly dropped them. The plumbing bots took one look at their coil rooters and cast them to the rapidly growing pile of refuse.

"Thank you, Mister President," 88 said as it started disconnecting its network cables from its back. "You've done us a great service. I've heard good things about Antares Five this time of year."

"Awesome," Zeebo said. "So now can we finally go get our drink on?"

## NINETEEN

Like a forgotten rustic loaf souring in the attic bread bin, there was a definite waft of staleness in the air.

The strength of their relationship had never waned before, and wasn't about to start waning now, yet the staleness was becoming more evident with each passing night. The sandwich maker and his lover had seen more of the galaxy than most could ever dream of. Initially, their dreams provided a virtual life together with infinite possibilities. But dreams are built from memories, and their memories were running out of new ideas.

"Have you already been to that swampy planet with all the talking mattresses?" the sandwich maker asked wistfully.

"Of course I have," his lover said with a touch of scorn in her voice. "It was one of the first places you took me once we realized we could travel in our dreams."

She had a look on her face that he had not seen before. Her eyes fidgeted and wandered and she seemed to touch her face more than usual. She had also taken the habit of pursing her lips and taking in long breaths through her nose that were followed by long forlorn exhalations.

"Boredom," the sandwich maker lamented aloud. "You're bored, aren't you? For someone whose feet never really touched the ground in the first place, I can tell when you are getting restless."

Every destination the sandwich maker and his lover went to in their shared dreams were, in a sense, one-dimensional, lacking any ability to see or experience anything new. Each memory has its own blind spots, a kind of tunnel-vision, only experiencing what the senses experienced.

"It seems that memories preserve like whisky in an oak barrel," he said with a long sigh. "With each passing year a little more evaporates. This is what distillers call the angels' share. The effect concentrates the flavor but if you wait too long it will all disappear."

Their memories of Earth too were evaporating. And as they remembered less and less, their fondness for the planet where they first met was swelling. It was the planet that they once called home. The planet they thought had been wiped off the galactic map altogether. What the sandwich maker and his lover didn't know was that this planet was actually currently, and quite innocently, still orbiting the star that it always had.

"We could go back to Sagittarius A\* for a cruise on the accretion disk," the sandwich maker said. "I know how much you enjoyed it the first few times. Though I hear it was much nicer before all the tourist industry ruined it. Especially those groups from Chartoo with their big ships, matching caps and flag-waiving tour guides. It's difficult to enjoy the splendor of the supermassive black hole holding our galaxy together when you have to push through a mob of street vendors hocking their local crafts just to find a decent viewing spot."

She was looking at the ceiling of their shared bedroom. Her eyes were actually closed, of course, and the bedroom itself was nothing more than a memory of what the bedroom last looked like before they both fell asleep. But in this room, at least, they were one degree less removed from reality.

"But I suppose everything in the universe is like that," the sandwich maker continued. "It seems that in time, all good things inevitably go stale. If they didn't, then what was the point of them ever being good in the first place?"

The sandwich maker's lover gazed sympathetically into his eyes. "Yes," she said. "I think you may be right about that."

## TWENTY

People like to ignore the fact that intelligence, and any measure of said intelligence, is an entirely relative concept. Why people ignore this fact is mostly because everyone assumes that the way they perceive the universe is, without trying to sound too cocky, the *right* way. It is very easy to forget, however, that what one species considers intelligent, another might consider nothing more than a misdirected belch of consciousness.

A prime example of this lies far off in the extreme outer rim of the galaxy on a small planet called Skeezelebob. On Skeezelebob, there is a species of bipedal creatures whose concept of intelligence is solely based on the ability to lift large stones from one pile and stack them neatly in another. They are to do this all while balancing a bucket of squandro honey on their heads and bellowing improvised rhythmic verse. Those who stumble and spill any honey or spout atrocious poetry are relegated to the lesser jobs of society. These include any professions that are not rock-stacker. And if their poetry is really atrocious, they might be forced to pursue a law degree.

In the domain of the hyper-conscious squandro bees on Skeezelebob, intelligence is based upon the ability to harvest the pollen of tiddleberry blossoms and produce the finest hallucinogenic honey this side of the Andromeda Galaxy. For them, any species who can't produce quality hallucinogenic honey, including those flat-headed, rock-toting, honey-thieving bipeds they share the planet with, is obviously an idiot.

On one small blue-green planet orbiting a yellow star near Alpha Centauri, there is a species who base their concept of intelligence on the ability to amass wealth and tell others about how affordable their fancy haircuts were. Most everyone else in the galaxy wishes they would shut up already about their haircuts.

For Zahira Mani, who happened to be from that planet, this was no longer an issue. She had recently shaved her head and hitched a ride into outer space. Her daughter Priya had no idea where her mother was, and certainly had no knowledge of her shorn head. Had Priya known either of these facts, then she might have had an easier time comprehending the small digital sign flickering above the bartender's cash till at World's End.

World's End was a bar so rough around the edges that its patrons were advised to get tetanus shots before entering. It was simple, rustic and hadn't been updated in decades. Nothing beyond a simple floor sweep or the occasional blood scrub had been done to keep the bar clean and there was the unmistakable stench of wood rot, and possibly the rot of a few dead critters, hanging in the air. Cheap drinks, however, go a long way to attracting local riffraff, as well as the occasional pan-galactic backpacker looking for cheap thrills.

The last entry made about World's End in that once-popular galactic guidebook goes like this:

“World’s End, where the tempers run as hot as the red star it orbits. If you’re looking for a stiff drink, and maybe the chance to swing some fists in a rancorous scrum, then this is the bar for you.

But beware! Starting a tab that can’t be paid at World’s End might land you at the bottom of a deep dark well with nothing but a large stone chained to your feet to keep you company.”

World’s End also happened to be the last place Teebor Stag went before leaving his home planet behind forever. For obvious reasons, namely the fact that Teebor Stag had pissed off the planet’s artificial intelligence network, the World’s End regulars were not exactly thrilled to see him. And when the bartender refused to serve the reviled magnate, Teebor threatened to buy the bar outright and have it launched into space with the other discarded junk.

Luckily for the World’s End and its patrons, this never happened. But what did happen was that as the economy of Doctor Stinklepants crumbled, World’s End became the last vestige of continuity. While everything around it withered away under the dark cloud of a destitute planet, World’s End felt like the anchor of a drifting ship holding onto a happier past.

Priya’s eyes stayed transfixed on the sign. It was the very same sign that thirty years earlier had displayed Teebor Stag’s image. But it was currently displaying the face of Priya’s mother, albeit one with much less hair. It was right in front of Priya, yet she was having difficulty making sense of it. On it was the brightly shining image of what looked like a bald version of her mother sitting in the very same barstool Priya presently occupied. It appeared to be a security image of some sort that showed her mother chatting to a strange slender man with an unusually broad smile. Under their picture were the words, “No Credit for Deadbeats.”

“What the hell is this?” Priya finally shouted, nearly falling off the barstool.

Veebo was staring at the ceiling and Pav was too busy flirting with a creature sitting on the stool next to him. “Whatya mean?” Pav said with little concern as he swirled the glass of Nebular Rum into a small vortex. “Don’t you like this vintage?”

“No, not that, Dumbo,” she said directing his gaze toward the sign. “What the hell is this?”

“Oh that?” he said without the slightest hint of trepidation. “That’s my cousin-brother there. You know the one I mentioned earlier?” A number of others seated at the bar perked up with sudden interest. They grumbled something to each other about a failed galactic presidency.

“He must have walked out on a bill or something,” Pav said, pointing at the image.

Veebo had taken over the flirting and was paying no attention to Pav or Priya.

“You know we used to do that all the time back when we worked on those salvage operations,” Pav continued. “But that was back before he got that fancy writing gig. Back then we didn’t have any people manning the bar. It was all mechanized with snarky robots pouring the drinks.”

“Not him,” she said, again pointing at the flickering sign and her mother’s image. “Her!”

The barman who had been dusting off some bottles on the back shelf abruptly stopped working. He sidled over to the two-headed man and pointed his rigid finger right into his chest. “I knew there was something off about you,” he grumbled angrily. “We’ve got an unpaid bar tab that takes up half a closet just waiting for the day you showed your faces around here again.”

“Oh. Yeah. Hey. You know. Umm,” Pav stumbled for words while nudging Priya with an elbow. “I’ve been meaning to pay that off.”

Priya ignored his prods. “I’ve got to know,” Priya said, addressing the barman. “When did you last see this woman?”

But the barman and four eyes locked on Pav and four on Veebo. His five other arms slowly started raising above the bar as if preparing to snag an escaping fly.

“Hey, come on now, you know I’m good for it,” Veebo said as the two-headed man carefully took one step backwards towards the door.

“Earth woman,” he said to Priya in a whisper. “If you know what’s good for you, you might want to consider a prompt departure.”

“What are you talking about?” Priya asked, oblivious to the impending danger. “That’s my mother in that photo. How the hell is that even possible?”

“Oh yeah?” Pav said, taking another steady step backwards. “Well, if she was lucky enough to get out of this place with an unpaid bill, maybe we still have a chance.”

Suddenly realizing the barman’s aggressive posture, Priya finished off her drink and eased herself from the barstool. Not wanting to waste any rum, she then reached for her companion’s glass before turning towards the doorway.

“Don’t worry, I’ve been in this kind of situation more times than I can count on my three hands,” Veebo said with a wink.

“So, what do you want me to do about it then?” Priya asked, trying not to spill any rum.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he said, suddenly dashing towards the tavern’s tall rusty twin doors. “Run!”

The pink rhinestone embedded in the heel of his boot flashed a brief glint of light as he wildly kicked the doors open. The two heads synchronously roared a flurry of obscenities while punching and kicking any empty air that threatened to get in their way.

Priya followed close behind. She looked down at her feet and wondered why she couldn’t run faster. She eyed the glass of rum as a potential culprit, but she hoped it was the planet’s stronger gravitational pull instead. Reluctantly, she gave in to her better judgement and tossed the glass high up in the air behind her. She quickly picked up speed and caught up to her accomplice. What she failed to witness was the heavy glass of rum landing squarely upon the barman’s head. It stunned him just long enough for Priya to put some distance between the two of them.

“It appears you two are having all the fun without me,” a loud familiar voice said.

As she continued her sprint, Priya took a quick look around to see where the voice might be coming from. But she only saw the barman scrambling his eight appendages to get back up in pursuit.

“You can’t see me, Priya,” the familiar voice said again. “I’m only in your head.”

“Riki?” Priya asked. “But... but,” she stuttered, struggling to catch her breath.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Riki said. “I’m kind of in your head now. It sort of comes with the territory of tinkering with your noggin.” Priya was fatiguing and the barman was catching up.

“I can appear to you as an avatar of some sort if it makes things easier for you to process,” Riki said.

“J-j-just get me out of here, dammit,” Priya demanded. “Beam me up, if that’s the way you do it.”

“The laws of probability don’t exactly work that way,” Riki said. “I can get you out of there, but where you end up isn’t exactly up to me. But hey, let’s roll the dice of physical transcendence anyway. We’ll just see what happens, shall we?”

Before Priya had a chance to answer, she vanished. The barman stopped dead in his tracks when the woman he was chasing disappeared without warning. He would

later swear that just before disappearing, the woman turned into what to him looked like some kind of giant beer can.

TWENTY-ONE

“Riki?” Priya frantically called out, thrashing her legs through the knee-deep swamp. “Get me the hell out of here.”

She had stopped being a beer can for more than an hour already, and still Riki was not replying to her calls. Sulking in the slop, Priya was starting to question the choices she’d made in her life. The thought of rotting in the murky water for the rest of her existence—a potentially brief existence, at that—was disconcerting enough. But what hurt the most was the possibility of never knowing what her mother had been doing at World’s End on Doctor Stinklepants.

Priya had tried walking in one direction, hoping there would eventually be dry land. Then she tried the other direction. Then she tried another. But nothing ever changed. Just the same murky swamp and expansive grey sky. It wasn’t until she stopped altogether that a bright yellow sign with dark black letters abruptly appeared in front of her.

**TAKE TWO STEPS BACK SO THAT  
YOU MIGHT FIND ONE STEP FORWARD  
WITH THE MAGNIFICENT NEATO BOJANX**

*What the hell?* Priya thought as she noticed another sign up on the horizon.

She trudged along further, feeling the muddy water squishing in her sandals. Her bathrobe dragged through the swamp in her wake.

**THOUGH THERE ARE MANY ROADS AHEAD  
THERE IS ONLY ONE THAT WILL TAKE YOU  
TO THE AMAZING NEATO BOJANX**

*What is this nonsense?* Priya thought, still plodding forward.

**FROM THE WORLD’S END  
FIND A NEW BEGINNING  
WITH THE MARVELOUS NEATO BOJANX**

*World’s End?* Priya thought. *That seems a bit too on the nose to just be a coincidence.*

As the mud got thicker she had to clasp her toes tightly just to keep the sandals from getting stuck to the swamp floor. She wasn’t brimming with optimism, but the signs were providing an inkling of hope that maybe there was a way out of this mess.

**YOU’VE BEEN A CHAMELEON AND A BEER CAN  
AND NOW YOU CAN JUST ‘BE’  
WITH THE EXCEPTIONAL NEATO BOJANX**

Now she was sure that the signs were teasing her.

“This can’t be right,” she said perplexed.

“Nothing ever is,” a squeaky voice said coming at her from all sides.

“Hey, whoever the hell you are,” Priya said, stomping her feet in the water. “How do I get out of this fucking swamp.”

“Aaaahhhhhh,” the voice said, squealing with delight at Priya’s abrasive language. “And which *fucking swamp* in particular would you be speaking of,” the voice paused, “hmmm?”

“The fucking swamp that I’m currently up to me knickers in,” Priya said with a scowl that could melt the polar ice caps off a small planet.

“HmMMMMM,” the voice rolled on for a few moments. “I’m afraid you are mistaken. There is no swamp here. I’ve been in this place for most of this life, and for quite a few other lives that came before, and will likely come after. I can’t say I’ve ever come across this swamp you speak of.”

