

# The Imnothero Principle

by Ian Purdie

The pronunciation of Imnothero,

im like swim  
nother like bother  
ro like go



## **Part 1: Write Off.**

‘In the end was the word,  
And the word was garbage.’

-the prophet Errol

2.47pm (Earth central time), 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2487 AD



## Chapter 1

Reading the first paragraph of a new book is like diving into a pool. Reading this is like hovering above the pool for a few precious moments before the inevitable plunge. You are committed.

Splash!

Allow yourself to surface into another age. Allow yourself to surface on another world. Allow yourself to imagine Archmed Bianco, a small planet floating about somewhere in the 43<sup>rd</sup> century.

Archmed Bianco is inhabited. It supports gaseous life forms. These don't register on humanity's chart that somebody invented to show all the rest of us what proper life is supposed to be. In this sense nothing on Archmed Bianco qualifies to be considered as a proper life form by human standards.

This didn't bother the native Biancans. As a gaseous life form they weren't bothered by much. They weren't even bothered when a few thousand Earthlings arrived one day and started building themselves somewhere to live. They actually found it all rather entertaining.

The new arrivals set up bases in places that the Biancans avoided. Dirty, evil places. Places that were remnants of a previous civilisation that had destroyed itself. Places used by the Biancans to treat their excrement. Places that were flat, lacking the concentrated urban sprawl that dominated the rest of the landscape for those who were able to see it.

To the humans it was just mountainous terrain. It was too rugged to support bases. They went for the few flat areas.

Then they started drilling.

The Biancans remained fascinated. None of the barriers or defence systems employed by the humans to protect

themselves had any effect on the locals. They floated in and out at their leisure, treating the human colonies as though they were self sufficient zoos.

Some of them attempted to communicate directly. They located the inward sensual portals on various humans and input welcoming data. The humans responded like a sack of manure leaning against a barn wall might respond to a passing duck.

Eventually the Biancans gave up and decided to simply enjoy the humans as a source of entertainment.

On colony AB 27 human life proceeded in the manner typical of deep space colonial enterprises. The 3,684 settlers assigned to the colony lived under a giant opaque dome that shielded them from the harsh solar radiation produced by the system's twin suns. The dome contained everything that the Earthlings needed to maintain themselves and the various life forms they had dragged along in their conquest of more space than most of them could imagine.

No other animal life had officially been imported onto the planet. But like all human settlements in every galaxy, rats and cockroaches had stowed away on the huge intergalactic freighters. These illegal space migrants had been cunning and daring to get where they were, unlike humanities' representatives who were specially selected to ensure that they possessed absolutely no imagination and would never be likely to cause any problems for the company financiers.

The 'gene screen' guaranteed that colonists were, at best, of average intelligence, had no ambition, were without any adventurous tendencies whatsoever and were grateful to be included in any activity that involved a lot of other bland, unremarkable people. Any hint of bravery or

original thinking, any tendency to question authority or to harbour preconceived ideas about fairness or justice, immediately landed posting applications in the nearest shredder. Settlers were specially selected for qualities that ensured that they would be proud to stand up and be shot, protecting outmoded parochial ideals that they didn't understand. They were unflinching in their loyalty, unreserved in their gullibility and blissfully oblivious to any notions that there might possibly be some better way of doing anything.

One of these settlers was Edwinkle Henderon. He was fully qualified for all aspects of the word dull. In fact he was so dull that new words had to be invented to fully encapsulate the sheer magnitude of his dullerium. He had been the victim of a dulluge. He was the original dullinquent! His job was so unbelievably dull that if emigrating into outer space had not become a horrifyingly routine form of mass conformity, he would never have dared to consider it. To accomplish this purportedly interesting act he had drawn upon all of his considerable resources of dullness. Thanks to the gene screen, Ed had achieved it with consummate dullacrity.

According to his eloquently worded job specification, his responsibility was 'to ensure that the systems that recycled oxygen through the colony's air ducts were not inhibited by foreign material from the outer planetary environment.'<sup>1</sup>

Had the outer environment contained anything capable of being recognised as threatening, he would not have qualified for his job. However, on Archmed Bianco he was perfectly qualified to protect the colony from things that nobody considered were there.

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<sup>1</sup> He unblocked the air vents.

The most exciting part of his job required one of the fans to stop working. This happened very infrequently. Fortunately Ed was dull enough to be able to survive in an environment completely devoid of stimulus. He spent most of his time sitting in the small cupboard-like cell that constituted his office waiting to go home.

Even the Biancans found him to be a lack-lustre exhibit.

Ed had been extremely grateful to get the job that had allowed him to take his wife and daughter away from what was left of poor old Earth. Earth, the mother of the human race had been raped, pillaged and plundered by her charming offspring in a manner so horrifying that even some humans were shocked by it. All of her land, seas and air were saturated with every type of filth that humanity could smear across them.

The only other species tough enough to survive the processes of greed and selfishness that had been unleashed across the once beautiful face of the planet were rats and cockroaches.

The cockroaches actually thrived as the Earth's vital systems were methodically strangled to death around them.

The rats grew stronger with every attempt to eradicate them. Eventually the humans simply gave up. They realised that it was a lot less expensive to ignore them.

Ed's wife, Regina, had reluctantly accepted a position as a general cleaner on Archmed Bianco. She had never previously cleaned anything. She was the daughter of a wealthy politician but she was prepared to do whatever it took to get herself and her family away from Earth.

Regina fell in love with Ed while she was attending an expensive finishing school. She had mistaken him for the son of one of the staff members. By the time she

discovered that he was really only the adopted son of one of the gardeners, she was already pregnant with their daughter Felacia.

They married secretly, breaking her father's heart when he eventually found out.

Regina never forgave herself or Ed after her father showed her Ed's gene screen results. His only distinguishing characteristic was a skull that was 4% thicker than the average for homo sapiens. Otherwise he had no natural aptitudes whatsoever.

Ed, for his part, loved his wife's thick mane of silky black hair. This had first attracted him to her and his fascination had not waned after more than ten years in the same bed. Unfortunately, there was a lot more to Regina than her lustrous hair and most of the rest of her was not as attractive. Even Ed had to admit that they had nothing in common. Their main problem was that after the initial attraction had evaporated along with all of the other accessories to romantic love, there just wasn't that much to talk about.

Ed's future on Earth could never measure up to even the most modest expectations demanded by the rest of his wife's family. The only types of employment he qualified for did not offer anywhere near the magnitude of remuneration that Regina had been brought up to consider her birthright. He could barely afford to pay for the birth of their daughter in circumstances so modest that some members of Regina's family refused to accept that the newborn was related to them.

Space was Regina's only honourable option. She was literally shamed off the planet.

At last Ed's extreme mediocrity became an asset. The gene screen identified him as a very good prospective space colonist. His exceptionally average genetic make-up,

combined with some serious leverage applied by his father-in-law qualified him for a career off-planet. A career that would not only provide himself and his family with food, shelter and clothing, but would give him long empty days for his underpowered imagination to aimlessly wander the by-ways of intergalactic irrelevance in the privacy of his own office.

Regina had not been brought up to be useful. However, because she was experienced in the ways of the idle rich, she had extremely high standards of what she expected from others. In the humiliating circumstances of having to apply those standards to herself, she was able to ingratiate herself to some of the more highly placed members of the colony. She knew what the stuck-up bitches wanted. Naturally this servitude was even more reason for her to resent her husband. Resentment slithered silently into every corner of their small apartment like an infestation of cold, dark reptiles staring unblinkingly from every recess.

Despite their differences, their daughter Felacia was devoted to both her parents. Colony life was exciting and stimulating for an inquisitive eleven year old. She loved living off-planet. Her memories of Earth were like being locked in a foul smelling, dirty cupboard. The other 'space kids' as they called their little gang were just as enthralled about living on another world. None of them had fond memories of Earth. On Archmed Bianco they had the run of the colony, were given the best education and had access to the most modern technology that humanity had been able to devise. The universe was at their tender young fingertips.

Felacia couldn't understand why her parents were so unhappy. She could see that they both regarded life away from Earth as an imposition, a punishment for not being able to realise the few self-centred conformist dreams they

had adopted when they were young. She couldn't understand how they were able to ignore the fantastic opportunities their new life presented. Why her mother pined for that old, toxic, space tip was beyond the bounds of her fertile, young imagination. A generation gap loomed between the adults and their children that matched the gargantuan distances that separated them all from Earth.

Although nobody who knew him had ever argued that Ed was anything but unbelievably dull, he wasn't quite dull enough to qualify as fascinatingly dull.

This proved to be a great disappointment to the Biancans. The sheer bloody-minded dullness that was built into each and every cell from Ed's outrageously ordinary hair-do to his infuriatingly normal toe nails could have made him a major attraction. He almost qualified as an exception to the general rule of interestingness that pervaded their world.