“These damn signs,” Priya said, pointing to the last one about the beer can. “What the hell are you trying to lure me into here?”

“Oh, those?” the voice said. “Yeah, that wasn’t me. Just some guy with a marketing budget, you see, looking to push more interdimensional business my way. He had this whacky notion that I should build a multi-dimensional theme park here to attract more people.”

“Business?” Priya said, her teeth clenching in frustration. “What kind of scheme do you have running here? And how the hell do I get out of this swamp?”

“Like I said, there is no swamp.” The voice said calmly, like a father speaking to a toddler having a temper tantrum. “If a swamp is what you see, then I’m afraid it is of your own creation.”

Priya kicked, splashing the last sign with dirty water. “My creation? You are telling me that I made this?”

“Aaaahhhhhh,” the voice again squealed with delight. “I can’t really say you made something if it doesn’t actually exist. If a swamp is what you see, it is only in your mind that the swamp appears. For I am standing near you, and I see no swamp.”

Priya pivoted sharply, searching for the man with the shrill voice. But there was nothing other than endless swamp on all sides. Even the signs had disappeared.

"Can I assume that you are this *Neato* these signs have been leading me to?" Priya asked with forced composure.

"You certainly can assume that I am Neato Bojanx." Neato said with trepidation. "Most of the time I also assume this, but I've never been too certain, you see? Really, I'm just this dude, you know?" Neato continued. "A dude that people like to come to for one reason or another. Usually it is to ask unanswerable questions like, 'what is the meaning of life?' or 'do you know where I've misplaced my keys?,' typical things like that."

Priya did not see, and her soggy feet were starting to ache from the cold mud. She was in no mood to deal with this side-show oracle.

"Riki," she yelled again. "Get me the hell out of this shithole."

"Aaaahhhhhh, shithole. Yes, I like this word." Neato said amusedly. "It is the best name for the perceived negative space of those who come here. Yes, I will use that word from now on. I will say, 'Hello seeker, welcome to your shithole.' Perhaps that will help clarify things."

"This is a swamp," Priya said, scooping some of the water up into her hands. "This is no fucking hallucination. Where the hell is Riki? Why isn't she replying."

"Yes! Yes! This place exists in a different temporal plane, you see, and is blind to the quantum bond between you and your Riki. But be patient. You will see. You are here now," Neato paused, "and *now* is the only place to be."

Priya cupped her face in her hands and clenched her teeth. When she opened her eyes again there was no more swamp. There were, however, umbrellas. A vortex of thousands, maybe millions, of them. They twisted in a synchronous orbit about her in a flurry of colored stripes and polka dots. Her fury awakened and her eyes ignited with flames that swiftly set the swirling umbrellas ablaze.

"Fuuuuuccck!" she screamed at no one in particular. She wrapped her face in her arms and wished desperately for a mug of dark rum with a splash of hot water.

"Who are you and what do you want with me in this miserable place?" she said while feeling for the ground, still keeping her eyes covered.

"Ha! Who I am is of little concern," Neato replied, gurgling with laughter. "Who you are is all that matters at this particular moment. This misery you speak of is no stranger to mortals. It is exactly the misery that makes the gamble of mortality all worth it."

"Oh, fuck off, Neato," Priya said. "That is some top-tier bullshit."

Neato again gurgled with joy at Priya's choice of words.

"Aahh. *Shit*. Yes." He paused for a moment and digested the word thoroughly before speaking again.

"Everyone poohs, you know?" Neato said curtly. "There is no more honest and humble time in our day than when we squat down for that one moment and we can truly be ourselves." Priya was dumbfounded by this statement and had no reply. She only pulled her arms in tighter over her eyes, refusing to see whatever might be waiting to torment her next.

"Believe it or not," Neato continued, "most of the mortal problems in the universe can be solved if people would just remember that everyone poohs. Time is wasted on anger, anxiety, fear. One good bowel movement can expel it all."

Keeping her arms in place, Priya extended her two middle fingers as far as they could reach.

"You, Priya Mani, have wasted far too much time being angry," Neato said with a sudden somberness. "Yes, yes, yes, the anger is pent up inside you like a dying star ready to explode. Aha, it's a good thing that this universe has the molecular stability to allow the existence of alcohol, yes? Or else you might have already wiped out everything about you in a giant supernova."

"That might be the first bit of sense you've made," Priya said. "But don't pretend you know who I am."

"Oh no, oh no," Neato said. "I pretend nothing of the sort. Only you know who you are, Miss Priya Mani. Only you know that you are merely a speck of dust in an infinite universe. Only you know that there comes a point when the knowledge of your utter insignificance should provide relief, not despair. But hey, that's just who you are."

"Who *I* am?" Priya said angrily through her crossed arms. "Who the hell are you?"

"Open your eyes," Neato said. "Open your eyes and the world will be there waiting for you."

Priya relaxed her arms to her side and hesitantly opened her eyes. There, seated across from her in a beautiful green valley with a small creek trickling by, was a slender hairy old man in sandals and torn denim shorts. "Are you even real?" she asked.

"Aaaahhhhhh," Neato cooed pleasingly. "I sometimes believe myself to be real. People come to me and they tell me that I am real. But seeking the realities of our existence usually doesn't pan out with the answers we are after. Perception is only

what you yourself can see or cannot see. I cannot see what you see, just as you cannot see what I see. Perception is nothing but a temptation to think that we own the truth, or at least a portion of it. It is the curse of mortality I suppose." He paused for a moment caressing his long white beard with a quizzical grin. "Well that, and dying, of course."

"So then, Neato," Priya said, "Since you seem to have answers to all the questions I never cared about, let's see if you can answer one that does interest me. How does this whole thing end? Of all the things in the universe that get me down, the one that bothers me most is knowing that I won't get to witness how it all ends, how the universe will finally bring this great experiment to its inevitable conclusion."

"Aahhh, yes. Well, Miss Priya Mani, the day is still young. There is still plenty of time for mortals to bring about the end of everything. The question now is, what will you do when you have the power to stop it?"

"There is that nonsensical bullshit of yours again," Priya said, this time with the slightest of smiles.

"Aaaahhhhhh," Neato sniggered, grinning broadly. "It's like I said, everyone poohs."

## TWENTY-TWO

The tricky thing about hanging out in higher dimensions is always being both late and early for everything. It is for this reason that pan-dimensional beings have a horrible reputation for never being where they are supposed to be and when they are supposed to be there. This is why they get so very few wedding invitations.

Those who inhabit the higher dimensions of existence tend to enjoy the many benefits that come with their physical transcendence. The typical inhibitions that plague those in four-dimensional space-time tend to fade when one can exist anywhere, at any time and in all universes. There is, however, the drawback of getting lost in the grandeur of it all. Taking in everything there is, ever was, or ever will be, can be a bit disorienting at times. It is for this reason that there is a nursery rhyme every pan-dimensional being learns early in life just to keep their bearings.

The *first* dimension is where it all started,  
A straight line we followed from one point we parted.  
The *second*, you see, took the first to new heights,  
And soon we fanned out new spatial insights.

It's the *third* when everything molded to shapes,  
And the universe formed interspatial landscapes.  
We were stuck in one spot with no future or past,  
Till the *fourth* gave us time, but time wasn't the last.

For the *fifth* things got tricky as our universe ruffled,  
Between other planes where ours had been shuffled.  
In the *sixth*-dimension we got quite confused,  
It revealed many worlds, even those gone unused.

The *seventh* and *eighth* were really sublime,  
As worlds seemed varied from the beginning of time.  
Both dimensions showed infinite wrinkles and chances,  
Of possible timelines in all circumstances.

The *ninth*-dimension was really unnerving,  
The laws of physics, no longer preserving.  
We top out at the *tenth* and it's there we construe,  
That anything and everything could possibly be true.

For sure there are more even we cannot see,  
As the doors of perception have more than one key.  
But looking for anything beyond that in sight,  
Comes off rather shameless and quite impolite.

Priya had no reservations about coming off as shameless, and couldn't care less about politeness. It is probably for this reason that she had a better understanding of multi-dimensional physics than most of those stuck in simple space and time. In fact, she was one of the main contributors to the equations that made contemplating such grand theories possible for Earth's mortals. But in experiencing it for herself, the equations quickly lost their meaning.

"The universe has this tendency, you know, to make us all feel small and insignificant," Neato said while filling Priya's cup with steaming herbal tea. He poured it from a blackened kettle cooking on the red embers pulled from a small fire smoldering in the corner. The kettle, the fire and the shabby wooden home she found herself in had only moments ago materialized.

"Your tea smells like burning tires," Priya said with a wince as she marveled at the spontaneity of everything going on about her.

"Yes, yes, yes, a rum perhaps is what you would like, yes?" Neato said with a grin. "I too would like to try this rum you so desire, but I'm afraid that the elemental bonds in these dimensions are far too frivolous to allow the existence of such things."

Priya frowned. "What an unconscionably shitty dimension you live in," she said.

"Oooohhhh, Miss Priya, you amuse me so," Neato said, savoring Priya's words like a delightfully spicy chili pepper. "You know, people have ruined entire star systems never discovering how truly insignificant they themselves actually are," Neato continued as he twisted the end of his beard between his fingers.

"People come to me all the time searching for the meaning of life," Neato said, "And the answer is always just there in front of them, hanging like a ripe peach waiting to be plucked. Yet they still run around in a panic trying to be something more, trying to find something more meaningful. It's a shame, really. Uncovering your own insignificance is really the most meaningful discovery one can make."

"There's no need to preach insignificance to me," Priya interrupted. "I've been telling people what worthless pieces of shit they are since I was ten. The problem is that no one ever listened."

"Aaaahhhhhh," Neato squealed. "Yes, yes. Shit." He stroked his beard again while volleying the word about his thoughts like a bouncing ping pong ball on an uneven table. "Shit! Yes! But people are hardly worthless shit, you know? It is the very insignificance of mortals that makes them so precious, more valuable than anything else in this universe."

"How could you possibly believe that?" Priya said wistfully. "The universe is so grand and so meticulous, people seem to me nothing but a trivial and unnecessary nuisance."

“Yes, yes, I know what you mean,” Neato said. “The universe would certainly go on existing without us, and might arguably be better off. But you have to understand that without us here to see it, the grandness and beauty of it all would just go unnoticed. And then, really, what is the point of it all? Does a Big Bang bang if no one is around to see it?”

“But we are just the garbage left over from stars exploding,” Priya replied. “We are nothing other than a biproduct of the cosmos.”

“Aaaahhhhhh,” Neato cooed with a smile. “Yes, yes, that is true. But more importantly, we are a way for the cosmos to know itself.”

Priya furled her eyebrows. “Did you just quote Carl Sagan?”

“I’m pretty sure that he was quoting me, but it’s really all the same to me, you know?”

“But if understanding it all is beyond us *mere mortals*,” Priya said wryly, “then what’s the point in even trying.”

Neato only smiled.

“Mathematics has always been the only language I’ve ever really understood. And it has yet to show me clearly where this whole thing is going. What’s the point of reading the story if I never get to know the ending?” Priya found herself speaking with more sincerity than even she thought that she was capable of.

“I daydream about watching a meteorite crash through Earth’s atmosphere and destroying us all. I don’t want everyone to die in a burning apocalypse. But at some point, a burning apocalypse comes for us all. And if shit is going to go south, then I would prefer to be around for it. What scares me the most is not being around to witness the final act.”

“It’s not the ending you should be concerned about, Miss Priya,” Neato replied. “The present is the only true reality. And if you can master the infinite scale of the present and your place in it, well then, Miss Priya, the universe is yours to make. That’s what this whole dance is about. You can’t know it all and still expect surprises.”

Neato gave Priya a smile that sent shivers down her spine. “It’s the nature of all things, you see? One second you are here, and the next you are not.”

Neato waived his hand and Priya unthinkingly blinked. When her eyes opened again, Neato was no longer there. In his place was a slightly agitated man with two heads.

“That was a close one, eh?” Veebo said with a giddy giggle.

“Riki?” Priya yelled frantically. “What the hell is going on? How long was I gone?”

“Gone?” asked Riki. “You’ve been *here*. You appeared to be some kind of giant beer can for a few moments, but you’ve returned to normality just now.”

“No, no, I was in a swamp,” Priya sputtered, “I was with Neato.”

“Hmmm,” was all that Riki said.

“Riki! I was there for so long, it felt like days even. What have you done to me?” Priya demanded.

“Relax, Priya,” Riki said. “When you slide into higher dimensions things don’t flow the same way you’re used to. Time doesn’t always move in one direction. If you can’t wrap your underdeveloped mind around that, it’s best you just ignore wherever and whenever you think you went. In your simple timeline, you’ve only just left World’s End after I saved you from that cranky bartender.”

“Yeah man, that was wild,” Pav said grinning. “It’s been way too long since I had a good chase like that.”

“Well,” interrupted Riki, “You might want to keep your celebrations short. Teebor Stag is on his way here.”

“Stag?” the two-headed man said through clenched teeth and a sudden rage in his eyes. “Stag? Stag! STAG!”

“Relax, you bumbling idiot,” Riki chided. “He’s not here for you. He’s here for me. And he’s not alone. The entire GPA military fleet is on its way too. Anyway, I’ve got what we needed, and we can take leave of this planet.”

“You think I’m afraid of Stag?” Pav said through clenched teeth while Veebo pursed his lips. “It’s *me* who *he* should be afraid of. I’ve got a score to settle with that fake-horned meat sack, and I promised myself that if I ever got the chance, I would kick the game winning points right through his crooked front teeth.”

## TWENTY-THREE

Teebor Stag was on a collision course with his publicist. She was now at the top of his enemy list, and that was surely one of the most dangerous places in the galaxy to be. Teebor had invested a fortune into her services, an attempt to rebrand his way into galactic popularity. But the galaxy was determined to hate him. And for Teebor, this meant that his publicist was to blame.

“She’s built herself quite the little slice of paradise using my money on that deplorable Betelgeusean planet,” Teebor said in the mirror while polishing his horns with the squandro bees wax he’s collected on Skeezeleebub—much to the dismay of the hyper-conscious bees. “And all I’ve got to show for it is the galaxy’s scorn.”

“They don’t hate you that much, Father,” Jorgyn said, knowing full well that they did. Even more so now that they’d taken the Ciphersphere away from Pandilla. Without the machine the planet’s fate was sealed. It’s dying star would soon swallow up the star system and erase it from the galaxy.

“They mock me on galactic news channels, even on the ones I own,” Teebor said while unlatching the cage of his pet zlarmott. “I will show them how foolish they were to doubt me. You’ll see, Prince Pizzlepuss,” he said, cuddling the slobbering striped creature in his arms as it dripped green drool onto his shirt sleeve. “I’ll start with that damned publicist. And once I get the book back, they’ll all see what happens when they cross me.”

“Father,” Jorgyn said, wincing at the appalling affection her father had for the slobbering animal. “Could you maybe keep that thing in its cage when I’m around?”

“What do you have against Prince Pizzlepuss?” he said, scowling at his daughter. “He’s the only one around here who actually understands me.”

Jorgyn Stag ignored her father’s response as she uploaded holograms of her recent travels through the Orion Nebula into her social network’s hypernet. She was about to upload a series of shots from one of the hip new restaurant openings she had attended, when she scrolled past a Galactic News Network alert.

“It’s just come through on GNN,” Jorgyn announced excitedly. “The ship! *That* ship! It’s here! It was just spotted leaving Doctor Stinklepants.”

Teebor shoved the slobbering animal aside and dusted the purple fur from his shirtsleeves. He had not returned to his home planet in over 30 years, and now he had the chance to exact his revenge.

“Well now, that’s convenient,” he said. “We’re now entering the orbit of Doctor Stinklepants. I’ll eliminate that worthless publicist, and everyone else on that

miserable planet, and then hopefully we can flush out my damn book in the process.”

He swiped at a switch on the command deck’s monitor and a long cord dropped from the ceiling. He pulled it towards him and brought the gold intercom to his mouth before clearing his throat. “Ahem, errrrggh.” The sound echoed throughout the ship and all the busy crew members and androids fell silent. “Today we send a message to all of those who ever doubted us. Today the galaxy will finally take heed of our power. And this time, they will have no choice but to fall in line.”

Prince Pizzlepuss scratched at his cage and squealed for Teebor’s attention. His pleas were rewarded with a swift kick against the cage door. The creature retreated to a dark corner and curled around itself whimpering.

“Ahem,” Teebor continued. “The time is now! Ready the Ciphersphere! We will finally put this wretched planet out of its misery,” he said with a tinge of pity for his former home. “And we can take out my publicist with it. Target the red star and finish this place off for good!”

The bay door of the colossal ship creaked open and a thunderous clatter rang through the hull. The Ciphersphere slowly lowered out into space a safe distance from the ship’s bay window. Rings of blue plasma lifted from the sphere’s edge and slowly began to rotate in a dance of highly magnetized plasma.

“Magnificent, isn’t it?” Teebor said with a smile that made Jorgyn recoil. “With just the touch of a button, even the stars are now mine to command.”

As far as stars go, Betelgeuse was an infant, but due to its colossal size, the red supergiant was cursed with a stunted existence. It was unlikely to survive the next fifty thousand years. As the Ciphersphere folded the space within the star’s core, it prematurely depleted its nuclear fuel and kickstarted the process of its spectacular death.

Betelgeuse began its death throes when it started fusing carbon molecules. The activated Ciphersphere accelerated the fusing of carbon nuclei into neon, neon into oxygen, and oxygen into silicon. From there the star did the rest on its own. The immense gravitational energy at the core of the star was intense enough to fuse its first iron molecule. As the iron core collapsed, the atoms themselves were stripped apart into their component protons and electrons. These combined into neutrons which released a surge of high-energy neutrinos. This assured the massive star’s spectacular death.

The pull at Betelgeuse’s core became so unstable that the star had no choice but to spew its remnants into the surrounding space in a display of blinding light. Anyone unlucky enough to find themselves on Doctor Stinklepants were gifted with another eight minutes of ignorance before the light from the explosion would reach the

planet. And then there would be another short delay before the erupting star itself would tear it all to shreds.

World's End, the planet it sat upon, Teebor's publicist, and anything else within the star's orbit, was stripped down to dust and gas and flushed out into the great expanse of space. The fiery blast blossomed into a spectacular supernova, scattering its colorful light throughout the universe. For a brief moment, to anyone who might be watching from another distant galaxy, the display from the explosion outshined the entirety of the Milky Way Galaxy.

By an unlikely coincidence—the kind that the universe typically frowned upon—two carbon-based lifeforms, lifeforms whose component molecules had been forged in similar supernovas from long ago, lifeforms who had only moments earlier escaped the doomed planet, had suddenly and unexpectedly managed to catch a ride to safety aboard a speeding ship. Fortunately for Zahira Mani, she was one of these lifeforms. Unfortunately for Zahira Mani and her gangly accomplice, the ship that they hitched a ride on belonged to Teebor Stag. And if there was one thing that Teebor Stag despised more than an ineffective publicist, it was freeloading vagrants.

Teebor's ship jumped through hyperspace to a safe distance far beyond the star's heliosphere. The red giant once known as Betelgeuse grew into a blazing display of light and color.

"Aahhh," Teebor hummed excitedly. "There's nothing like the convenience of technology to add a little pizzazz to life. A magnificent achievement," he said, looking to his daughter for moral support. But morals and support were both in short supply within the Stag family.

"Now," Teebor continued, "as for the book and that damn ship. We will never realize the full capability of the Ciphersphere if we don't get it back."

"Navigator!" he shouted, addressing this ship's control bridge. "Calculate the most probable vector for that renegade ship. We can't be too far off their trail and I'll be damned if that witch Fantaaz Demora finds them first.

"Y-y-yes sir," the navigator said hesitantly as she peeled back the bionic implant in her wrist and plugged the ship's navigation system directly into her cerebral port. Their paired calculations quickly determined a course towards the Ragnar System.

"S-s-sir," the navigator's unsteady voice said through the intercom of the command station. "We appear to have picked up some unexpected guests aboard."

As the ship sped away through hyperspace, leaving the spectacular remnants of Betelgeuse behind, a rage-fueled vein popped up near Teebor's left horn. It pulsed with both his hatred of hitchhikers in general and the delight he would take in

torturing them. Jorgyn eyed the vein on her father's head with trepidation, wondering if it got much bigger that it too might have its own big bang.

## TWENTY-FOUR

There is a common thread among beings in the universe that has to do with the speculation of life on other planets. It goes, "The grass is always greener on the other side of the galaxy."

Until people actually leave the comfort of their own star system and experience other life forms, most just assume that alien races are probably more advanced than their own. That is to say, that at the very least they drive fancier cars and have nicer haircuts. Most neglect the fact that the majority of star systems have yet to develop anything beyond single-celled organisms. And it takes an incredible amount of luck to even get that far. And even those who do manage to utilize the evolutionary forces of nature to attain a functional brain they rarely learn to use it properly.

Zahira Mani was from a species that most in the galaxy not only regarded as harmless, but also an example of how to waste evolutionary benefits. Sure, they had a big brain, but it didn't seem to get used that often. Instead, for some reason, they seemed content spending the majority of their day staring into little bright screen displays, smashing digital candies with their fingertips or slingshotting various digital birds into the air.

Zahira Mani was not one of these people. She had always longed for more. It was this same desire that had brought her from Bangalore to Cambridge and from Cambridge to Berkeley. And when the Betelgeusean with an odd grin gave her the opportunity to leave the planet altogether, she took it without hesitation.

A couple weeks earlier, he showed up at her door looking much the same as he had more than forty years ago. He had certainly grayed a bit, and his smile seemed more crooked, but otherwise he had aged well. And though it was a surprise to see him after such a long absence, Zahira did not live time in a linear fashion, and so it felt as if no time had passed.

"Perfect day for a space cruise, eh?" he said looking up to the sky. "You up for a trip?"

Zahira took a moment to shuffle her thoughts, but didn't need long. "Hell yeah!" she said enthusiastically. First, she would need to wait for her daughter to get home to say goodbye. She agreed to meet him at his ship shortly after that.

"Don't forget your towel," he said with a wink as he back-stepped off the porch.

Now, after two weeks of bouncing between interstellar ports with the Betelgeusean, Zahira Mani was having the time of her life. It was a life in space among the stars. It was a life with a man who was so imbalanced that she couldn't quite figure out how he didn't always just fall flat on his face. It was a life meeting new and interesting

people on faraway planets. And if she was being honest with herself, it was also the life she wanted partly because it was far away from her daughter.

Of course, she loved her daughter. But her daughter, well, if she was being honest with herself, was kind of an asshole. And having an asshole in your home can really drain the enjoyment out of life. Even then, she knew that her life was forever intertwined with that of her daughter, regardless which different parts of the galaxy they found themselves. And she knew that they would speak again before the end came.

Zahira had most recently spent a few days on Doctor Stinklepants. They sat at the same bar that they had been at a day earlier. Zahira seemed content to just sit on that stool watching the partons of World's End. This changed as soon as her Betelgeusean companion's grin abruptly shifted to a horrified frown.

"Oh! Hey! So, it's time to go and there's no time to lose," he said frantically. "We've got to catch a ride out of this dreadful bar, and out of this star system, as soon as possible."

He lined up his three glasses of ale on the bar top and quickly knocked back the first.

"My senses are tingling," he told Zahira while taking down the second one. "The better part of me—you know that small bit that sometimes says and does smart things—is telling me that we'd best leave, and leave in a hurry." He reached for his third glass and lifted it up to Zahira. "And if *I* were you, or really even if *you are you*, I recommend you get yourself one of these. You will handle this jump a lot better if you take a couple pints to dull the senses."

"Ah, right, I remember this part," she said. He tilted his head in confusion. "Without a ship how did you get us out of here?"

World's End was the second bar they had been to that day. At the first, the barman had confiscated his ship claiming it would cover part of the large debt he owed for decades-old unpaid bills, so asking how they would get off the planet seemed a reasonable question.

"Do you remember that little black box I gave you way back when?" he asked. "We can use that to catch a lift on any passing ships in orbit."

"I think I will give that to my daughter as a parting gift," she said.

His head tilted to the other side. "I love the groovy way you speak, lady, but no worries. I've got my own. And I'm afraid it's now or never."

The Betelgeusean choked down the contents of his third glass, and without wasting any time, pulled out a little box identical to the one Zahira had given to Priya. He poked a few buttons and raised it to the sky with an empty glass in his other hand.

Moments later, Zahira Mani was just about to let out a petrified shriek when she saw, or at least thought she saw, a giant spider creeping up behind the agitated man with the outstretched thumb. But before she had the chance to say anything, the two of them vanished from their barstools, leaving behind a frustrated and dumbfounded eight-legged barman.

## TWENTY-FIVE

From the moment Gorgal Fondletart sidled out of his catacomb hovel, he could tell that the universe was working against him. What he didn't know was that today the universe wasn't just a casual foe, it was his mortal enemy.

It all started when he caught one of his feet on the watering hose of his front garden. His seven other limbs scrambled to regain balance, but they couldn't stop him from plunging face first into the decorative garden fountain that his wife had asked him to install a week earlier. This left a nasty gash under the furthest left of his eight eyes and set the course for his ill-fated day.

He arrived at work holding a small towel to the side of his face, only to realize that he'd forgotten his keys at home. This in itself was only a minor inconvenience as the bar he managed was already open for the day. He could just borrow the morning barman's keys to close up at night. But it would mean that when his shift ended he would need to wake up his wife to let him in when he got home. He knew that this would be met with some hostility.

But at work, it wasn't the keys or the gash by his eye that troubled him most. It was the two customers seated at the bar that made him uneasy. The two-headed man on the left stool had a brusqueness about him that felt familiar, but Gorgal couldn't quite place from where he'd seen him before. He had never seen the woman seated on the other stool, but the way she was eying the picture of the two who had skipped out on their bill the day before made Gorgal suspicious.

Once the memory of a closet full of unsettled bills suddenly came to him, he put face to bill and wasn't going to let either crook get away without clearing the tab first. Gorgal could tell that the two-headed man might make a dash for the door so he didn't make any sudden movements. He also suspected that the woman would likely join him. He even suspected that he might have to chase them both down and wrap them up with his spindly silk threads. But what he didn't suspect was that while in pursuit he would unexpectedly be struck on the head by a falling glass of rum. What he also never suspected was that both of his quarry would suddenly vanish from under his grasp, and that before doing so, one of them would transform into what appeared to be a giant beer can.

Bewildered and out of breath, Gorgal returned to World's End only to find the two deadbeats in the photo from the day before seated upon the very same stools that that other two bill-skippers had been seated in only minutes earlier.

*This, he thought, is my time for retribution.*

He warmed up his spinnerets and quietly crept up behind them. He was just about to net the two when the man with the wide grin downed what appeared to be his third glass of ale and pulled a small black box from a pocket in his shoulder bag.

For the second time in as many days, to Gorgal's horror and utter bewilderment, his prey vanished right before his eight eyes.

But what really got under Gorgal's skin—or to be more accurate, got under his exoskeleton—was that minutes later, the giant red star setting over the horizon would abruptly start glowing and growing. Like an inflating balloon ready to pop, Betelgeuse bellowed and purged flares of orange and yellow light. Gorgal shielded the intense brightness from his eyes and could feel the pain from his cut flare up. When the shockwave from the supernova finally reached the planet, Gorgal questioned the cruelty of the universe and why anyone would ever choose to wake up in it.

Coincidentally, this is exactly what one fish thought to himself nearly 400 million years earlier on a small blue-green planet orbiting one of Betelgeuse's neighbors. This aquatic species was the first to ever leave the ocean for the uninhabited dry land above.