There was a single cause for Ed's tragic failure at the threshold of fascinating dullness. His otherwise pristine predictability and unfathomable monotonousness were imperfect. There was one flaw, one blemish. One lone arhythmic glitch in the clockwork precision of his inner conformity defiled the otherwise complete inadequacy of his measured, managed existence.

Ed had a secret that he'd never told his wife nor anybody else.

Earlwin Zittler was not typical company material. He'd only managed to swindle his way into employment with the Intergalactic Mining and Settlement Company by forging his gene screen results. Otherwise he had convincingly failed all the tests that required any aptitude for conformity. When it came to his ability to stand up and be shot for

things that he didn't believe in, Earlwin Zittler was a complete failure. The worst thing about him was that he possessed and believed in his own imagination.

Earlwin hadn't begun his posting on Archmed Bianco at AB 27. He was transferred from one of the other colonies under a very dense, dark cloud of intrigue. Some of the other less retarded imaginations in the colony suspected that he'd been convicted of some minor criminal offence. Something not sufficiently heinous to warrant him being repatriated back to Earth. Speculation about the exact nature of his crime ranged from the marginally embarrassing to the utterly corrupt. Whatever he had done Earlwin was generally considered to be mysteriously dangerous, a designation that identified him as a barely acceptable outsider.

Earlwin and Ed had met because they both had names that began with the letter 'E'. They were obliged to sit next to each other at the infrequent colony forums. At these forums the colonists were invited to share any grievances they might harbour, with delegates from the company representing the shareholders back on Earth. The forums were well known to be farcical and had never resulted in a single recommendation being implemented. It was widely considered that they were only held to justify the delegate's irregular junkets out to the colonies where they were practically worshipped by the colony managers. If the forums served any real purpose it was to identify potential troublemakers and silence them by appearing to take their grievances seriously. The indelible reality was that every employee had signed a contract, while still on Earth, that specifically forbade them from ever having any grievances.

Termination of an employee's contract immediately guaranteed them a berth aboard the next ship back to

Earth. It also meant that they would be unlikely to find any kind of employment ever again.

Earlwin had been transferred to AB 27 for breaking rule 843 in the Company Handbook. This rule expressly forbade employees or their family members from eating anything other than the food provided by the giant gardens that supplied the colonies. This rule in effect, imposed compulsory vegetarianism on all space colonists. The gardens grew an impressive variety of fruits and vegetables as well as hemp and several types of aloe vera.

The colonists' diets were prescribed with mathematical precision according to their age, weight and the functions that they were required to perform.

Earlwin was a carnivore. He hadn't been able to accept vegetarianism and wasn't ready to become a rabbit.

He dreamt about steak. In some of his dreams sausages and pork chops on horseback would ride gallantly over hills made up of meatloaf and tripe. They would rescue sexy damsels from barbaric tribes of lettuce and broccoli.

One night he woke up throwing punches. The last survivor of a herd of cannibal sheep had turned on him. Its bloodthirsty eyes narrowed as it had surveyed the girth of his healthy thighs. His only weapon had been a half empty bottle of barbecue sauce with a nozzle that was designed by a vegetarian!

The following afternoon, in desperation, Earlwin cornered and strangled to death one of the rats that infested every colony. He then gutted and skinned the unfortunate rodent before grilling its flesh to what he deemed to be a gourmet medium-rare. Savouring the fleshy aromas, he applied salt. Then armed with a fork he eagerly devoured the muscular tissue. Its warm juices dribbled down his chin. It tasted fantastic!

Reclining in a comfortable chair with his eyes closed, Earlwin began to feel strange. Really strange. Something was happening inside his head. He opened his eyes. This made him feel even stranger. The rat was reacting with his brain in some unexpectedly primitive way. For the next few hours Earlwin actually felt like a wild animal himself.

He spent the rest of the evening roaming the colony hunting for more rats. The hunt was unsuccessful. The hunted could sense the change in his mental geography and once again proved that they were supreme survivors. On that occasion Earlwin didn't see another rodent in a colony where, as the dominant population by weight, rat ruled.

Earlwin had had a taste and he liked it. Over the next few days he caught several rats and stored their lifeless bodies in his cubicle.

Then, one evening he prepared a feast of rat. He chopped up two of the unfortunate creatures into small cubes and fried the sinewy meat in soy oil. The smell of lightly sautéed rodent invaded his flaring nostrils as he tucked into a full meal of their forbidden flesh.

Once again he felt the desires of his ancient ancestors awakening in a part of his brain that had lain dormant for generations. He ripped off his uniform and began to howl like a rabid dog. The veins in his neck stood out and he could feel his heart pumping the blood that made him a living animal. His vision was clearer. The pastel colours of the colony's walls were suddenly offensive. He felt more alive than he'd ever felt before. He felt as though he'd suddenly been born a grown man, emerging like a butterfly from the chrysalis of his former self. He stood alone, magnificent, pulsating and sweating in the artificial glow of the colony's lighting.

Now he knew why it was against the rules to eat flesh. He had been half a man, cowering and grovelling, begging for favours from people who weren't even that.

He laughed hysterically, the insane laugh of a madman who'd just glimpsed the cosmic punch-line.

Next morning, he awoke amidst the broken wreckage of his meagre possessions. His cubical looked like a herd of Slorantian sabre toothed oxen had stampeded through it during the night. Everything was smashed into tiny pieces and lay around him. The evidence was undeniable.

He was sent to see a counsellor. The counsellor asked him a lot of irrelevant questions. As Earlwin strove to answer them the counsellor twiddled his thumbs intellectually, twirled in his chair several times, then finally with his brow furrowed in the closest approximation of anything intelligent that he was capable of imitating, he produced a join-the-dots diagnosis based on a textbook that he'd read recently. His brilliantly unimaginative conclusion was that Earlwin was in conflict with some members of his work group. He recommended that Earlwin be transferred to another colony where his aberrant destructive tendencies could be monitored away from the psychological triggers that had set him off.

Until he met Ed, Earlwin was the only person in the universe who knew that he'd breached rule 843.

“She thinks I'm doing a night inspection,” Ed laughed. “I told her that the sanitiser for the herb gardens has a special incandescent filter that can only be changed at night.”

“Very good,” said Earlwin producing a large, dead male rat from his bag.

“Wow! That's a beauty! He must be over a foot long, not counting the tail! Where did you find him?”

“This is a real rat’s rat! He put up a hell of a fight. I got him from the trash cans behind the gupteria. Look, he bit me on the arm,” said Earlwin, pulling up his sleeve.

“That must’ve hurt.”

“He fought like an Earth rat. As soon as I had him cornered he attacked. Luckily, I had a club and I belted him good before he could strike again. He’d been eating colony food for too long.”

Ed fired up a portable burner as Earlwin peeled off the rat’s skin. After skilfully removed the feet, head and tail, Earlwin gutted the rat and threw its limp body into a waiting frying pan. He prodded it a few times with his knife as it sizzled in soy oil, filling Ed’s office with the aroma of sautéed rodent.

“He’s big enough for both of us,” said Ed as he flipped the corpse.

“Don’t even think about it. One of us has to stay normal. I told you what happened the last time I tried to eat this much by myself.”

Ed sat silently mesmerised as Earlwin lovingly nudged the sizzling remains around the pan.

“You’ll be all right. I’ll look after you.” said Earlwin inhaling the fumes. “Just try not to make too much noise. If I get caught again, it’s straight back to the rubbish tips of planet Earth for me.”

“Would that be such a bad thing? They must have huge rats in the rubbish back there. Imagine the feasts you could have and it’s not even illegal.”

“I hope I never have to set foot on that disgusting planet ever again. There’s more rats out here in space than back there,” said Earlwin.

Earlwin gave the carcass a last prod. “I think it’s ready. Nothing worse than a burnt rat.”

This was to be Ed's second meal of rat. At their previous 'meeting' he had watched Earlwin greedily devour two smaller creatures and then lapse into a state that was light years beyond his meagre vocabulary.

"Fantastic," said Ed suddenly weak with uncertainty.

Earlwin stabbed the steaming body with a fork and lifted it out of the pan. "I'll just let it cool down. I've got some salt," he added producing a small packet from his bag. "This should enhance the gastronomic appeal."

"Thanks," said Ed. "I hadn't given much thought to the flavour."

A few minutes later there was only a pile of small bones left. Ed's innards were heaving slightly as his stomach fought to reject its recently arrived contents. He could feel his heart rate quicken as the rat's essence was absorbed into his blood. He became aware of the almost deafening beating of his own heart. He could feel the blood pulsing through his veins. In the presence of so much activity it was impossible for him to remain still. He jumped to his feet. He could feel Earlwin trying to hold him down. He became aware that he had been shrieking like some exotic bird welcoming the prehistoric dawn.

Effortlessly he threw Earlwin aside and watched his friend hurtle through the air in slow motion. Earlwin hit the wall half way between the floor and the ceiling before sliding slowly down onto the floor.