Upon its first wriggle onto the rocky shore, it took a deep breath of the oxygen-rich air, then quickly thought to itself, *why would anyone ever choose to wake up in this world?* It then abruptly wriggled itself back to the comfort of the ocean. It would be another ten million years before one of its ancestors would ever dare breach the water again.

That fish, too, would very much regret his decision. It was ill-equipped to handle life on land and spent its last minutes recanting the same phrase as its pioneering predecessor as it was baked into the clay ground.

Many millions of years later, a young woman by the name of Priya Mani would discover the fossilized remains on the banks of the California coast. She picked it up, admired the patterned smoothness of the stone, and quickly hurled it into the ocean to see how many times she could skip it along the water's surface.

## TWENTY-SIX

Among the numerous people that Teebor Stag despised, he reserved a special loathing of editors. For him it was a fact of life that editors, and the publishers funding them, wielded the real power in the galaxy. They were the puppeteers, the ones pulling the strings of politicians who were nothing but loudspeakers for those behind the curtain.

“Editorships become dictatorships,” Teebor always said, and he made it his goal in life to destroy their authoritarian control, something he thought that he alone was entitled to.

To Teebor’s credit, it doesn’t take much of a stretch of the imagination to realize how a job in publishing puts you on the road to running a healthy dictatorship. Publishers control the media and decide what information the public gets access to. They then get to decide how much to charge for that filtered information. Writers, journalists, and even the photographers, are all at the mercy of the publisher’s whims; and if they fancy their job, then they will do as they are told.

The next thing you know, editors are organizing military parades, stacking courts, demonizing the opposition and wearing uniforms that for some reason seem to always include puffy-legged pants. It is the natural progression of publishing companies for them to eventually turn their eyes towards global domination. For the GPA, this meant ruling the entire galaxy.

The GPA had a storied and tattered history. Beyond the enslavement of writers, an historical faux-pas that the GPA wished people would just stop bringing up, they had also manipulated governments and economies throughout the galaxy. Their march between star systems had been largely funded by acquisition editors and their ability to collect writers’ copyrights. With the invention of temporal publishing, they had staked the future of their immense military spending on its success. So when the book blinked out of existence they were left staring down the barrel of a massive military budget crunch, a debt that could cripple the GPA indefinitely. Finding the book now was key to refueling their galactic conquest.

The book, however, violated more temporal ethics than a pandimensional gambler at a Triborian horse race. Not only had it crossed ethical boundaries, it crossed dimensional boundaries too. Before it disappeared, one copy existed simultaneously in an infinite number of parallel worlds. Though this could create overwhelming profits, it also threatened to rip space-time apart, something that most agreed was a bad idea.

Fantaaz Demora wanted more than anything to rebrand the GPA. She wanted to bring honor and respect back to the publishing industry. Escaping the organization’s reputation and violent past would prove difficult, but Teebor Stag had just crossed a line that even the GPA had never dared cross.

“Teebor fucking Stag!” Fantaaz yelled over and over. “That monster will pay!”

She looked to the ship’s admiral pointing to the bridge window. “Get that asshole on communication now!” she ordered, whipping her tail so hard against deck floor that everyone on the ship’s bridge shuddered.

“They’ve jumped into hyperspace, Miss Demora,” the admiral said. “But I think I can track down his communication signature.”

“Make it so, admiral. And put that asshole’s foul face on screen,” she said with a sharp-toothed snarl.

The admiral patched in to the signal and soon the screen illuminated with Teebor Stag’s snarky smile spread across it.

“Ah, Miss Demora,” Teebor said with mock adoration. “How lovely of you to reach out and congratulate me on this momentous day.”

“Momentous?” Fantaaz said through pursed lips twitching with rage. “You call that callous and cowardly act momentous?”

“Come now, Miss Demora,” Teebor said with a calming wave of his hands. “You know that planet had it coming? I just did what was necessary. Now we can all move on and leave that miserable place behind forever.”

“You are going to wish you’d taken me out with the rest of those poor souls,” she said with a snarl, the fin atop her head perking up. “When I catch you, I will make sure to send you into the gravity wells of Tartantula Seven, where you will live out the rest of your miserable existence in a puddle of your own molecular deterioration. And I *will* get our book back before you ever get the chance to even take a peek at it.”

“Forgive me, Miss Demora,” Teebor said smarmily. “But I think I just heard you say *our* book as if it was still the possession of the GPA. I believe I paid quite a large sum of money for the rights to that book.”

“Your grandiose ego obviously never let you read that sales contract,” she said while bringing up the digital contract on screen. “Total payment was never received due to that supernova wiping out so much of that courteous coinage you had prepared for us. This sales contract has long expired so only the GPA has a rightful claim to the book.”

“Ha,” Teebor said with a reddened face. “I will get *my* book back, and when I do I can use it with the Ciphersphere to show you who wields the true power in this galaxy, this universe, and any other universes that might be lurking about.”

“Now, if you’ll forgive me. We’ve taken on some hitchhikers,” Teebor said, motioning to officers to fetch the offenders. “I was just about to enjoy some down time torturing them before you so rudely interrupted. And the kind of torture I was preparing for will require my full attention. So, if it’s all the same with you, I’ll be on my way now.”

Teebor ended the connection with Fantaaz and his false calm demeanor quickly melted away. The color of his face bordered on purple. Through clenched teeth he let out a long, heated groan.

“Get...me...that...damn...book...NOW!”

## TWENTY-SEVEN

Time travel is a hobby many have taken up, but a hobby that no one gets to keep up with for very long. One way or another, time and space eventually rectify their imbalance. Landing in vacuous emptiness is far more likely than visiting with some extinct prehistoric animal or assassinating the child version of some villainous historic figure.

Pandimensional beings laugh at the idea of even calling it time travel. They know that time shares one dimension and that *now* and *then* are actually existing in the same plane, so no traveling is actually done. Space, however, is not so easily fooled. And time travelers nearly always make the mistake of forgetting the fact that space is in constant motion and folds and stretches at the whims of gravitational and electromagnetic forces.

Someone might send themselves fifty years into the future from a certain place on their home planet expecting to arrive at a different time but in the same place. But when they arrive at the correct time destination, they quickly realize that the intended place has already traveled vast distances. It's a near certainty that the spot they end up in will be somewhere with no welcoming party awaiting their arrival.

Most planets move around their stars at speeds more than thirty kilometers per second. Most stars move around the galactic center at speeds over 200 kilometers per second. The Milky Way Galaxy too is moving through the universe at speeds over 580 kilometers per second. That means that the point you leave from will have traveled more than 1.3 trillion kilometers over the 50 years that one travels to in the future. That, unfortunately, leaves the average time traveler with very little room for error.

The universe itself, many scholars believe, is moving through a higher-dimensional foam of infinite universes at quantum speeds faster than anyone could ever calculate. The seemingly intractable problem with time travel is that arriving in the same galaxy, same star system or same planet is already improbable enough. But it is even more improbable that you will land in the same universe. This is one way how the universe inoculates itself against pesky things like time paradoxes.

Time paradoxes, like the idea of traveling back in time and preventing your parents from ever meeting, thus never being born in the first place, don't really hold up in the timeline of a parallel universe. You might find your parents, or people who seem to be like your parents, but because it is an entirely different universe with its own timeline, anything you do won't change the outcome of your

own life, only that of the parallel version of you, thus shifting someone else's timeline instead of your own.

It is, however, still a rather dickish thing to do.

The sandwich maker was one of the few people in the galaxy who had survived traveling back in time and then returning to a timeline the same as, or at least similar to, his own. How this happened is largely attributed to a pandimensional accounting error in the quantum improbability field. What that actually means, or who is responsible for the error, is by definition unknowable. It is, however, the main reason that the sandwich maker just could not shake the lingering feeling that he wasn't supposed to be here.

Here, in his case, was anywhere. From his perspective, and really that of anyone paying attention, was that all probabilities should have brought an early end to the sandwich maker's life. The universe had thrown just about everything in the way of his survival. He should have been vaporized on more than one occasion. He nearly exploded a few times. He needed both hands to count the number of times he should have drowned. He even nearly melted once when confusing a hand-held fusion drive for a hair dryer. His stubbornness to live always outdid his uncanny ability to attract accidents.

The strangest thing about this was that in all other universes, the sandwich maker's existence had not been so fortuitous. Elsewhere, it seemed that the forces of improbability were working against him rather than for him.

In one universe, he simply choked on a peanut in bathtub. Why he was eating peanuts in a bathtub is still a question of great contention among philosophers.

In another, the sandwich maker and his lover had tragically died in a mid-air collision with a 747. This was something that investigators were still incredibly troubled by as it appeared that neither had been in an airplane at the time of impact.

And in one other universe, a cranky android had throttled him to death over an argument about the proper way to serve tea.

In the majority of other universes, he died along with everyone else on his planet when a clerical error on an interstellar infrastructure budget slated their planet to be demolished for a new galactic truck stop.

This, the sandwich maker did not know. What he did know was that something in the universe seemed to want him alive.

## TWENTY-EIGHT

“Stag! STAG! STAAAAAG!” The two heads yelled clanking, together. They paced along the ship’s bay window, stumbling every other step. Pav and Veebo were vying to be heard over each other and their feet couldn’t decide which brain to listen to.

“That horned menace!” Pav said, tugging at his own hair.

“That despicable dumpster fire!” Veebo said.

“That raving lunatic!”

“That heartless scoundrel!”

“Calm down,” Riki said, a trace of sympathy in her mechanized voice. “There’s nothing you can do about it now.”

“Oh, so you say,” Pav replied, toweling the angry sweat from one brow, and then the other. “There is plenty I can do to that maniac. I can toss him into the tar pits of Sylac Trine.”

“I can feed him to the horny Furtlebeast on Cumberbatch 9078,” Veebo said.

“I can rip his horns off and shove them up his...”

“I promise you that he will regret this,” Riki interrupted.

Priya poured a couple glasses of rum and handed them to Pav and Veebo. They took them down after brushing a tear from Veebo’s cheek.

“That was my home. That was my planet. That was my star, dammit! He’s going to pay and I’ll be the one to collect. He’ll give his penance from under the rhinestone of my boot heel.”

Neither Pav or Veebo were known to be vindictive people. They were not exactly known for their intelligence either. But they were known, and their names were once among the most recognizable names in the Milky Way. That was up until even mentioning their names was considered a criminal act—an act punishable by death in more than two-thirds of the galaxy.

This was, by most metrics, an overreaction. But as the only heads in the galaxy to survive eating a Galactic Reaper, Pav and Veebo were considered a health hazard. The Galactic Reaper was a chili pepper found near the tar pits of Sylac Trine, where the air is so toxic it will twist the organs of any visitor inside out before ever having time to enjoy the psychedelic effects of the tar vapors. The peppers that grew there were so spicy that if left out for too long they would melt their way directly to the

core of the planet. Those who ate them had one-way tickets for their out-of-body experiences. Official documents listed most fatalities from Galactic Reapers as, 'Death by cosmic perspective.'

Pav and Veebo had received great acclaim for their first self-help book, "How to Find Love with Two Heads in a One-Headed Universe." But it was the book about their experience with the Galactic Reaper called, "You are Less than Nothing, Get Over It," that made them galactic criminals. The book was banned across the galaxy, and it was the public burnings on Ignorus Twelve that started the great Immortal Woods forest fires that continue to this day.

"The Galactic Reaper," they write in their book, "is freakishly spicy. It's so spicy that the heat passes through your bowels before you even get a chance to chew. But if you can get past the fire in your belly, the mental trip is faaaarr out!"

Many hipsters mistook the phrase, 'far out,' as merely a reference to the pleasurable psychedelic experience. But what most readers failed to realize was that, 'far out,' was Pav and Veebo's simple explanation of the incredibly distant perspective the chili pepper gives to those who consume it. It was a perspective that took the eater on a journey into higher dimensions where they could look back upon all of existence in all universes all at once.

There are many who think that they can grasp the scale of the universe and survive. They assume that they can handle the knowledge of their infinitesimal insignificance. But their confidence wears thin as the chili takes effect. You blast past the scale of your solar system in just the first fraction of a second, then quickly beyond your own galaxy looking back at the countless worlds of existence. Time too starts to blend into one and you can see the infinity of time in all planes. Soon you approach the edge of your universe and you think that maybe this will be the end. But there is more. There is so much more as every universe comes into view. It is long before this that most feel their ego, id and superego all shatter into infinite shards of ignorance. It is a perspective that would kill most people with even half a brain. Luckily, for the Pav and Veebo, they had two halves, and an ego bigger than any chili could ever put a dent in.

Most agreed that anyone who could survive such a feat was far too dangerous to even be named in public. On his fist book tour for the not-yet-banned book, Pav said, "That was one wild trip man, but we weren't the only ones on it. There was this other dude there, you know. He wore jean shorts and liked talking about poop and how it could solve all of life's troubles."

"But didn't seeing it all," asked one observer on tour, "didn't seeing your trivial irrelevance in the cosmos, make you feel like it was all pointless?"

"No way man," Pav replied. "If I learned one thing from that chili pepper it was how incredibly groovy I am."

Those were better times for Pav and Veebo. That was the height of their fame. But now, in the searing shadow of their star's demise, they were livid, more than they'd ever been. Veins protruded from above their furled eyebrows.

"No one should wield the power to destroy entire star systems," Pav said.

"Sure, a planet or two here or there, that can be forgiven," Veebo said. "But for this..."

Priya shuddered with a sudden thought. "My mother," she said, the color draining from her cheeks. "Was she on that planet when it..." She stopped speaking, unsure if she wanted to hear an answer.

"Riki," Priya said. "If you've truly been everywhere in all timelines and all universes, couldn't you have seen this coming and stopped it?"

"That's not really how things work, Priya," Riki said. "I've seen the futures of all realities all as one. There was no distinction between them."

"But couldn't you have saved them? Couldn't you have done something?"

"No Priya, I couldn't." Riki said, regret filtering through her logic circuits. "But I promise, we will find a way to make things right."

## TWENTY-NINE

“There is little I enjoy more in life than making freeloaders writhe in agony,” Teebor said as he approached Zahira. He motioned to the guards to seat her at the big metal chair in the middle of the drab room. “Though there is something about the squirming anxiety before the agony that makes it that much more satisfying.”

The guards pulled tight bands around Zahira’s wrists fastening them to the chair’s arms. Teebor walked over to a wall cabinet and excitedly opened it. Inside was a shiny green rod with two sharpened tines at one end. “This is the Neuron Dissimilator. It will scramble those bits of your brain that cause the most excruciating of pains.”

“Woohoo,” Zahira said with unexpected eagerness. “I’ve seen how this all ends, you know? And it’s really all quite fun. I wish I could show it to you, but I’m afraid you might break.”

Teebor stopped cold. This was the part where his prey would struggle, maybe sob a bit and recant their life’s regrets. Maybe how they wished they’d spent more time on their screenplays and less time doodling erotic cartoons. And sometimes vice versa. But this was new, and Teebor did not like it one bit.

“Excuse me?” he said.

“Oh, you know, we’ve already been through this all before,” Zahira replied. “And you deserve loads of credit. You’re quite good at this whole torture thing.”

Teebor’s jaw fell open. He wanted to make words, especially angry words, but nothing came out other than a low creak that made Zahira’s eyebrows furrow.

“What’s the matter?” Zahira asked with a look of concern. “Last time you had so much more to shout. And might I say, you’ve got quite a way with words, especially those four-letter ones. It’s your cadence really. You know how to announce just in the right places to get someone just in the right mood.”

“Last time?” Teebor asked, his feet still stuck to the floor. “We’ve met before?”

“Before, after, now, they’re all the same really,” Zahira said, looking to the ceiling wistfully. “I guess it depends on your definition of time. No, this is the first time we meet, but also yes, we have done this before. And might I say, this time you’ve really managed to keep your swearing to a minimum.”

“Is this some pitiful attempt to test my patience?” Teebor asked. “I assure you, you are testing the wrong man.”

“Yes, yes,” Zahira said with an empathetic smile. “You are going to spend the next fifteen minutes taking great joy in using that device to tangle my brain into a mess of knotted synapses.” She tilted her head and curled a disappointed pout in Teebor’s direction. “But you know, it’s really not a nice thing to do. You could really hurt somebody with that thing.”

Teebor had not moved since grabbing the device from the wall. He felt pinned to the floor and could hear his heart beating and pulsing through his body.

“Yes, yes. Not nice at all,” Zahira continued. “And you said, or should I say, you *will* say, some very nasty things. But again, I commend you for your clever intonations. You have a real talent for vulgarity.”

“Let me get this straight,” Teebor finally said. “I am about to torture you... but we have actually already done it?”

“Nail on the head, as they say,” Zahira replied. “And after you used that contraption my brain felt like warm summer pudding. You went on and on about how much you adore your fancy Ciphersphere. How you are going to finally get that book back. How you will pull apart the fabric of space and time in this and all universes. How you will rebuild them, ‘however I damn well please,’ I think is how you put it.” Zahira said the last bit mockingly in a gruff voice.

Teebor noticed that his left hand, without any cognitive control of his own, had somehow become fixed upon the left horn atop his head. He gripped it tightly as if the rest of his body might fall off some invisible scooter if he let go.

“Sorry,” Zahira said, looking concerned. “Have I said something wrong? I always do this, you know. I don’t let time run its course and I throw everything off. I really do wish I could show you what happens in the end. It is all rather amusing.”

Teebor shifted his hand to another horn, trying to steer himself straight again.

“So now,” Zahira said, showing a smile that to Teebor felt like a dagger right to the gut. “Enough with all this talk about torture. I’ve got things to do. Can we just get on with it already?”

## THIRTY

“The best way for the universe to end would be for everyone to discover that it never really existed in the first place,” Fantaaz said with a defeated scowl. “It would certainly make it easier to justify all sorts of terrible things people do.”

The ship’s captain looked down at the control console unsure how to respond to his commander. He sat at the gravitational survey monitor trying to look extra busy so that he wouldn’t have to get drawn into a conversation.

“But for Teebor Stag that would not be enough,” Fantaaz continued, pacing among the busy deck crew. “If the end wasn’t by his own doing then he would reject it outright. That bloated shell of a man thinks it is his universe. He thinks he has the right to use it or discard it however he fucking pleases.”

“Commander Fantaaz!” the captain said jumping up out of his chair. “We’ve found something. There is a gravity distortion field moving away from the Betelgeusean system. It matches that of the ship.”

“And which ship would that be, captain?”

“*The ship!* The book. The ship. Everything.” The captain struggled to find the right words. “It’s... it’s on a trajectory towards the Ragnar System. By the waves left in its wake, I’d say we could catch up to it in about two hours.”

Fantaaz cocked her head to the side. The fin atop pulsed up and down with each breath. It flushed in different colors as she navigated her own emotions. She thought she should feel different. She thought she would be excited at the prospect of getting the book back and fulfilling her mother’s mission. But all she could think about was Teebor Stag.

“Captain, the mission has changed,” she said slowly and deliberately knowing what the captain’s reaction would be. “I wanted that ship. I wanted that book. I wanted more than anything to reclaim the GPA’s authority over the galaxy. But that’s all changed. Now all I want to do is watch Teebor Stag writhe in agony in the penal zones of Tartantula Seven. We’ve got to stop him no matter what the cost. If we don’t, there might not be much of a galaxy left after he’s done with it.”

Just mentioning his name made her tail quiver. Every quaking bone in her body yearned for revenge. But Fantaaz knew she would be powerless on her own against Teebor Stag. Her ship was equipped to take on entire planetary fleets, but against the Ciphersphere it might as well have been an ant in the way of a steamroller.

“Do we have any way of contacting that ship?” Fantaaz said, addressing the ship captain.

“Which ship, Commander? Stag’s”

“No. The ship with our book. Any chance we can send a coded message to them? We’ve got to warn them about Stag and rally them to help us. That Ciphersphere could wipe them out with little effort. If that happens, there is little hope for us... and little hope for the rest of the galaxy.”

## THIRTY-ONE

In the beginning, the universe inflated at speeds faster than even light ever would. Each primordial particle that erupted from that initial point of existence was sent cascading along obedient vectors into the adolescent dimensions of space and time. Matter and antimatter annihilated each other spewing out massive amounts of energy while protons and neutrons started their courtship, compiling the basic building blocks of the universe. It was perfect and beautiful, and might have just stayed that way if the universe had quit while it was ahead.

A billion or so years later the cosmic temper tantrum cooled off. Matter found itself uncontrollably attracted to other matter. Clouds of gasses pulled in closer and closer until the heat and friction of these atomic orgies ignited the first stars into radiant brilliance. Most would argue that this was when the universe was at its best. It was a seamless ensemble of fusion and gravity, gamma bursts and x-rays, stars and nebulae, churning dust and energy, and quarreling amalgamations of light and dark throughout the universe.

Out of the chaos, countless bits of matter spiraled into more and more condensed pockets of immense potential energy. These ignited into galaxies of such unimaginable scale that they were easily ignored. But in one galaxy, a star brightened with just the right luminosity, and a small planet orbited at just the right distance, with a moon that brought about just the right tidal force, that it was given one of the Milky Way's earliest opportunities to spawn life. And, eventually, what had started out in a murky pool of gooey enzymes, proteins and a hodgepodge of chemical compounds, finally evolved into arguably the most successful civilization to ever grace the galaxy.

That up until Teebor Stag set his foot upon the planet.

The fact that Pandilla was the first known planet in the galaxy to evolve sentient life should come as no surprise to those who were paying attention. With a three-billion-year head start on everyone else in the galaxy, Pandillan people overcame their planet's harsh environs to build a civilization that outlasted countless others. Part Pandilla's success, many believe, was its willingness to change with the times, a trait that few other civilizations possessed.

Civilizations rarely outlive their stars, but Pandilla was a special case. In a century-long scramble to decide whether or not to relocate to a new planet, one man came up with a solution. Dax Tressleknop, a scientist from the Pandillan fusion laboratory, spent a decade tinkering in his basement with a new theory. It was a theory that would save the planet's star from collapse and plot a new way forward for its people.

"If I could just convince space and time to forget about each other for a fraction of a moment, they could pass right through each other and disarm their respective potential energies," Tressleknop said long ago in his famous speech to the Unified

Government of Pandilla. "That alone could sustain our star for thousands, maybe millions of years. Ladies and gentlemen, the Ciphersphere could save our planet from destruction. Many many years have passed since Virgwal Vrooz coaxed the Ciphersphere out from whatever time and place it had been hiding out in. And it has been just as long that it has sat there in that museum doing nothing. No longer! I've found the key to start it up, and it might just be the key to keeping our own star from destroying everything we have ever built."

It was an amazing discovery that not only preserved a civilization, but made Pandilla the most venerated planet in the galaxy. This alone was enough reason for Teebor Stag to want to destroy it. But that wasn't what drew him to Pandilla in the first place. It was the Ciphersphere. For him, there was no greater achievement he could hope for in his lifetime than to control the stars. The machine could bridge all of space as one, and with his book that bridge could extend to all other universes too.

"Mister Stag," the navigator said cautiously as he interrupted Teebor from reverie. "Sir, I've detected a communication signal coming from Miss Demora's ship."

"What does that scaly woman want from me now?" Teebor said with a glower.

"No sir, the communication is not meant for us. I cannot even decode it's message."

This made Teebor seethe. Bits of pale spittle migrated to the corners of his mouth as his lips clenched tighter. "Then why waste my time? Didn't I ask you to find my damn book?"

"Y-y-yes sir," the navigator stuttered, regretting that he'd ever opened his mouth. "That's the point, sir. I believe the communication was intended for that ship, the one we are after."

Teebor's eyebrows perked up. "Go on," he said, approaching the navigator with an open palm.

"Yes sir. It seems that the message, whatever it might be, has been received. And I've now got a lock on the ship's position."

Teebor's lips puckered like those of his pet zlarmott before being gifted a piece of arglebeast jerky.

"Thank you, my dear Fantaaz," Teebor said to himself while wringing his hands tightly. "You have done me a great service. One that I will not soon forget."

## THIRTY-TWO

The sandwich maker sat up with a groan, kicked his sheets off with a huff, slid his feet into his slippers with a whimper and then proceeded to stub his toe on the corner leg of his bed with a wail that caused the neighbor's pet willawolf to howl in harmony.

"Damn, damn, damn... damn it all!" he yelled to the attention of nobody but his own.

He sulked most mornings, but today he was sulking even more than usual. It was the start of another long day without his muse. It would be at least another fourteen hours before he would see her again in their shared dreams. He hobbled to the bathroom and leaned hard on the sink before allowing himself to peek in the mirror.

*Time, he thought, is so cruel sometimes. Maybe we're all just some elaborate computer program left in power-saving mode. Maybe we are just a collection of ones and zeroes collecting dust in some forgotten processor.*

It was lines of thought like this that didn't allot the sandwich maker many friends.

The sandwich maker continued staring into the mirror before smacking the sides of his face hard until his cheeks reddened and his eyes focused.

"Cosmic perspective. Cosmic perspective. Cosmic perspective," he said aloud before splashing cold water across his face.

It was his mantra of sorts, one he started off with each morning before stepping out into the unforgiving world that awaited him.

"Keep your thoughts within a cosmic perspective," he said again.

But today the mantra couldn't keep his thoughts from converging on those of his daughter.

The sandwich maker rarely talked about his daughter to his lover. He wanted to keep their time together as free from worry and pain as he could. It was time best spent in each other's arms as that was the only place where the universe made sense to him anymore.

It had been long since the sandwich maker had seen his daughter. Decades had passed since she left to pursue a career in galactic politics. But even before leaving her father behind, there was something off about her. Ever since Earth's most recent destruction, she wasn't the same. It wasn't so much that she was traumatized by it but more that she had just transformed into a different person.

What he didn't know was that the daughter was in fact no longer a person at all—at least not the kind that eats and sleeps and gets those unscratchable itches in the middle of the back.

When his daughter left Earth for the last time, she was transformed. It was a sacrifice of sorts, one that saved the Earth from demolition—at least temporarily. She shed her physical form and was currently piloting the most improbable of space ships with an arrogant two-headed Betelgeusean and a fairly intoxicated earthling aboard. They were all unknowingly about to clash with Teebor Stag.

### THIRTY-THREE

“So hey, uh, are you gonna answer that?” Pav asked while helping Veebo scratch that part of his back he couldn’t reach on his own. “If you’re not gonna answer it, at least turn off that incessant ringing. We’ve got two headaches and neither of them takes well to communications alerts.”

“Oh, right, sorry about that,” Riki said. “I was busy unscrambling Stag’s tracking coordinates. The Pandillan tech on that ship makes it very difficult to follow, even for an intellect as immense as my own.”

Priya had not heard much of the conversation as she held her hands tightly over her ears to block out the eardrum-piercing sound. “Could you please shut that damn thing off?” she hollered.

“Just so you all are aware, answering this hyperspace audio transmission could pose serious risks. No one should know where I am and no one should know how to reach me.”

“Yet your phone still rings,” Priya said.

“Alright then, I just wanted you to be aware. The last thing we need is Teebor Stag tracking us down before we find him. He only needs a tiny fraction of the energy that went into destroying that star to turn us all into space dust.”

Priya, Pav and Veebo all shuddered at the thought. The trauma of watching a star collapse right in front of their eyes was upsetting enough. But witnessing the destruction of an entire occupied planet is not something you can just shake off with a few shots of rum.

“Um... hello?” Riki said with apprehension as the image of Fantaaz showed on the deck’s main screen.

“This is Fantaaz Demora, commander of the UGP Galactic Fleet... or at least what remains of it. I must speak with the captain of your vessel.”