Ed felt utterly invincible. He felt like a great warrior about to take on a whole army with his bare hands.

"This must be what God feels like," his own voice rumbled out of the void echoing around the room until the sound waves became solid around him. He heard God laugh and joined him in a cacophony of unbridled, absolute mirth, the kind of mirth that had created the universes.

Earlwin picked himself up off the carpet. He edged towards the door and locked it. Most people would have locked themselves outside but Earlwin knew that things would ultimately be a lot worse if he abandoned Ed right now. He stood as still as he could, knowing from experience that any sudden movement would lock Ed's supercharged attention onto him.

Ed was transformed from a meek, dull wimp into a demented monster. His eyes glowed like portals into Hell while his face turned a seriously unhelpful shade of purple. His body tensed and tautened producing unprecedented muscles that bulged against his clothing, threatening an explosion of synthetic fabrics. He epitomised a long extinct form of animal magnificence. He was potent, he was deadly, he was super Ed!

Ed didn't need to do anything. He was the centre of the universes and everything was completely under control. He stood like a statue, throbbing to his own innate rhythm. He savoured the next half hour like a god worshipping itself.

Suddenly, an alien warmth invaded his totality somewhere below his navel. Responding to its own irrevocable mandate, it began to rise. It lingered for a while in the vicinity of his stomach before making its presence felt in his throat. He tried to swallow, to drive its unwanted presence back to its source but it was no use. A physical urgency that seemed to exist beyond his otherwise super-human control erupted into his mouth where for a split second he was able to contain it. But that brief moment was the limit of its containability. This thing required birth. It needed representation in the world beyond his body. He became aware of a new sound, a strangled, raw bodily release that usurped his otherwise total dominance of the universe. His mouth opened automatically as a torrent of

masticated rodent erupted from his face, showering everything in his view with partially digested rat.

Earlwin, realising what was happening just a fraction of a second too late, threw himself sideways in an attempt to avoid being splattered with foul smelling, warm rat remnants. He failed. The plume evacuated Ed's body like the proverbial rat out of a drainpipe, spraying his office with a monsoonal deluge of unspeakable putridity.

Ed collapsed as if the evacuated rat had been the sole controlling force in his body. Institutional dullness flooded back into his life like a gloating, dumped, high school sweetheart presiding over his divorce from somebody else. He lay on the floor as a few convulsions raked his body, the aftershocks from the first disgusting spasm. His consciousness was no longer that of the mighty warrior. He could feel his normally compromised, mundane reality filtering back into focus.

"Errol!" he spat out the name of the only deity that had been imprinted into his otherwise irreligious mind.

"Are you OK?" Earlwin didn't feel up to another baptism.

"I think so," Ed flexed his fingers and toes.

"What happened?" Even though he could remember the sub-atomic details of every micro-second, Ed somehow couldn't quite integrate what he'd just experienced back into normal 3D.

"You threw up," said Earlwin not bothering to try to be poetic. He was drenched in what he hoped was non-staining rat.

Needless to say the rest of the 'meeting' conformed to the usual patterns that had established themselves in Ed's life and was reassuringly dull. Neither man spoke, other than to mouth the minimum necessary formalities to make a polite, if slightly rushed exit.

## Chapter 2

Twelve days later the Pleasure Ship arrived at the colony. It had been orbiting Archmed Bianco for 19 days and now, finally, its schedule directed it to the lonely hearts of AB 27.

Sabina Xotiquat put the final touches to her make-up and psychologically prepared herself for her first client of the day.

He was a young mining technician with a fiancé back on Earth. He didn't try to push Sabina beyond the massage he was entitled to under Article 412c of the Company Handbook. He was shy and very good looking. Sabina wouldn't have minded in the slightest if he'd requested any 'extras'. Her fingers attempted to stray on a few occasions but his hands sprang gallantly to the defence of his distant girlfriend's exclusive territory.

The cute young ones seldom required any extras. It was only the wrinkled, foul smelling, older clients who required the services of a serious professional. Sabina prided herself on always being professional no matter how physically repulsive the recipient of her services might be.

Sabina had been a Gosha girl for nearly two years. She was recruited into the profession after being 'discovered' in a bar on Endophus 9. It wasn't her ideal job but it paid well, she got to travel the universe for free, and it gave her the security and affection that she'd never received as a child. A runaway from her native mining colony, she considered herself lucky to have been accepted as a Gosha girl. While not quite a respectable vocation, young girls from all of the universes aspired to the glamour and freedom that the life offered.

Sabina adjusted the skimpy pair of black lace panties that constituted her only line of defence and applied fresh powder to her nipples. She broke off a small piece of biscuit and gave it to Shafi, her pet rat. Shafi nibbled gratefully at the biscuit as she lovingly stroked his small grey head. Eventually he withdrew back into the safety of her bag. It was against all the rules for a Gosha to keep a pet so she'd trained him to stay hidden.

Sabina's second client was an old transportation clerk from the shipping department. He was a veteran of many visits to the Pleasure Ship and wasn't shy about extracting satisfaction from whichever nubile was assigned to him. He was from the old school and actually believed that he was doing the girls a favour. Sabina humoured him for a few minutes and wasn't disappointed when he finally wound himself up to a noisy orgasm, rolled off her, then got himself dressed and left. She needed a shower so as not to feel tainted for her next client.

Earlwin had spent the previous night completely ratted. He'd devoured three medium sized rodents that Ed had caught inside one of the ventilation ducts. Earlwin had managed to keep them down all night and they were still inside him. He could feel the effects stirring in his brain as he entered the booth in the Sleazarium for his company sponsored, regulation appointment with a Gosha girl.

Sabina ushered her new client into the booth.

"The company welcomes its valued employee," she recited the company's greeting mantra. "Would you like to remove your clothing and relax on my couch?"

"I'd love to," said Earlwin eagerly throwing his apparel at the floor.

Sabina picked up his discarded clothing. There was something different about this client. "Would you like some refreshments?"

“No, I’d like you to get naked too.” Earlwin felt no need to prevaricate with pleasantries.

“Great tits,” he commented as Sabina obediently sent her uniform plummeting to the floor.

“Thank you,” she responded sensing a form of animal intent that she found both unusual and exciting in a deep space colonist.

As he made himself comfortable on the couch Earlwin’s nostrils began to twitch. He could sense another presence.

He reached over to Sabina’s bag. Before the Gosha could stop him, Earlwin’s hand was inside and poor Shafi was dragged ruthlessly out into the light. The rat squealed and sank his teeth into the fingers that had claimed him. It was too late for Shafi. Half of him was already inside Earlwin’s mouth.

A spurt of blood erupted from the rodent’s back spraying Earlwin’s face as he bit through the neck, completely severing Shafi’s head.

“What are you doing?” Sabina screamed as warm rat blood splattered across her naked body. She lunged forward in a futile attempt to save her beloved pet.

Earlwin pushed her away as he chewed and swallowed.

“Got any more?” he asked before lapsing into a trance, his eyes rolling back into his head.

Sabina was mortified.

After a few seconds Earlwin lifted his head off the pillow and fixed her with eyes that were no longer human. Shafi’s blood was dripping from his chin as he thrust the remainder of the unfortunate rat’s limp corpse into the reddened cavity of his mouth, pulverising its flesh and bones with his teeth.

Sabina retrieved her panties and reinstated them about her horrified person. She ran to the door and started

banging on it with both fists, screaming “Help! Help! There’s a madman in here.”

Mere fractions of a second later a burley security guard strode efficiently into the booth, clearly not expecting the spectacle that confronted him. Usually the only problems he had to deal with involved lecherous old men, trying to engage in acts of lewdness that even the well trained, highly accommodating Goshas considered to be beneath their sparse concept of dignity.

This was very different. Sabina was splattered with blood and was battling to control herself on the brink of hysteria. Naked on the couch, Earlwin seemed to be unnaturally calm. He lay on his back covered in blood and, most disconcerting, he had the still twitching tail of what appeared to be a rat protruding from his mouth. Worse, he was chewing.

The Company Handbook contained nothing that the guard could relate to the scene in front of him.

He looked Sabina up and down, twice.

“So what’s the problem?” he asked trying to sound authoritative and calm.

By now Sabina had recovered sufficiently from the initial shock to realise how precarious her situation was. For a start, pets of any description were not tolerated amongst Goshas, especially creatures that were classified as vermin. Secondly, she had received three hundred days of training, at great expense to the company, aimed solely at instilling in her the need to put the whims and desires of her clients first, despite officially being forbidden to engage in sex.

“It was a rat,” she rallied. “I’m sorry but it scared me.”

“It seems to be under control now,” said the guard trying not to allow his attention to be drawn to Earlwin

who continued to lie quietly within what appeared to be an aura of undiluted insanity.

“Great. Thanks,” said Sabina regretting having woken up that morning. After the guard closed the door behind him she turned to Earlwin. “What did you do that for?”

Earlwin said nothing and remained motionless. He continued chewing as Shafi’s tail stopped twitching.

“That was disgusting,” continued Sabina. “He was my pet.”

A moment of silence in memory of Shafi ensued. Finally, Earlwin spat out the remains of the tail. “It was nothing like a wild rat,” he complained.

“He was my pet.” Sabina began to cry softly to herself.

“It must be all the pesticides accumulated in their bodies” Earlwin muttered to himself. “I feel pretty normal.”

“Normal?” sobbed Sabina. “Normal people don’t bite the heads off other people’s pets and eat them alive!”

“It was only a rat,” said Earlwin temporarily flirting with the appearance of non-abnormality. “This colony’s full of them. How many do you want?”

Sabina picked up what was left of Shafi’s tail from where it landed on the floor. Needless to say that was the end of Earlwin’s massage.

Ed spent the evening dutifully at home with his family, trying not to think about what Earlwin was probably up to with some gorgeous, accommodating Gosha. Regina had had a terrible day. She had been expected to clean out the locker room in the men’s gym.

“I don’t know how Betty put up with it for all those years. The whole place smells worse than a toilet. No wonder she was too sick to face it again.”

Ed said nothing. He knew that most of the facilities in the colony basically cleaned themselves. All his wife had to do was to make sure that the rooms were empty, close the doors and push the button clearly marked 'Clean' on the master control console. Then she would have sat around for half an hour, smoking guptide with Wendy, the other member of her cleaning team, until the console flashed 'Task completed'. That done, they would have gone inside and made sure that none of the suction drains were blocked. Really hard work.

Felacia was in her room pretending to do her homework. This kept her uneducated father and disinterested mother out of her way for a few hours every evening while she directed an unmanned space probe to explore one of the few parts of the immediate universe that had not yet been polluted by the arrival of humanity.

She had saved up several months' worth of her allowance and bought the probe after discovering an advertisement in one of the teenage magazines that she infrequently perused, just to see how the adolescents on Earth were coping in her absence. The probe was part of a liquidation sale. The company that built it had gone broke so she'd got it very cheap. It had been launched from Earth a few hundred days earlier and was now sending data back from the void as it skimmed past unexplored worlds at the speed of light mach two.

In the other room Regina lit another guptide cigarette. Guptide was the only recreational intoxicant that the company allowed. It was derived from the only herb known to grow in space and had many unique properties. Guptide was a plant that lived off solar radiation emitted from stars and floated around in most solar systems growing in colonies that varied in size from that of a tennis ball to a small moon. It had confused a lot of early

astronomers on Earth who had invented lots of theories back in the days of science to try and explain it. Comets, meteorites and black holes had all been invented to try to explain its existence. When guptide was eventually discovered it was a great relief to most astrologers. Some however were embarrassed at the vast amounts of money that they had wasted on shields designed to protect the Earth from imaginary space rocks.

Guptide cigarettes were supplied by the company to all employees free of charge. They were credited with preventing most diseases to which space dwelling humanity was otherwise prone. Guptide was able to synthesize the life giving energy of stars in a concentrated manner. Humans could directly benefit from it, simply by inhaling the smoke. It was also available in liquid form and could be applied directly to most wounds with extraordinary, remedial results. It was the miracle substance that early space travellers had been searching for. Unfortunately, its discovery had not been enough to convince the majority of them to return home.

Regina dragged mercilessly on her wilting incinerative. She was annoyed that her husband would not be drawn away from the day's intergalactic sporting results.

Nobody else cared about sport any more. It was an outdated pass-time. Since the discovery of the planet Antopia, sport had become irrelevant. Antopia was the home of a race of super men and women who could easily humiliate any human in any game. Ed was only attracted to sport as a means of avoiding the otherwise unavoidable interaction his wife insisted on.

Regina required somebody to listen to her while she was complaining. On this occasion she wasn't complaining about her husband so he had no excuse. Ed watched her lips move from inside his sports' shield. He watched her

expression become darker and darker until she finally disconnected his mind screen from the zisk console that fed it.

“You’re not listening to me!” she bellowed.

“Of course I am darling, I was reading your lips.”

“Alright! What was the last thing I said?”

Ed thought back to the previous night’s litany of complaints and hazarded a guess. “You just said that most people on this colony wouldn’t know if the facilities had been cleaned properly or not.”

That slowed her down. Perhaps he had been listening.

She continued. “That’s right. The work here is absolutely thankless. These people behave like filth just floats out into space all by itself.”

Ed plugged his monitor back in and continued to review the day’s sporting results while Regina carried on as if somebody else was interested.

Earlwin stumbled unsteadily out of the pleasure booth. The time simulator strapped to his wrist was trying to tell him that it was late in his third quadrant. He knew he was due back at the warehouse but could only hazard a guess as to which one of the seven or eight corridors his eyes were trying to focus on was actually real.

“Must have been a bloody mouse,” his befuddled brain managed to communicate down the long, spiralling tube of his head to where the centre of his lack of control was guiltily lurking. Movement in this state was unpredictable. Eventually he gave up trying to be conventional and willed his body to fly. This worked better and after what seemed like mere seconds in the air he crashed through the warehouse door into his workspace. He wondered if anyone else had noticed him. When things returned to

normal he'd be very interested to learn what they thought they'd seen.

He laid himself out in his chair with his head flopped back staring at the ceiling.

Earlwin was not a bird. He was not a plane. He was a storeman. He was in charge of one of the cargo bays. This was where the few items that the colony couldn't produce were kept after they'd been shuttled down to the planet from the giant space transport freighters. The shipments arrived sealed for deep space travel and were not unsealed until after he'd dispatched them to their ultimate destinations in the colony. Fortunately for Earlwin there'd been no shipments for the last two days and none were expected so he didn't have to do anything.

He didn't feel omnipotent and magnificent like rat usually made him feel. He felt sick. The mouse was having some kind of effect but it was less than spectacular – like his health. He grudgingly recalled that he'd eaten the whole thing – brain, offal and all the sticky bits contained therein. He'd never eaten a whole rat before. Certainly not one that was raw and still alive.

Still, it had been worth it, just to have finally gotten an honest reaction from a Gosha girl. He'd actually made her cry. Up until then he'd never seen a Gosha react with any kind of real emotion. They were mistresses of the fake arts. Most of them were clones, derived from the genetic material of the original Whore of Brenagh, one of the most beautifully erotic women that the universes had ever produced. The irony was that she had eventually been reproduced through the asexual process of cloning.

According to legend, the Patriarch of an Empire in the Orion Belt, fell in love with her during one of her famous orgies. Realising that such a woman could never limit herself to just one man, he untangled three of her pubic

hairs from his own and cloned an entire harem from them. These women were in turn cloned and the Order of Gosha was established, solely by men, devoted exclusively to the sating of male desire.

Earlwin licked his dry lips. His tongue felt like sandpaper being dragged over ground-up glass. It was his only outward sign of movement for over an hour. Internally his guts were locked in mortal combat with Shafi. What had, up until a few hours ago, been a perfectly happy rat, was now a churning whirlwind that was trying to find a way out of the tomb that had so ruthlessly engulfed it. Earlwin belched. He tried to stand up but quickly realised that was a bad idea.

Somewhere between an eternity and a nanosecond later, somebody placed a hand on his shoulder. Earlwin realised that he must have nodded off. Shafi almost escaped through the tightly clenched cheeks of Earlwin's butt. Nearly, but not quite. Earlwin held on. Sphincter was pitted against ratty remains as nausea doused him in a fog of faecal displeasure.

"You look like you might as well stay there for the rest of the week," remarked Norbert as he arrived to relieve Earlwin for another day.

"I must have drifted off to sleep. It's been a pretty dull afternoon."

"That's not what I heard. That Gosha must have wrung you out good and proper, you lucky old bugger!" laughed the relieving storeman. "You ought to be home in bed."

"Thanks. I will be soon", replied Earlwin hoping that the day's battle between good and evil, man and mouse, had ended.

Earlwin's body had performed a minor miracle while he'd been asleep and he was able to stand up. Walking was a bit more tricky but after a few attempts he managed to

reach the door and made a slightly undignified, but at least upright and forward-moving, exit. He used both sides of the very wide corridor to keep himself vertical then fell into the transport chute and clumsily banged in the coordinates that got him safely home to his cubicle.

## Chapter 3

The human race had spread mediocrity across the universes like margarine onto stale bread. Over fifteen centuries, the conquest of space had been reduced to a bland commercial chore as humanities' status quo was shoved into amazing, fascinating realms with the level of enthusiasm that most people reserve to complain about a cold entree. Dominance was imposed with the bloody-minded indifference reminiscent of a group of four year olds on a golf course. Sure, there'd been a few exciting periods, like when space piracy had erupted throughout the Magenta System, or when they'd found other sentient races that needed to be conquered by military might. But otherwise humanity had spread throughout the universes like spilled dishwasher. They'd turned the magnificence of infinity into a huge suburb.