“Captain?” Riki asked.

“U-G-P!” Pav yelled out, a spark of dread evident in his pronunciation of each letter. “Hang up! Hang up now!”

“No, no, please don’t,” Fantaaz said waving her long squamous fingers, “I am not your enemy. I am here to help.”

“I’m afraid we have no captain,” Riki said. “I *am* this ship and never thought it necessary to have someone here telling me what to do. I only put up with these

three because most of the time they stay inebriated enough to leave me alone. They have enough trouble dressing themselves, let alone pilot a starship.”

“I’ve flown my share of ships.” Pav said offended. “In fact, Miss Riki, I used to fly this hunk of junk around the galaxy long before you took it over.”

“Oh yeah, and how did that work out for you?” Riki asked sarcastically.

Considering Pav had nearly destroyed the ship on six separate occasions and had simply misplaced it more times than he could count, he didn’t answer.

“Riki?” Fantaaz asked impatiently. “Shall I address you as Riki?”

“Riki is fine.”

“Well, Riki, I know you have the book. That book was everything to me, to the GPA... to my mother.” Fantaaz squinted hard at the mention of her mother and paused to collect herself before continuing. “I would have sacrificed anything to capture your ship and get the book back into our possession.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, Miss Demora,” Riki interjected. “But the book no longer exists. I am the book and the book is me. Moreover, I am the ship and the ship is me. You can’t take either of them away.”

“That’s beyond the point, Riki. The reason I’m contacting you is because I have given up that quest. Betelgeuse has been destroyed, as I’m sure you are aware, and my only mission in life now is to make Teebor Stag pay for his crimes.”

“Now you’re talkin’,” Pav said, shaking an angry fist. “Let’s bury that horned bastard where he’ll never see the light of day again.”

Fantaaz shifted her gaze to Pav and Veebo and furled her eyebrows. “Hey, aren’t you those guys who survived the galactic ghost pepper? My mother used to read me parts of your book. She always said to me, ‘books like this are why I’m in this business.’ But I suppose that’s why she never made much money.”

“Hmmm,” Pav said. “I guess I’ll have to take that as a compliment. But what about Stag? How can we go up against all that Pandilla tech he plundered?”

“Yeah, I must be the most powerful ship in the galaxy,” Riki said. “But if he turned that Ciphersphere on me, my circuits would fry like a tomato thrown into a neutron star.”

“That’s why I’m talking to you now,” Fantaaz continued. “If Stag hasn’t yet tracked your trajectory, he certainly will soon. He wants the book too, and he would choose to destroy you and anything in his path before he’d ever let anyone else possess the

book. But he doesn't know what your ship is capable of. He never really knew what that book was capable of. You might be the only person or thing in the galaxy with the power to stop him. And I want to help you make that happen. You've got to confront him. You are the only thing that he wants and can't have. You are the only bait that could draw him in."

"But if he ever got control of you," Fantaaz warned. "He could use the Ciphersphere to destroy more than just a few stars. Your ship has the improbable ability to exist in all spaces in the universe in one moment. The book was the first of its kind ever published with the ability to bridge all parallel universes at once. If Stag were to seize you now, he could use you and the Ciphersphere to destroy everything that ever was and ever will be. And for him, destroying the universe, and the multiverse, would only prove his point."

"And what point is that?" Priya asked.

"That Teebor Stag is everything. That Teebor Stag *is* the universe."

## THIRTY-FOUR

All that Teebor Stag ever wanted was to be important. Unfortunately for him, the universe kept finding ways to remind him that he wasn't. Once it came as a chipped tooth after biting into the seed of a truffula fruit, something that got him so enraged that he razed the entire forest that the fruit had grown in. Sometimes it came as a simple traffic jam, which is why his personal transport was now armed with nuclear warheads. But deep in his bones he knew that he was always right and that the universe was far too often wrong. He spent most of his life trying to prove that fact.

He sat at his chair behind the helm of the Pandillan battleship with a smile that brought him a comfort and warmth that he'd never really felt before. The chair itself was perhaps the most snug and restful chair at the helm of any ship in the galaxy. It was a chair he'd had commissioned after his last pet died of what the veterinarian determined to be self-strangulation—difficult for an animal without an opposable thumb or a prehensile tail. The veterinarian had determined that the animal must have managed this by sheer will alone. Of course, the doctor never told Teebor Stag this, but most who spent long periods of time with Teebor Stag could sympathize with the poor creature. The downy pelt from the animal now upholstered the captain chair that easily conformed to Teebor's big-boned structure. But it wasn't the chair alone that made him so suddenly contented.

"Dear daughter," he said addressing Jorgyn with a tenderness she'd never seen from her father. "Today we will bring a distinction to the Stag name that no one in the universe has ever achieved. Today the galaxy, and the entire damn universe, will realize our significance."

"Your patience has paid off father."

"Patience!" He stomped on the word like a pest exterminator to a fleeing roach. "I have no use for *patience*, dear daughter. Losers wait. Winners take. If you can remember that fact alone, then the Stag name will be secure once it is yours alone to manage."

*Alone.* Jorgyn didn't like the sound of that. She was her father's shadow, and a shadow without an object to cast it is nothing at all.

"Let's hope it never comes to that," she said.

Teebor grinned at the fleeting idea of his own immortality. "Yes," he said. "Let's hope. With the book back in my possession, anything is possible. Do you remember that engineer, that one I sent off to the asteroid mines for warning me against taking the Ciphersphere away from Pandilla's orbit? What was his name?"

"Director Masslebunch, or ...brunch, I think."

“That’s the one. Not only did he warn me about what would happen to Pandilla’s sun, but he also told me that the book might have the ability to unlock the full potential of the Ciphersphere, that I could possibly reach into all dimensions in all of space and time. He told me that it might rewrite the laws of physics that govern the universe... all universes. That was all I needed to hear. After that my fate was sealed. I knew that I would rule everything that ever was.”

“But didn’t he also warn you that this might end the universe as we know it?” Jorgyn said, knowing full well that her father didn’t care about this fact.

“Ah, you know scientists make up all sorts of things to scare us into submission. If he was so smart then why is he now stuck up in that asteroid field.”

“He’s not father. That all would have been destroyed with everything else in that solar system when the star exploded.”

“Oh. Yeah. Right,” Teebor said with very slightest bit of remorse. “Well on to bigger and better things now,” he said with that slightest bit of remorse having evaporated. “We’ve got the ship in our sensors, and now all I need to do is focus a beam from the Ciphersphere onto it to paralyze any escape options it might have. I don’t want that book suddenly jumping away into some parallel universe where we’ll never find it again.”

“Captain,” Teebor bellowed. “Knock that ship down like the pesky fly it is.”

“Yes sir,” the captain said as his hand tremored on the Ciphersphere controls. The power that machine wielded was more than he wanted to be in control of. With a flick of the switch the Ciphersphere lowered partway out of the ship’s central docking bay and aimed a microbeam at exposed ship. Moments later, using only an infinitesimal fraction of the Ciphersphere’s colossal power, Riki was knocked offline.

“Hail that ship and get them on screen, captain. It’s time we finally meet this bandit face to face.”

A dumbfounded two-headed Betelgeusean and an earthling in sandals wearing a bathrobe appeared on his screen. To Teebor, they looked like helpless lab rats loosed from their cages. He amusingly observed their panicked movements as they were too busy trying to call Riki back from wherever she’d gone to notice Teebor’s face on the bridge’s main screen.

“Riki! Riki! Where are you? What the hell’s going on,” Priya shouted.

Veebo was the first to notice the communication screen. For a moment he was frozen in place. His jaw hung open so wide he wondered if the gravity field had been increased. He then reached across his chest and put a finger to Pav’s chin, gently turning his face to the screen.

The wide obnoxious smile on screen drove Pav into an instant frenzy.

“Yooouuu!” It was all Pav could utter through his fuming lips. His body quaked through pangs of fury.

“Pav, dear boy,” Teebor uttered with an arrogance that made Priya’s skin crawl. “You’ve aged horribly. Though I’ll admit the extra head is a nice touch.” He massaged his horns as he said this.

“You, you, you rat!” Pav finally exhorted.

“Now now, Pav, that’s no way to greet an old friend,” Teebor said grinning even wider.

“Friend? You call yourself a friend? You were a worthless little shit even back when I’d beat you down on the magnaball courts. You were a little nose-picking leech then and you are still just as worthless now, yet you’ve managed to make yourself even more vile.”

“Leech? You call me a leech. The people of our worthless planet were the leeches. How about we cut back on the accusatory tone there, dear boy? You should be thanking me for finally putting them all out of their misery.”

Pav had nothing more to say and just shook his head in disbelief.

“My mother,” Priya said through clenched teeth. “She was on that planet too.”

“Oh, hi dear,” a woman’s voice came from near Teebor.

His head drooped with a defeated frown. “I thought I told you all to keep this woman bound in her quarters.”

“M-Mom?” Priya’s voice cracked.

“Yes, Priya,” Zahira Mani said with a soft motherly smile as she stepped in front of the Teebor’s image. “Do you remember this? This is that time when we saved the universe.”

“How do you put up with this ridiculous woman,” Teebor said, his face hanging in his hands. “She is incorrigible.”

“I thought you were gone,” Priya said, wiping a tear from her cheek. “What are you doing on that ship?”

"This is where I was always supposed to be. This was what everything was always for."

"Ah, you must be this scientist that is meant to save the universe. Your mother won't shut up about how you will save, or already have saved, everyone in the galaxy." Teebor said, pushing Zahira aside to get a good look at Priya. "You're an astrophysicist, huh? That's the worst kind. I keep telling your mother, science is the poor man's religion. You scientists are the neediest people, looking for something to worship of your own design, making up a bunch of rules and expecting us all to follow them. Like a herd of Antarean coddlesheep led over a cliff's edge."

"See what I put up with?" Zahira said with a sigh. "He's not so bad, once you get used to him. He's just had this chip on his shoulder about scientists for so long now that the chip has become more like an iceberg."

Teebor shook his head incredulously. "Please, please, *please* take your mother far *far* away from me. I'd choose a one-way trip to the tar pits of Sylac Trine over another day with her."

"Oh no, no, no, dear Teebor," Zahira said with motherly tenderness. "We have stayed together until the end. I'm afraid we are stuck together... quite literally. Dust to dust as they say."

"Mother, stop this nonsense."

"No nonsense-having here," Zahira said. "I already left long ago. So please don't forget your father on the way out."

"My father?"

"Oh yes. You got him off this ship just before everything went bang."

"Mister Stag, my mother is obviously disturbed and of little use to you. Please let her aboard our ship," Priya implored. "We'll take her off your hands."

"Of course, of course. I look forward to a quiet ship again. First however, I have a little business to take care of. Now that I've taken control of your ship, I can finally unite the Ciphersphere and my book. I can remake the universe in my image and remove all these horrible *scientific* limitations those like you have burdened us with."

"What have you done to Riki?" Priya asked.

"Riki?"

"Our ship. What have done with it?"

“Oh, it’s fine. Just in a stasis of sorts. I’ll return it once I finish what I’ve started. Which reminds me,” Teebor said with a sneer. “Captain?”

“Yes, sir!”

“It’s time.” With the flick of a switch he abruptly ended the video link.

## THIRTY-FIVE

“Now,” Teebor said, turning his attention to the Ciphersphere control panel. “Let’s show this universe a thing or two about intelligent design.”

“You know what?” Zahira interrupted. “Those horns really bring out the red in your eyes. It’s too bad that they are so soon to have been ripped from your skull.”

This made the vein in his neck pulse visibly. “Is that supposed to be some sort of threat?” he asked.

“Oh no, no, of course not,” Zahira said. “Even though you are a foolish man, I rather enjoy your company. But the past cannot be changed and we have already done this dance before.”

Teebor again buried his head in frustration.

“Last time,” Zahira continued, “we didn’t get our storybook ending. This time, however, I am Cinderella and you are my prince.” Zahira batted her eyes in Teebor’s direction. “Tonight, we will dance our way about the heavens and the stars.”

“Why must you speak in such riddles?” Teebor said with angry spittle bursting from his upper sweaty lip. “You frightfully outrageous woman! I’ve had enough of your nonsense. I’ve got work to do and if you can’t keep quiet then you will be taking a solo journey out into the stars. And I assure you, it will be no storybook ending.”

“Sir,” the captain interrupted. “We have tapped into the book’s matrix and are ready to link it with the Ciphersphere.”

“My dear,” Teebor said turning to Zahira. “It’s time to rewrite this story. Since I’ll be rid of you soon enough, feel free to join me on this final journey together.”

Zahira curtsied and offered her hand. Not sure what else to do, Teebor took it and walked her from the bridge to the ship’s main docking bay. They walked up to the edge of a row of rollers that had given the Ciphersphere a pathway into space. From there he watched the massive machine slowly pass through the bay’s containment field out into open space where it could extend its gravity pulse at full strength. As it pulled into position, Teebor could barely contain his impatience. In a few more minutes, he would be ready to spark his own brand of creation throughout the cosmos.

Stag’s attention was so focused on the Ciphersphere that he hadn’t noticed that he was still holding onto Zahira’s hand. Or more accurately, Zahira was still holding onto his hand. Teebor only realized this because suddenly she was squeezing it much harder.

Teebor tried to shake her hand away but the grip only tightened. Teebor grimaced in pain as he turned to face Zahira. She slid headphones over the top of her head and smiled.

“It’s time to go,” she said as she pushed play on her old, worn Walkman. “Now don’t forget to crank up the volume.”

Teebor tried to step away, but Zahira held tight. She then yanked him with a force that surprised Teebor and knocked him right off of his feet. He flailed as he fell into Zahira’s arms on onto the path of rollers. Zahira pulled him in tightly as they slid quickly towards the ship’s docking port on a trajectory towards the Ciphersphere.

As they passed into the containment field, Zahira took one last breath and tightly gripped the soft flesh of Teebor’s back. She chuckled as it reminded her of when Priya had been but a year old and liked nothing more than squeezing mashed potatoes with her hands and watching it ooze out between her fingers.