In the process innumerable ancient civilizations had been mindlessly ploughed into the cosmic dust. Cultures that had evolved far beyond the paltry range of human imagination were melted down for their component minerals while being ridiculed by a race so preoccupied with its addiction to blind economic growth that it was unable to see any value in anything else. The narrow human paradigm of exploitation and greed had ruthless disregard for anything but dull conformity.

'Errolism' was the only religion condoned by the company and consequently had become the sole arbiter of ethics and morality throughout the inhumanely inhabited universes.

The prophet Errol had walked the Earth in the 25th century and was a devout atheist. He proclaimed that because deep space exploration had failed to discover any

heavenly realms, there couldn't possibly be any God or gods. It was his contention that human desire was the highest force in the cosmos and that all of the ancient religions, founded before the advent of space travel, were not only erroneous but irrelevant. They'd been created solely to stop poor people from complaining about their place in life.

He founded his new religion (the first 'Errol Event' in history) for the wealthy and anyone else who aspired to that condition. Amongst his lengthy 'Chronicles of Errol' was a unique interpretation of the ancient law of karma. Errol taught that when you die, your soul goes to a rubbish tip comprised of everything that you threw away during your life. He also taught that anything you had sincerely given away before dying would also be waiting for you on the other side. These key teachings had resulted in a boom for charities and the recycling industries.

Jeremiah Horton, the founder of the Intergalactic Mining and Settlement Company had converted to Errolism way back in the 27th century. He'd been quick to grasp the significance of a prophet who put profits above all other worldly phenomena. On his deathbed, Jeremiah Horton had inserted compulsory Errolism into his Company Handbook (the fifth great Errol Event), alongside enforced vegetarianism and the gene screen. These three requisites guaranteed almost total conformity from his workforce. Besides ensuring the unprecedented growth of the new religion, they also resulted in the aforementioned proliferation of dullness and mediocrity across what had once been some fascinating universes.

Errol's other great contribution to humanity was The Anti-Mantra. The Anti-Mantra was the most liberating thought that six million years of human evolution had so far been able to produce. The Anti-Mantra was an

invitation to forget the serious day to day thrust of reality and just be silly. It sniggered an overwhelmed humanity back to the sanctity of childhood, possessing nothing that could be considered intelligent, challenging, or in any way mature or relevant. Its syllables were completely meaningless, with nothing esoteric hidden surreptitiously behind or between them. It was pure, unadulterated foolishness that could be used anywhere and at any time by anybody.

The Anti-Mantra was credited, by many of the company's most successful and admired executives, with connecting them to their own forgotten essence. It calmed the stressful maniac that lurked beneath the surface of every successful human. It restored life's sacred equilibrium and, paradoxically, by being meaningless, gave life a deeper meaning. It made people laugh and induced the feeling that life was actually worth most of the bother.

It had many permutations and even more permutations, but the basic Anti-Mantra as expressed by Errol himself was:

“Ferdie tiddle dum do.”

Ed was not a religious person. He was naturally dull and didn't need any rigid belief system to enforce his natural lack of imagination.

Regina on the other hand had embraced Errolism. She kept all the family's unrecyclable garbage in the spare room, using it to build a rather large and quite smelly shrine dedicated to the memory of the prophet. She believed that her fall from wealth had been punishment for a childhood transgression. She had temporarily subscribed to the, by now completely discredited, religion of science. At the age

of fourteen she'd tried to prove experimentally that greed didn't exist.

She acquired several large denomination bank notes from her father's wallet and had left them on the pavement outside their home hoping that somebody would either knock on their door and return them or hand them into the police. When this didn't happen she eventually abandoned her experiment. Later in life she considered the loss of these notes to be the beginning of her fall from wealth. She hoped that by staging her own Errol Event she'd be able to appease and atone for her immature foolishness. She was righteously driven by a desperate desire to be obscenely wealthy, like all good Errolists.

Like most human colonies, AB 27 had its own imported system of artificial time. Hours, minutes and seconds corresponded to the same time units on Earth. The Earth year, or EY, was also used as a measure for longer periods of time.

However, unlike Earth, a day consisted of twenty hours and was divided into four quadrants of five hours - two for work, one for recreation and one for sleep. Everybody living in the colony had a time simulator. These were specifically programmed with each colonist's personal schedule, nearly all of which were different, depending on the person's occupation and the shifts they were required to work. This meant that the majority of colonists were at different stages of their day or night and that the only commonality, amid a feverish clash of schedules, was the steady ticking of the hours. For despite the conflict between personal programmes, all simulators did agree on when the hour changed.

Every ten days colonists were given an extra quadrant for recreation and the whole system was calibrated so that

every 100 days the extra quadrants all occurred at the same time. These were used by the company to hold ‘Errol Events’, the religious meetings which borrowed their name from the Prophet himself. Errol Events usually took place in the Great Hall, presided over by the colony’s chaplain, The Most Extremely Reverent (M.E.R) Merily Winthrop.

His Extreme Reverence sat in his chapel, putting the final touches to the sermon he had prepared for the Errol Event that was to occur in less than an hour. He had reams of material to draw from. The Prophet had been extremely prolific during his sadly foreshortened life on Earth. Thanks to the invention of the dictaphone, The Chronicles of Errol (affectionately referred to by the faithful as The Babble) ran into many thousands of volumes. Errol had been presented with a dictaphone at a very young age and consequently, practically every word that he had ever uttered had been recorded.

An ignorant mob had taken some of his more famous teachings far too literally. They had decided to “throw him away” so that he would be awaiting them in the next life. Unfortunately for the Great Prophet, this meant that he spent the last week of his tragically short life wandering aimlessly around a rubbish tip.

The ultimate symbol of Errolism was the Empty Baked Bean Can, that being the holy relic that his martyred corpse was clinging to when the righteous finally located him.

M.E.R. Merily Winthrop contemplated this sacrilegious waste, as he often did, pausing to glean inspiration from the small, gold, baked bean can pendant that he wore around his neck. He stroked it affectionately with his thumb.

Half an hour later he approached the Great Hall. His congregation were mostly huddled towards the back wall, discussing for the most part the recent departure of the

Pleasure Ship. It was not compulsory to attend Errol Events and both Ed and Earlwin failed to arrive, having made no attempt to do so, before the great doors were sealed. The faithful who had arrived in time were now committed to five hours of religious bombardment, by which time they would be numb, disoriented and ready to drop everything to proudly serve their Prophet.

Regina on this occasion had managed to drag her reluctant daughter away from her 'homework'. For her part, Felacia had only consented to the unwanted and utterly boring interlude so that her mother would not suspect that she was otherwise engrossed in something extremely interesting. She was prepared to tolerate nearly anything so as not to arouse her mother's curiosity.

The murmur waned as M.E.R. Merily Winthrop mounted the pulpit and placed a leather bound volume of The Chronicles of Errol before him on the podium. He waited patiently for the last anecdotes to be exchanged before clearing his throat in a manner that left no doubt as to the indifference of his authority as one of the truly pious. He adjusted his spectacles and made a mental note of the dwindling attendance spread thinly before him.

"Ferdie tiddle dum do," he began.

The congregation echoed the sacred syllables.

"Praise be to Errol," he continued.

"Praise be to Errol," his faithful flock repeated.

"Welcome oh ye of faith. Today I wish to speak about the highest emotion in the Universe. I am, of course, referring to human desire." He lifted his right hand which contained an effigy of an empty baked bean can.

"Praise be to Errol," repeated the faithful, invigorated by the glimpse of the can.

"Today's teaching is taken from The Chronicles of Errol, Volume 88,674, Chapter 27,421, Line 97, known

affectionately after our Prophet's opening words as "The colour suits ya". This famous speech comes from the 4,973rd laundromat discord when our great Prophet spoke words of comfort to a poor washer woman. The mother of seven illegitimate children, upon retrieving her only dress from the washing machine was heard to lament that it had faded in the wash. Whereupon, the Prophet Errol was recorded as having said, and I quote; "The colour suits ya. Do not despair oh ye of little faith. Thou shalt not discard thy garment unless thee desireth to wear it again after thou hast passethed on. Lo thou shalt have thy desire. But would not it be better to desire other garments to fill thy wardrobe?"

And the woman replied, 'I am but poor, oh Holy one. I must feed my seven babes ere I shalt be called a lousy mother.'

"Thy children will prouder be ere their mother, adorned with fine cloth and smelling of sweet perfume, shall be regarded by all as a more beautiful woman than has ever seen fit to indulge in pornographic acts with the beasts of the field. Verily I say unto you, it is the quality of thy desire that shalt set thee apart. Adorn thy body, for it is the temple of thy soul."

The Utterly Reverend Winthrop paused for effect before noisily closing the ancient book in front of him. He looked over the rims of his half-glass spectacles at the confused rabble before him and set forth to elaborate.

"In this sacred discourse, our beloved Prophet clearly delineates the three types of worldly desire," he began.

"For in the entirety of this vast cosmos, there are but three types of desire. The desire to have, the desire to be and the desire not to be. It is the first two desires that set man apart from the animals and other lesser species. The desire not to be is shared by all sentient beings, for

everything possesses the innate desire not to be dead. This was the desire expressed by the washer woman when she spoke unto our great Prophet stating that she desired not her faded garment. The Prophet was swift to chastise her with holiness and righteousness by suggesting to her the purely human desire to have more clothing in her wardrobe.

Once again the woman replied with her lowly desire not to be, and this time she stated that she desired not to be a lousy mother. Whereupon our Prophet was swift to chastise her with the second great and righteous human desire: the desire to be. The righteous desire to be regarded as a beautiful woman was clearly enunciated from the holy lips of our beloved Prophet.

So here in this beautiful passage we have a clear indication from the Holy Prophet Errol of the twin desires, to be and to have. It is these two desires that have enabled the human race to become masters of the universes. Cast your mind's eye back over the course of history and you will see that before these holy imperatives massive civilizations have crumbled to dust.”

The Utterly Reverend Winthrop paused to take a sip from his glass of water and allow the full magnitude of this profound cornerstone of the entire edifice of Errolism to sink in. A few in the congregation coughed as he swallowed and replaced his glass on top of the pulpit.

He continued.

“These twin desires, to be and to have are the holy birthright of all humanity. They do not distinguish between race or sex, nor even rich and poor. They are the basis of ambition and of all accomplishment and shine their light upon the universes from the heart of every human, great and small. They are the great forces that have enabled humanity to ennoble itself before all of the various species

scattered throughout the cosmos. And it is these twin desires that have set humanity apart and destined us for the greatness in which we now dwell.”

He lifted the replica of the baked bean can once again, just to make sure that nobody had gone to sleep.

“Praise be to Errol,” bleated his flock in unison, spurred on by the flash of tin.

“Ferdie tiddle dum do,” he replied.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the colony in Ed’s office, Earlwin was dicing the flesh of two medium sized rats. It was Ed’s turn to indulge in culinary mayhem once again and his hands were shaking slightly in anticipation. He busied himself by heating the pan – rocking it from side to side to channel his excitement – before dropping in the meaty morsels and watching them sizzle deliciously. Deliciously that is, until a cockroach which had been taking a leisurely stroll across the ceiling, lost its footing and dropped into the pan.

“Shit!” said Ed, his lips curled with revulsion as he flicked its roasted little corpse out with a knife.

“Little buggers get into everything eventually,” replied Earlwin squashing the dead insect under his boot and driving the message home with a twist of his heel.

“I think it’s ready,” Ed was ready. He’d been looking forward to this all week. He poured the rodent remnants onto his waiting plate and blew on them to cool them to a devourable temperature. The steaming mound represented a slightly smaller portion than they had grown accustomed to but, that minor issue aside, it was still rat. Ed gulped it down without ceremony and braced himself for the roller coaster’s release.

It began quickly and soon he was back in ‘the zone’, rising up once again as the king of the jungle. His heart

raced as the rat bounded through his system. His eyes bulged in their sockets while the colony suddenly began to feel like the inside of a tin can.

He tried to push the walls away from himself but even in his super human state, they were not open to negotiation. After emitting a few primal bellows Ed attained the serenity that always exists in the eye of a hurricane. He took in the scene. Earlwin was standing well back, poised to leap even further back at the first sign of impending vomit. Ed threw back his head and laughed the insane laugh of the damned.

His rapidly expanding awareness centred itself on one small truth. He wanted to get out. He wanted to be free! The room felt like a cage and he was trapped. He wanted to feel the cool surface of the world they were living on. He wanted to connect. He wanted to see the sky and feel the fresh breeze blowing past his fingertips. Everything around him was offensively artificial. The walls were an insipid pastel colour that had never existed before the invention of paint. The fake air stuck to him like a sweaty glove. Nothing was real.

He wanted . . . no, he needed to escape.

Ed turned to Earlwin who looked pale and small in the corner. The walls felt as though they were tightening around them. Ed was learning about being ratted by now and was careful not to over-react. He remembered the bruises Earlwin had shown him after he'd thrown him against the wall.

He started to feel dizzy. The room began to spin and he held onto a chair to steady himself. He felt as though he was the centre of a vast swirling vortex. Everything was too bright, too fake and spinning. A committee of his ancient ancestors burst into his mind and directed him to return to the sanctity of his cave. He needed darkness. Effortlessly

he found the light switch. He watched the rays retreat into their source and gratefully – miraculously - felt a little less enclosed. In the darkness he could feel the colony throbbing around him. It felt vast and alive. Ed was alive too, but he felt like a parasite trying to survive inside its guts.

He lay down on the floor and let waves of emancipation break over him like a log washed up on a beach. The gentle rocking motion felt much better and for a while he felt as though he could actually hear the sea breaking around him.

Ed stayed in this state for a long time. It was very pleasant until Earlwin suddenly turned the light back on. As well as the immediate sensation of hot knives carving into his flesh, he could hear Earlwin's voice telling him that he was all right, that everything was fine.

After some more time had stretched itself over and past him he heard Earlwin's voice again, now telling him that it was time to go home.

But he was not ready to go home. He was still ratted, though not as severely as before. He needed to remain horizontal and stationary.

Why did eating rats do what it had obviously just done to him? The fact that he was a vegetarian did not satisfactorily explain anything. This wasn't just some meaty placebo effect that he and Earlwin had cooked up between them. This was a complete paradigm shift. It was like he was on another planet, but even that didn't explain the rat's part in it all. Of course he was on another planet. So was everybody else but none of the other colonists seemed to have any problem carrying on their boring, useless lives just as if they were still living in the sewer that Earth had become. What was happening? It was obviously a composite effect and eating the rat was merely the catalyst. Once again he arrived at the conclusion that he needed to

escape from the contrived human environment in order to appreciate the effect that the planet itself was having.

These rats were not just normal rats. They couldn't be. They hadn't evolved on Earth over the millenniums merely to eat, shit and die. They were seriously mutated and completely unnatural after surviving centuries of man-unkind's best attempts to wipe them out. Poisons specially created with no other purpose than to destroy them had completely failed. The rats had simply absorbed them and moved on as if nothing had happened. Humanity had managed to get rid of every other species on their native planet, some of them without even trying. But these rats had not only survived the best efforts of the most efficient slaughterers in the universes, they had tagged along in an antagonistic relationship, to conquer the place.

Perhaps the human race was just a cover, Ed surmised. The rats didn't have to go to work. They didn't have to organise anything or contribute in any way to the running of the colonies. The humans did all of that for them. They were quietly conquering the cosmos while everybody was trying to pretend that they weren't even there.

And even more horrifying, the same could be said about cockroaches. Their numbers had increased exponentially and thanks to humanity they now occupied every single sector of the immediate universes.

These alien thought processes were doing Ed's head in. In his normal state he knew that he was far too stupid to imagine any of this. Yet now in the twilight of a good ratted it was all becoming painfully obvious. He had to get out onto the planet. The real planet. The artificial environment of the colony was not helping him to think clearly. And so it was decided. Next time Ed got ratted he was going to get out.

With this thought bouncing around inside his pulsing brain, Ed left his office and headed for home.

Back home Regina was waiting, her mind fired up with religious zeal ignited by the Errol Event. She had been chanting the Anti-Mantra and was filled with righteous desire to be better than she was. She desired to have more than this colony could offer her. Regina had seen the light and she knew that her desires were sacred property. They were her birthright, not just as a human but as part of the elite. She was desirous of absolute luxury and complete control over the means of satisfying her righteous desires. She didn't just desire the Universe, she desired desire itself!

Ed stumbled into their apartment. He could really only remember that he desired to get the hell out of the colony. He desired to not be there anymore. He was still partially ratted and he was exhausted. He desired sleep.

Felacia had sat through enough religious crap to turn her brain into custard. She didn't need to understand any of it to know that it was all crap. She had done her duty as a good daughter and that seemed to have pleased her mother, but she had heard more compelling material bubbling up from the toilet. How come her father didn't have to put up with hours and hours of religious drivel? Was it some exclusive feminine quality that had destined her to have to listen to all that? Though she had to admit that he looked as though he had put up with something even more horrible since she had last seen him. The scales of justice rebalanced themselves in her young mind.

Meanwhile her probe had travelled another 3,000 dark light years into uncharted deep space.

“Goodnight,” she said sweetly and kissed her mother on the cheek. Her father was already asleep as Felacia closed

her bedroom door behind her and opened her mind to the latest discoveries of her ever more distant probe.

## Chapter 4

Two days later, a disaster befell the colony. Central Control (CC) contacted its administration section to inform them that the colony had fallen behind its production quota. This meant that an overseer had been dispatched and would be arriving to run a systems analysis to attempt to isolate the problem.