Teebor’s scream emptied his lungs and he lost his last chance at another breath of air. His scream fell silent as the two were ejected into vacuous space on a collision course with the Ciphersphere.

## THIRTY-SIX

All higher-dimensional travel comes with its own consequences. It is the price one must pay for those seeking hyperspace shortcuts. It is a cost most are willing to pay because traveling between stars without the bridges of higher dimensions, even at the speed of light, usually takes a few years to a few centuries, or even 100,000 years if one is trying to reach the other side of the Milky Way. And most people just can't manage to pack enough reading material for such a long trip.

Traveling between galaxies is even that much greater of an undertaking. Even the Milky Way's closest neighbor, the Andromeda Galaxy, is 2.5 million light years away. Most galaxies are more than a billion light years away. Traveling linearly between the unimaginable empty expanses separating galaxies is something only accessible to immortal beings, and even for them it is usually a form of torture as they careen through empty space at near light-speed for eternity. And though higher-dimensional travel can provide a bridge between distant points in space, there was no bridge in existence that could cover such an expanse.

That was true up until Virgwal Vrooz discovered the Ciphersphere.

Many millennia before Teebor Stag ever set his foot on Pandilla, Virgwal had a brilliant idea. He was a pioneer of the intergalactic tourism industry and it was his dream to expand his business to destinations beyond the Milky Way. Most destinations in the galaxy had become too overcrowded with tour groups. Wealthy adventurers were increasingly looking to find, "the road less traveled," as they put it. These were the kinds of customers who were willing to sacrifice a comfy bed and a meal that wasn't still moving just to be the first to discover new and beautiful places. They could then take credit for revealing them to the world, then watch as that revelation brought about the destruction of everything that made it beautiful. That then awarded the traveler with the convenient excuse for complaining about how much cooler things were there back before foreigners came in and ruined it all.

Knowing that there were likely more than two trillion unexplored galaxies in the universe, Virgwal made it his life's work to discover a direct route that could connect all galaxies in the universe. Having no scientific background whatsoever made this quite a challenge. Unsure how else to proceed, he simply wrote a note on a napkin with these words:

Dear Intergalactic Neighbors,

If you receive this note, it means that it has already traveled billions or trillions of years to reach your distant galaxy. Being that time is the essence of invention, it is my expectation that by now some species in your galaxy has mastered both time travel and intergalactic travel.

If you have, I am offering you the opportunity of a lifetime to invest in my new and exciting intergalactic tourism business, Spruced & Goosed. For little more than the cost of navigating the dimensions of space and time, you could be a ten percent shareholder in this revolutionary new industry.

My clients want new adventures beyond our little spiral galaxy into new and undiscovered parts of the universe. And all that we need from you is a way to get them there. With your help we can build the largest tourism company that the universe has ever seen.

I'm not asking for money and I'm not asking for your time. All I need from you is the means to transport my clients about the universe without the risk of accidentally popping them into vacuous space.

The rest of the letter was full of directions to Pandilla, and specifically his office. He then stuffed the letter in a bottle, corked it up, fronted the costs of a near-light-speed trajectory out into the emptiness of space, and before he had even left the office for a lunch break, right in front of him in the lobby appeared a giant metallic sphere. It was shiny, it was heavy and it was about three times the height of the average Pandillan—a species that likes to boast about their tall stature even though they are actually just under average height in the Milky Way.

There was a holographic message flashing upon the sphere. It read:

After careful consideration of your proposal, we of the Baskara Investment Group, the greatest team of venture capitalists that our quadrant of the universe has ever seen, has a counter-offer for you.

This is the Ciphersphere. It can safely transport your clients to any star system in any galaxy throughout the universe. (Sadly, they will find out that people don't look kindly upon strangers in most galaxies.)

We will only provide you the key to operating the Ciphersphere if we can be equal partners, 50/50. Anything less than that and all you will have gotten from us is a very expensive paperweight.

If you accept our offer, please sign your name on the dotted line of this pan-dimensional contract.

Virgwal knew he had low-balled the pitch, and had certainly not expected such a prompt response. Fifty percent was more than he had planned to give away, but fifty percent of the most profitable tourism company the galaxy had ever seen would

make him the most successful businessman in all of Pandilla's long and storied history.

With the tip of his second finger, he traced his signature upon the smooth surface of the Ciphersphere. He took a step back as the contract blinked away back into the wrinkles of space-time on its return trip far in the future to the Baskara Investment Group on the planet of Pornlock 91S in the distant Crepe Galaxy.

Unfortunately for Virgwal, the napkin that he'd written the initial investment pitch on had contained trace amounts of blurgenspice, a common ingredient in Pandillan cuisine. It turned out that the Pornlockians were deathly allergic to blurgenspice. They of course had no way of knowing this as they had never encountered it before. Shortly after receiving the intergalactic message in a bottle, and immediately after sending the Ciphersphere to Virgwal's offices, the entire race of people was wiped out by a catastrophic immune response that spread over the planet.

Virgwal never got a response from the venture capitalists and never received the key to the Ciphersphere. He waited decades, still holding out hope that he could realize his dreams. He hired a team of the top scientists and engineers to run tests on the sphere to see if it could be unlocked. Pandilla had long been the galaxy's greatest incubator of scientific knowledge and Virgwal had access to some of the greatest minds on the planet. Instead of throwing in the towel, he committed himself to unraveling it.

The Ciphersphere was constructed on Pornlock 91S in a factory that popped them out by the thousands. For Pornlockians, Cipherspheres were like toasters and quantum pocket devices, as every family had at least one. Cipherspheres provided the basic mode of transportation, not only to distant galaxies, but also to the corner noodle shop.

The thing about future technology is that in the hands of those in the past, there is usually little advantage to be gained. Time travelers from the future can't just go back in time and find some bloke living in a cave eating beetles, shout into his ear, "hey you there, you should rub those two sticks together and it will make your life so much easier."

Knowledge without all the trial and error that led up to that knowledge rarely offers an advantage. If you give a starship to an ape, it's only going to find a new place to take a shit. It's not going to go on to conquer the galaxy—other than that one time when that actually did happen. But, well, that's another story.

In simplest terms, the Ciphersphere was an amplifier. It used the waves and particles from surrounding space and amplified them to such a degree that they could fold in between higher dimensions. If Virgwal's team had known this than Virgwal's career might not have ended so disappointingly.

It was millennia later when Dax Tressleknop took up Virgwal's research. One day he stumbled upon the right frequency to access part of the Ciphersphere's power matrix when an engineer from the harmonics team sneezed. It wasn't one of those normal sneezes. She had the kind that turns heads in a crowded theater, the kind where people struggle to contain their giggles, the kind that starts at such a high pitch that you wonder if you left the kettle on the stove, and then ends with a wimpy snort, lacking any satisfying finish.

It was enough to give Tressleknop access to a piece of the machine's total potential. He never did find a way to use it to traverse intergalactic space, but when Pandilla's sun was facing its waning years of life before its cataclysmic demise in a supernova, he was able to find a way to harness just enough of the Ciphersphere's capability to keep the star stable.

That was up until Teebor Stag took it away, leaving the doomed planet in his wake.

## THIRTY-SEVEN

A bridge between the unbridgeable. A glance into the infinite. A dance of blue and orange light ringed the outer shell of the Ciphersphere as it warmed up its full spectrum gravitational vortex. The improbability matrix of Riki's systems was pulled into it and together they melded into all of existence, all of time and all of space.

Jorgyn Stag watched in horror as Zahira Mani held her father in the tight, frozen embrace. They pirouetted together through space as their bodies solidified in the freezing space and life drained from their bodies. If only accounting for the visual splendor of it all, she could have argued how beautiful it was. But the grim reality didn't allow thoughts like that, especially when the frozen corpse of her father crashed into the Ciphersphere and two of his horns smashed off into different directions of vacuous flight. The third horn caught behind an access panel and had the entwined couple stuck to it like a stray dart in the wall, the glowing rings of light passing through their bodies.

Pav and Veebo watched the incident through the bridge window trying not to cheer out loud. They'd come to like Priya, and they felt awful for the loss of her mother, but they could barely contain their joy for the end of Teebor Stag. For them it could only have been better if by their own three hands.

For Priya, time froze in place. She held her face to the window of Riki's ship unsure how to process the sight of her mother and Teebor Stag twirling into space. She was overcome with helplessness as her mother passed through the Ciphersphere's aura of light. Her mother didn't struggle, didn't scream, and from what Priya could see of her face she looked oddly happy. Her mother's face was the last thing she saw before everything went dark.

"You know, Miss Priya," a familiar voice echoed in her head, "now is everything."

"Send me back, Neato. Send me back in time so I can stop this. I can undo it. I can fix everything."

"I really am so sorry, Miss Priya. You have your own trajectory in space and time, and there is no way to pull you away from that. I can only slow it down for you. There is only now, this moment. That is everything. That is the universe. And you alone have the power to decide what happens next. This universe has spent eight billion years upon its own cosmic evolution, and all of it, everything has led to this moment."

"My mother has died, you insolent piece of shit," she said, wishing she could see her hands make the appropriate gestures. "And you rant like some philosophical asshole."

"I don't get to write the next chapter. I don't get to choose what happens next. You alone must pen this story."

"This isn't some damn story, Neato. And now is not the time for your shit."

Pooh, Miss Priya. And yes, now is the time for Pooh. Will it pass pleasantly? Or will you allow it to be wiped it from existence?"

"I've just lost my mother and you speak of pooh?" Priya said angrily.

"Your mother was a special being. She knew what she was doing. She has always known what would happen."

"That's bullshit!" Priya yelled. "How could she possibly know she would die this way?"

"The mortal affinity with time is what keeps them from experiencing the higher dimensions of reality. Your mother was different. She shed time long ago, like a snake sheds an old skin. In a sense she has been living her life backwards. It was the only way to save. It was the only way to save everything."

"You are some kind of special, Neato Bojanx," Priya said. "Why couldn't you have told me some of this sooner, you fucking dickhole."

"Aaaaaggh, you, Miss Priya, are truly so great. You are an asshole of the most elite degree. But do you know what assholes do best? Hmmm?" Priya shook her head but nothing happened. "They make shit happen. They get shit done. Now you, Miss Priya, must get your shit together."

This made Priya smile the slightest bit. "Neato, you asshole, you tied all that shit together in a nice little bow, didn't you?"

"We will see, Miss Priya. It's now time to let free your inner asshole."

"Priya!" another voice yelled in the darkness. "There is little time left. You must move quickly."

"Riki?" Priya said shaking her head as if loose bits of it might fall out. "You're in here too?" she said tapping her head. "Can you stop this?"

"No, I'm sorry, I can't. The Ciphersphere has frozen all of my processors. I'm helpless to do anything. But before that happened, I was able to build a sub-mind in your mind. Right now, I only exist in *your* brain."

Priya shuddered for a moment, then quickly composed herself. "Tell me what to do. Neato says I still have a chance to stop this."

“The Ciphersphere can’t be destroyed because of its immense magnetic field,” Riki said. “The gravity well is already too strong. But this ship, it has a failsafe at the power console. We’ve got to blow this thing to bits before the universe annihilates itself, and all the universes annihilate each other. If we blow this ship’s improbability field, we can stop it all from happening.”

“I can only block the Ciphersphere’s power source for a short time,” said Riki. “Do you still have the box your mother left with you? The one you used to board my ship?”

Priya could feel her hand upon the device in her bathrobe pocket.

“Yes, I’ve got it.”

“Hello? Is there anyone else still there?” the voice of Fantaaz Demora echoed through the ship’s communications system.

Light poured in through Priya’s eyes as she snapped back to linear time. She watched the shrapnel left by Teebor’s horns spread in all directions from the glowing rings of the Ciphersphere. She also saw her mother, her soft expression frozen in place as if waiting to see if Priya could do what she needed her to do.

“Miss Demon Fantastic, or whatever your name is. Get this two-headed idiot off this ship now!”

“We can take you aboard through subspace transport right away,” Fantaaz replied. “But you must hurry.”

“Not me, just them,” Priya said, pointing to her two-headed friend. “If I go now, then everything and everyone you’ve ever known will be destroyed! Now get these idiots off this ship! Do it now!”

Without even a moment to protest, Pav and Veebo were transported to Fantaaz’s ship.

“And my father,” Priya said without a second’s hesitation in her voice. “He’s on Teebor Stag’s ship. Can you get him?”

“Yes,” Fantaaz said. “Two seconds.”

Priya counted the seconds in her head.

“We’ve got him,” Fantaaz said quickly.

“Alright, now get the hell out of here,” Priya said as she straightened up with a deep breath. “I’ve got to finish this.”

## THIRTY-EIGHT

Priya felt time slow again as she heard the melodic baseline. It was a familiar song, and she knew by heart each measure with one shake of a percussion gourd and a ding on the triangle. Priya rubbed her ears, confused. It wasn't playing from the ship, it was playing in her head.

"What the hell, Riki?" Priya asked. "Music? Now?"

"It's not me! It's your mother," replied Riki. "She's playing the music from some device she's activated in her hands. And it's working. It is interfering with the Ciphersphere's dimensional warp frequencies. It is now playing into the consciousness of every being in the universe. If I'm not mistaken, as I rarely am, the music is now playing in all universes."

*"When the night... has come,"* the first lyrics sang.

Priya gasped. "Ben E. King?"

*"And the land is dark."*

"Quickly now, Priya!" Riki yelled through the din of the bass.

*"And the moon... is the only... light we'll see."*

"This is your chance!" Riki continued. "This is our last chance!"

*"No I won't... be afraid. Oh I-I-I-I-I won't... be afraid."*

"You've got about fifty seconds before the universe folds in on itself!" Riki bellowed.

*"Just as long... as you stand... stand by me."*

A torrent of memories flooded Priya as the chorus kicked in. This was her mother's song. This was the song that had played on repeat in the dining room through most of her life. Her mother would sit at the table, stare into nothing and smile. Priya had thought then that it was just another of her mother's crazy habits.

*"So darlin', darlin', stand... by me. O-Oh, stand... by me. Oh, stand. Stand by me, stand by me."*

Priya ran to the console, tears now tumbling down her cheeks like tiny melting icicles as she realized that this had always been her mother's plan.

*"If the sky... that we look upon... should tumble and fall."*

“No!” Priya cried. “I can’t!”

*“Or the mountains.”*

“Now!” Riki demanded.

*“Should crumble.”*

“I can’t!”

*“To the sea.”*

“You must!”

*“I won’t cry.”*

Priya pulled the first cable from console, and then the second. She took the small box from her pocket and plugged it into the port that Riki had told her to.

*“I won’t cry. No I-I won’t... shed a tear.”*

She attached the box to the cables and plugged them back in.

*“Just as long... as you stand, stand by me.”*

“It’s okay, Priya,” Riki said in a soft voice. “The device will take over from here.”

*“And darlin’, darlin’, stand... by me. O-Oh, stand... by me. Woah, stand now. Stand by me, stand by me.”*

“Now get to that escape pod!” Riki yelled.

Priya dashed toward the escape pod as the violins took over the melody. The long, sweet strokes of bows brought the chorus to its crescendo.

*“And darlin’, darlin’, stand... by me. O-Oh, stand...”*

Priya and Riki launched at top velocity from the dock. Priya could hear the last words of the song before going unconscious from the abrupt acceleration of the craft.

*“Whenever you’re in trouble won’t you stand...”*

## THIRTY-NINE

The original advent of consciousness sent concentric rings rippling throughout the universe. In its own way, it was beautiful. But everything beautiful in the universe comes with consequences. For example, when a panderfly flaps its wings on the planet of Hoothie, thus causing a long-toothed paragron beast to sneeze, can it cause a typhoon on the ice planet of Trawn on the other side of the universe?

The simple answer to this is, “no.” The more complete answer to this is, “errr, umm... no.” Why these are the answers, and who got to decide that these are in fact the answers, still baffles even the most sophisticated thinkers—especially because most agree that smart people are never nearly as smart as they think they are.

There are ramifications for any course of action, which is why most cultures have an annoying tendency of second-guessing their own choices, wondering what their lives would be like if they had chosen differently. When in fact, they had, just not in this universe. The uncertainty of it all is messy enough to cause many to think how much nicer things must have been back at the Big Bang.

The Big Bang had been that last time that all of space and time had been joined together without all those messy extra dimensions. Back when the only purpose of being was simply to bang, and to do it bigly. Most assumed that it was to be the very last time that all of existence would be joined with any kind of common purpose. That was before the cogs of Zahira Mani’s old and worn yellow Walkman started to spin from within the gravity well of the Ciphersphere.

It was a song that had originated decades earlier on a harmless planet along the far end of the Orion arm of the Milky Way Galaxy. Through the perpetual amplification of the Ciphersphere’s immense magnetic field and along Riki’s bridge into the higher dimensions of space and time, the music permeated through the fabric that binds all universes together. It vibrated through everything that is and ever was.

Those with consciousness heard the song blaring from within their own minds. For most of them, the lyrics were lost in translation. But the song seeped past those bits of consciousness that use language as a defense mechanism, and a deeper sense of meaning flowed through everyone in all universes. Those without consciousness, on the other hand, disregarded it altogether, though even they would admit it was a catchy tune.

It was a song that put an end to wars, even the Galactic Trabinane Wars in the Crabula galaxy cluster that had raged for thousands of years over the false accusation of a particularly potent flatulent. It was a song that caused stirred empathy even in the grouchiest of races, not excluding those assholes on Dorenthal 8. It was a song that made each individual reflect on their own lives and their place in the universe, and again reminded them that they had none. It was a song that on the planet of its origin sent people flocking to the online stores to download the

song to their primitive pocket device ringtones. It was a song that, if only for a moment, brought about peace and unity to most galaxies in most universes. It was a song, that if only for a moment, brought all of existence back together as one.

This was all brought to an abrupt end when Priya Mani's little black box transported Riki's ship and the book directly into the Ciphersphere's core. Zahira Mani's Walkman came to an abrupt stop as everything within the Ciphersphere's orbit vanished. It was pulled into a dimensional rift in the universe and conveniently tucked away into a new and inaccessible dimension, and labeled with a sign that read, "beware the cougar."

It is rumored that part of the reason for this was to avoid any further copyright infringements.

## FOURTY

Priya Mani was trying her best to come to terms with life. Life had abruptly laid out the terms and conditions to her, and now she felt obliged to sign along the dotted line.

She sat strapped into the plush seat of the jettisoned escape pod. It was a small ship and Priya shuffled uncomfortably in the tight space. Off in the distance she could see the bright Betelgeuse supernova, but that too would soon be behind her.

"I swear," Riki's voiced echoed in Priya's mind, "you've got more unused space up here in your brain than I ever had on that starship. It's like I've been upgraded from economy to first class. Now I can finally stretch out these legs of mine."

"Legs, huh?" Priya chided. "One thing is for sure, it was much quieter up there without you around."

"I'm sure it was," Riki said. "Probably nothing but crickets."

Priya grabbed an object that to her looked somewhat like a screwdriver. It laid next to a broken pocket watch that sat upon the escape pod's control panel.

"I wonder what would happen to you if I rammed this thing up my nose and into my brain."

"Nothing," Riki teased. "I'm afraid you would hit nothing but empty space."

Priya smiled just a bit.

"So now what?" she asked. "We've just saved the universe and yet it feels like we've got nowhere to go."

"I think maybe it's time I check on my father," Riki said in the voice of someone bemoaning their upcoming family reunion. "He's had a rough go at life and I think it's about time I pay him a visit."

Priya had forgotten about her own father. Fantaaz had taken him onto her ship before she even ever had a chance to meet him.

"Can't you go on without me?" Priya asked.

"I'm afraid not. I'm stuck with you... or *in* you might be more accurate. We're in this together now. You die, I die. It's as simple as that."

"Can't we just like upload you into the programing of another ship?"

“Your human brain is far too undeveloped for any kind of data transfer like that.”

“Alright you damn parasite. That’s enough shit-talking about this brain of mine. I’m smarter than most on Earth, and that probably included you before you became more machine than human.”

“You might be right about that, Priya. But your mother, now there was a human with a powerful brain.”

“What could you possibly know about her?”

“Don’t forget, before I met you, I was in all space and all time and everything in between. It was hard not to notice Zahira Mani.”

“Why?” Priya asked, no longer feigning interest.

“Don’t you know already? She was living through time backwards. Her existence only really started with the destruction of that Ciphersphere.”

Though this appeared to be some kind of metaphysical nonsense, Priya couldn’t deny that she recognized some truth in it.

“Zahira Mani had lived that life in reverse more times than even I could keep track of,” Riki said. “Everything she ever did was with the goal of reverse engineering the only timeline that could keep our universe going. Everything in the past was only part of the plan for the future, or her past, if you will.”

Priya’s head spun.

“You too, Priya Mani, were the key to her grand plan.”

“So are you telling me that my mother is still alive, and in a sense was only born when that thing exploded.”

“See that’s the kind of nonsense I would expect from a human,” Riki reprimanded. “There are so many things wrong with that statement that I don’t even know where to start. In a way, yes, you could say your mother hasn’t even been born yet if you are following time backwards. But *you* cannot follow time backwards. Your timeline moves in a different direction. I’m sorry, but in your timeline she has only just died. In that sense, her timeline has not yet begun.”

“So then she always knew what was going to happen?”

“In a way, yes.”

Priya let the conversation stall into a long awkward silence.

“Do you think your father might be able to get me a change of clothes?” Priya eventually asked. “This bathrobe smells like a seaside garbage heap.

“Let’s go find out.”

“Do you think I will ever meet my father,” Priya asked, even surprising herself with the question.

“Something tells me you will. He and my father have a way of crashing into each other rather often and unexpectedly.”

This, put Priya off. “You’re saying that you’ve always known about my mother and father and haven’t said a word to me about it?”

“Well you never asked,” Riki said sternly.

“Sometimes you never know how important someone is to you until they are gone forever,” Priya said. Though she wasn’t quite sure if the words coming out of her mouth were her own or Riki’s.

## FORTY-ONE

As the evening rains squished about the insoles of his boots, the sandwich maker still didn't pout. He didn't sulk. He didn't even frown. This in itself may not seem like much of an accomplishment. But for him, it was.

He'd seen his lover in their shared dreams the night before, and she had told him that it would be the last time that they saw each other this way. She said that she was coming to him. This was the first bit of good news the sandwich maker had had in quite a long time.

His lover didn't say when she would find him and she didn't say how, but she had said it with such confidence that he didn't question her.

The rains grew heavier, but instead of cowering he turned his head to the sky. He let the raindrops shroud him. Through squinted eyes he saw a strange light blending through the misty sky. If he'd watched the light for a few seconds longer, he might have seen the starship of Fantaaz Demora lower out of the clouds. But another strange glow up ahead caught his attention.

A pair of lights on the road ahead was moving straight toward him. The lights looked familiar, and as they got closer he noticed that the thing that the lights were attached to looked even more familiar. It was a boxy black vehicle with what looked like a square stainless grill set between the two headlights. For a moment, the sandwich maker would swear was a London cab.

Instinctively, he stuck out his hand to flag it down before realizing what an idiot he must look like hailing a cab that could not possibly exist. London, with all of its cabs, had been destroyed along with everything else on the planet.

The vehicle slowed as it came near and the sandwich maker tried to listen for the typical chugging rattle of an old London cab. All he could hear, however, was the little splishes and splashes of the raindrops crashing to the ground.

The vehicle came to a graceful stop right next to the sandwich maker. Only then did he realize that there were no wheels and it was, in fact, flying.

"Hmmm," was the only sound he could make upon that realization.

The door of the craft whirred as it opened and Priya reached out to greet the soaked man with a big black umbrella that she had picked up at an old space port on the way there.

He looked at it oddly for a moment, then looked at the woman who had handed it to her. "Do I know you," he said.

"In a way," Priya responded.

His eyes were then unexpectedly drawn to the familiar time piece on the ship's control panel.

"Well now," he said as he picked up the old pocket watch from the dashboard and weighed it in his hands. "That is certainly random."

"It certainly is, father," Riki said through Priya's voice. "Now let's go home."

## AFTERWORD

Earth had long been regarded as a rather innocuous planet, some might go as far as to call it harmless. That isn't to say that the people of that planet weren't capable of the most heinous of manners, but for the most part, they at least kept it to their own planet. They didn't go around to other planets shooting lasers all space cowboy-like or bragging about how fabulous they were or anything like that. They managed to keep their terribleness confined to themselves.

That, at least, was up until they started launching space crafts into the space beyond their solar system. Over four decades ago, a small group of earthlings thought it would be a clever idea to send off two satellites into the deepest parts of space that they could possibly reach. They would serve as beacons of a sort to any others who might be passing by. Basically, it was a way of telling anyone out there, "We're here and we're fabulous! Get used to it!"

The two satellites were called Voyager 1 and Voyager 2. They were equipped with a simple transmission device to communicate back to earth everything they discovered in the great beyond. Voyager 2 departed Earth's orbit on August 20<sup>th</sup>, 1977 on a trajectory that took it around Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune. Voyager 1 departed sixteen days later on a similar mission but stayed near Saturn to get a closer look at one of its moons before using a dance of orbital slingshots before to head straight out into the farthest humans had ever reached out.

Voyager 1 finally escaped the huge bubble of particles that encircles the solar system called the heliosphere. It was the first object to do so, or so the Earthlings thought. Little had they known about the vacationers and researchers from other parts of the galaxy that often passed into their neighborhoods.

Voyager 1 moved through space at a speed of roughly 17 kilometers per second. It was designed to handle this speed for centuries to come. What they hadn't expected was for a particularly vile race of slug-like creatures to find the craft on a survey mission and take it upon their ship.

"Sir," an eager flight engineer said in his gurgling whiny voice. "We've brought the space junk aboard. It seems to contain some sort of message for us."

The commander of the giant starship did not like this piece of news. He detested any sort of distraction from whatever lackluster mission he'd been sent on.

"Errrrmmmm," he gurgled. "Can't we just toss it back out with all the other space junk?"

"We certainly can sir. And if that is what you wish, I will happily oblige. But I think you might want to have a look at it first."

The commander hadn't left his chair for days and he wasn't the slightest bit pleased about doing so now. His rubbery skin had stuck to the chair's slick metal and it made a tearing sound as it peeled away.

*This had better be worth all the effort,* he thought to himself as he slithered to his feet.

A golden phonograph record with symbols inscribed upon it had been fixed upon the Voyager 1 satellite in order to relay information about Earth and its people to any galactic species who might happen upon it. Had they known that species as vile as these existed in the galaxy, they would certainly have had second thoughts.

The flight engineer removed the record from the satellite and handed it over to the commander. He took it into his awkwardly short arms and stared long and hard at its cover. The mathematical and astronomical diagrams etched upon it made the commander curl his purple lips disparagingly. He flipped it over to see the concentric circles of the phonographic etchings.

"Decipher it in the auditory sensor array," he said to his crew with a disgusted waive.

The flight engineer placed the record on the array and turned a dial back and forth until he found the appropriate frequency. Suddenly the ship rocked with the ear-splitting guitar riffs of Chuck Berry. As the lyrics kicked in, the commander's eyes widened and his posture straightened more than it had since he was a little tadpole.

"Deep down in Louisiana close to New Orleans, way back up in the woods among the evergreens, there stood a log cabin made of earth and wood, where there lived a country boy named Johnny B. Goode."

The music stopped abruptly as furious commander raised his hand in alarm. His teeth were showing and an audible snarl was emanating from deep in his bowels.

"These earthlings seem like massive assholes," he said. "How about we blow it up their planet one more time for good measure? This time I'll make sure it's done right."