This information was zisked to every personnel station on the colony. It directly affected everyone. All of the administrators at Central Colony Control (CCC) were devastated. They took it very personally. All leave was immediately cancelled and they called an emergency crisis meeting. The horror reverberated like an earthquake with shockwaves emanating from the centre sending ripples of fear and dread out to every human in the colony.

Even the cockroaches could sense that something was wrong. The rats all packed their bags and got ready to jump ship but until another interstellar transport arrived even they had no options.

The Biancans noticed the change. The colony normally emitted a frequency of calm efficiency but suddenly it began to emit disturbingly erratic blasts like an alarm clock that had slept in. The vibe was frantic. The entire colony appeared to be in a state of panic.

Archibald Henschwhistle of Central Control didn't consider panic to be unusual. Most places he travelled to were in a heightened state of panic and AB 27 was perfectly normal in that regard. And so they should be. Twenty days of negative growth meant that their company charter could legally be revoked at any time. That would mean the immediate cessation of all commercial activity

and, of more immediate concern to its inhabitants, the shutdown of all life support systems, usually resulting in the forced termination of employment due to personal bereavement.

The company only allowed colonists 20 hours after a charter was revoked to remove themselves and their possessions from its property. Because it controlled all of the shipping to and from the colonies and most of the relevant space had already been assigned, little mercy was shown to any community that had proved itself to be inefficient.

Only one other colony on Archmed Bianco had failed to meet the company's quotas. AB 13's charter had been revoked about 4EY earlier and it was now derelict. There had only been 17 survivors out of a population of 1,612.

Archibald Henschwhistle was an enthusiastic company man. A 54<sup>th</sup> generation descendent of Jeremiah Horton, the company's founder, he took very seriously his responsibility to ensure that all aspects of the operation remained profitable. He deplored inefficiency and had been personally responsible for closing down 128 inefficient colonies. He stepped into the main control room at CCC and cast a disdainful eye across the quivering staff.

Nobody moved a muscle. Everyone knew exactly who he was and one of the Com Secs actually fainted as he entered. She was dragged away before he could see her limp body slumped across her desk.

Archibald Henschwhistle said nothing. Why should he? Most of these people were already exhibiting signs of sub human desire. They were desiring not to die. He found this pitiful and immediately concluded that it was another symptom of the colony's ultimate problem.

Archmed Bianco was rich in quandalude, a form of radioactivity that powered everything from interstellar

spacecraft to most household utensils. All of the human bases on the planet were set up specifically and solely to mine for quandalude. It was available in seemingly unlimited quantities from specific sights approximately one and a half kilometres below the planet's surface. Once a source was tapped it continued to yield quandalude almost indefinitely. Quandalude was really just a form of energy that was syphoned off at whatever rate it existed in the ground and stored in batteries which were then shipped off planet to where it was refined into manageable quantities.

Quandalude batteries could be used to power anything but were especially useful in deep space because they were small and did not react to the magnetic fields generated by the cosmic bodies that made the phenomenon known as gravity possible. This meant that in effect, quandalude was not only weightless but generated absolutely no field around itself that could interfere with any electric or magnetic drive systems. It was completely physically inert but could be utilised at roughly 1000 horsepower or 1000 watts indefinitely without producing any waste.

AB 27 had 6 shafts that were actively harvesting quandalude and was in the process of drilling two more. CC calculated that the amount of quandalude being produced was not off-setting the energy needed to produce it and run the colony. It was a fairly basic equation and theoretically there should have been a surplus since the third mine commenced production 7EY earlier.

The inefficiency could only be caused by one of four possible variables. Firstly, the systems governing production were malfunctioning. Secondly, the systems maintaining the colony were malfunctioning. Thirdly, the living members of the colony were drawing too much from the system, or finally there was some problem with the accounting that related production to overall cost.

All but the last of these inefficiencies could justify revoking a colony's charter if the problem could not be remedied in a manner that was cost effective to the company.

Human Rights ceased at the outer bounds of the solar system that contained the Earth. Commercial considerations had been the driving force behind all deep space exploration and settlement, and these were deemed to be dominant over the rights of individuals in all of the outer regions.

Every employee of the company had to agree to the terms and conditions of the company handbook, a work that Jeremiah Horton had personally written. Employees were bound exclusively by its stipulations once they had exited the home solar system. There were no politics in deep space. You agreed to the company's rules or you stayed on Earth.

As an incentive, members of commercially successful colonies were given a percentage of the bounties that exploitation produced. It was very unusual for a colony to have its charter revoked and the fact that this had already happened once on Archmed Bianco was at the top of Archibald Henschwhistle's list of considerations.

He was the leader of a fifteen man delegation that had every intention of scrutinising absolutely everything that occurred in the colony. As his hand-picked team intruded into the offices of CCC, even the rats began to defecate irregularly.

Ed saw the news as it was zisked to every communicator on the colony. Regina zisked him immediately. She was terrified.

“What are we going to do? “ she sobbed into the communicator, her image blurred by guptide smoke.

“...” Ed didn’t have an answer. He was wondering the same thing with the additional worry that his rat evenings with Earlwin had something to do with it.

He tried to reassure his hysterical wife, “It’s probably just an accounting problem. We’re as efficient as any other colony.”

“Then why are they here? What are we going to tell Felacia?” At this point Regina burst into tears. “I don’t know why we had to come to this awful planet,” she sobbed. “Why couldn’t you have got a proper job on Earth? What will my father say?”

There was no answer. At any moment the life support systems could be turned off. “It wasn’t my fault,” he offered weakly.

“Of course it’s your fault. It’s all your fault. I never wanted to come here!”

Earlwin was less emotional. In fact he found it all slightly amusing but he dared not let that be known to anybody else. The mood of the other colonists suggested that he could be lynched. “Better find some more rats,” he decided and left his storeman’s office in search of prey.

Sixteen quadrants passed. The colony exhibited all of the symptoms of mass depression. Hardly anybody spoke and all eyes were averted downward in fear and shame.

MER Merily Winthrop sat in his study surrounded by ancient books. He was suddenly seeing the words of his beloved prophet in a new light. A desire not to be dead could surely be equated with a desire to remain alive. He possessed both in equal quantities. They could both be considered to be human desires because humans actually knew that they were alive as opposed to the lesser life-forms which merely desired not to be dead.

He drew strength from Errol's Sermon of the Mint, which had come to pass during one of the prophet's many famous "Bus stop" epistles. A passing heathen had casually spat a mint into the gutter and the prophet had admonished him with the famous words, "Why fore dost thou expelleth thy mint from thy oral cavity? It shall await thee in heaven." Whereupon the unbeliever had punched our prophet in the mouth and told him to, "Shut the fuck up, you wanker!" Immediately the prophet had phoned an ambulance on his mobile phone before turning the Dictaphone off. Later that day, he had three stitches sewn into his holy face. The moral of the parable was never to cast pearls before swine.

This told MER Merily Winthrop that he should attempt to arrange his personal passage out of there. This he decided was in the best interests of Errolism because dedicated pastors such as he were rare and should not be wasted on inefficient congregations.

Meanwhile Archibald Henschwhistle and his team had uncovered some serious acts of adultery involving senior members of the management team and anybody they could talk into it. The colony reeked of immorality and sex. Archibald Henschwhistle was disgusted and had several members of CCC deported back to Earth, much to their gratitude. The notion of the captain going down with the ship had not made it into space. In this case the captain had seemed more interested in going down on the cleaning staff.

Regina, of course, had been above all of this but knew that most of her colleagues were not. A lot of them had been rejected as Goshas and had taken up cleaning as a second choice to get away from Earth.

Finally, the real problem was isolated. It was a problem of the second type, namely that the systems governing the functioning of the colony had malfunctioned. Rats had eaten away the wiring that connected the climate sensors to the central governing console with the result that the system was using far too much energy to compensate for daily temperature changes within the colony. A very simple problem that should have been obvious to Ed and his team but that had remained hidden because the rats had destroyed the override system by building their nests inside its sensitive mechanism.

“Bloody rats!” Archibald Henschwhistle was not impressed that he and his team had been called out to deal with such a basic malfunction. Unfortunately this trip had not furnished him with any new scalps to add to his already impressive collection. But at least he had managed to flush out an upper management sex scandal.

He declared war on the colony’s rats and personally oversaw the destruction of several of their most obvious nests. He ordered twenty advanced rat traps and appointed a rat removal officer (RRO).

He boarded the first shuttle out and the human inhabitants of the colony breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Not so the rats. They intuitively knew that something terrible was happening and intuition became solid reality as their nests were destroyed. They had survived and multiplied without much opposition since they’d first infiltrated the new colony. Besides a few half-hearted attempts to poison them, their position had appeared to be relatively secure. This resulted in a population explosion that was about to blow up in their faces.

Ophyn Krapton had been a storeman until he was promoted to the colony's new position of RRO. Ophyn, in terms of his native intelligence, was no match for a rat. He was barely intelligent enough to remember to change his underwear, a feat he managed to accomplish very infrequently. However, armed with the latest quadracide mach twelve D, vermin disposal units (VDU's) he was a formidable force. Within his first 20 days on the job the rat population was decimated. Entire genetic lines of specially mutated space rats were completely wiped off the face of the void, their charred and battered bodies cremated in a deadly quandalude furnace provided for the purpose.

Ed and Earlwin were horrified at the waste. Both of them began killing and freezing as many rodents as they could find. But they were no match for Ophyn and his VDU's. Their once plentiful supply began to dwindle and dry up. Between them they had managed to freeze 18 rats' bodies before their normally abundant supply was terminated.

"They won't get them all," declared Earlwin as he and Ed prepared three small freshly thawed carcasses for the evening's rat event.

"If Ophyn stays on the job full time, they're going to become very rare." Ed was pessimistic.

"We've got enough to keep us going for a while. When he stops catching them, he'll have to go back to his old job. They won't take long to get back to normal."

"I hope so. Don't forget, next time I want to get outside."

"That's not going to be easy," Earlwin had his doubts.

"There's a space portal in section four. We use it occasionally to clean the outer filters. I've been looking into it." Ed wasn't going to be dissuaded. "I can get a suit from old Jock in supplies. He owes me a favour."

“Don’t expect me to come out with you. I reckon these little babies are done.” Earlwin poured the sizzling rodent remnants onto a plate and began to devour them.

The evening passed without serious incident. The psyche of the colony’s rats had undergone some serious evolution since Earlwin’s last ridding. He also began to feel caged as waves of rat-headedness flooded through his mind. He could feel the fear of the colony’s diminished rat population and had a similarly claustrophobic experience to the one that had convinced Ed that he needed to get outside. He was still not convinced it was a good idea as the effects began to wane after a few hours but he did have a far greater insight into the terror of eradication that was sweeping through the rats. He retired to his cubicle a lot more inclined to help Ed realise the only original idea that he had ever had.

Regina was in their lounge room smoking guptide when Ed arrived home. “Where have you been?” she demanded like an interrogator with the electrodes poised.

“I had another meeting with Earlwin, from stores.” Ed wasn’t quick enough to think up a lie.

“What for? You don’t have anything to do with stores.”

“We were just discussing the rat problem. They don’t have any rats in stores.” Ed fumbled weakly with the truth hoping his wife would lose interest. Fortunately for him she neither cared about nor was interested in rats for any reason and she let the subject slink away.

“I hope you’re going to come to the next Errol Event,” she said mercifully changing the subject. “The last one was truly uplifting. Even Felacia enjoyed it. You need to become more involved with religion. You’re not going to live forever you know.”

Ed knew, but he didn't care. He certainly didn't believe any of that codswallop about going to a huge rubbish tip when you die. Even his small imagination was able to spot the company's thinly veiled attempt to mould its peoples' attitudes into a more manageable asset.

"What about rats?" he thought quietly to himself. Will they all be waiting for us when we're dead? Certainly not the ones that Earlwin and he had caught. Most of them were still waiting in the storeroom freezer.

Ophyn Krapton had found his true vocation. Armed with his deadly VDU's and a mandate from the company's upper echelons, he attacked the rat population with merciless gusto. He trapped them in the Gupteria, in the hallways and throughout the colony's ventilation shafts. He found everywhere that they tried to hide. Nowhere was safe as he tirelessly sniffed out every last rat haven and efficiently exterminated all of the occupants. He slaughtered them in their thousands; old and young, male and female, their defeated corpses stuffed into the incinerator each night and obliterated.

MER Merily Winthrop had not managed to get himself out of the colony before 'the problem' had been discovered and subsequently remedied. Without impending doom hanging over his pious head, the need to leave became less and less immediate and finally was discarded to await his arrival in heaven. He continued in his parish duties, consoling the suffering and running the church bingo nights.

He spent most of his free evenings at the base of the great bronze statue of Jeremiah Horton which marked the epicentre of the colony. The statue was an inspiring image of the young Jeremiah, one arm outstretched to the

cosmos, inviting his employees to get out there and exploit the virgin universes to the full, under the other arm was a bound volume of the Chronicles of Errol.

MER Merily Winthrop always felt uplifted in the statue's presence. It represented the pioneering spirit of humanity in the final conquest of space, the last frontier. In it he could see the highest desire of all; to be masters of the universes, a desire that humanity had embraced in its unstoppable thrust towards the greatness that was its birthright.

"Ferdie tiddle dum do," he chanted to himself.

Beneath the statue's base, the rats had established their last safe haven. This was the only place in the colony that had not been the scene of an epic massacre. They huddled together beneath the giant edifice, silently waiting as Merily Winthrop quietly invoked the anti-mantra and lost himself in the beauty and depth of the myriad, myopic, teachings of Errol.

Meanwhile, Felacia's probe was still speeding away out into the infinite firmament, dutifully sending back data to its 11EY old controller. One evening as she sat at her zisk console analysing the columns of figures, she noticed a glaring anomaly.

According to the data she had received that day, there appeared to be a planet made of solid gold. Naturally she was extremely excited. A small squeal of glee managed to escape from her lips before her overriding desire not to arouse the suspicion of her parents reasserted itself.

She encrypted the coordinates and all of the relevant data into a secret dossier with the intention of filing an application to register and claim the new territory for herself. Felacia was still examining the information when her mother called for her to come and have dinner.

She emerged from her room, trying to act nonchalant and bored with her homework.

“You spend far too much time doing homework these days,” her mother commented as she sat down to the evening meal of soy protein and vegetables.

“I’m doing a space project,” she answered flatly, hoping it sounded too boring to qualify as a subject of conversation.

“You’re not experimenting with anything dangerous, I hope,” Ed tried to sound concerned and authoritative.

“No.” Felacia answered hoping that her parents would soon get back to their normal arguments and leave her alone.

“Could I have some more broccoli?” she asked hoping to divert the conversation away from her activities. That seemed to work. Her parents’ short burst of interest in their daughter had satisfied both of them that they were trying to be good parents and the rest of the meal passed without any more misinformation being requested or offered.

Ed’s next date with a dead rat was not due for another five days. He needed to borrow a space suit and organise an exit strategy to get himself out of the colony. As far as he was aware, nobody had ever tried to get outside except for routine maintenance of the outer shell and to change the outer filters. He was, for the first time in his life, attempting something both daring and new. He had no previous experience of either.

Earlwin’s existence had always been controversial. He understood Ed’s desire to get out but his own experience had taught him that being radical was best accomplished by keeping a low profile and not doing anything that might attract the attention of the flock. He had become a master

at the game of playing normal. Going outside was too reckless for his hardened sense of rebelliousness. Too many uncontrollable variables that could easily attract unwanted attention, but he also knew that Ed had made a firm decision. Earlwin was not about to begin to try and talk any sense into him. He didn't feel qualified for that sort of thing. Besides, if all went well, he wouldn't be completely adverse to trying it himself at a later date.

Archmed Bianco moved silently through space, slowly shedding the souls of dead rats from AB 27. The multiple levels of civilization that the planet supported were able to go about their daily business without any of the usual conflicts that always occurred once the humans had recognised another life form.

The quandalude mines continued to produce the energy that would be used in humanity's manic quest for total domination of everything that they were aware of. This continued to amuse the Biancans who continued to observe the humans as though they were an interestingly shaped sand dune.

Finally the quadrant arrived that was to provide Ed with his opportunity to get his booted feet onto actual terra bianca.

It was rat day again!

Ed was excited and terrified. He'd never felt so alive in his life before. Even without having ingested any rat he was buzzing with anticipation. He'd organised the space suit and had accessed the control sequence that would enable him to open the portal. Even Earlwin was impressed. It all seemed inevitable as they fried the diced bodies of four baby rats.

“I hope the babies are as potent,” Ed was annoyed that Earlwin had not defrosted some serious large rats. “They’ve probably never been poisoned. What if they don’t work.”

“They’ll work. Don’t worry, I got ratted on that Gosha girl’s pet mouse.”

Ed was still annoyed as he ate the freshly fried flesh. He put on the space suit and he and Earlwin left his office and moved discreetly to the airlock in nearby section 4. Ed could feel the baby rats surging through his bloodstream as he turned and glared Earlwin with a last look of fear and gratitude.

Earlwin punched in the code to open the inner airlock. Sure enough it sprang open. He helped Ed to secure and lock the suits’ helmet into place. Ed stepped into the chamber. Earlwin closed the door behind him and punched in the code that would evacuate the air. That took about 20 seconds. Next he initiated the equaliser sequence to adjust the chamber to the outer planet’s surface pressure and temperature. This took about 2 minutes before the control console flashed the green light. He opened the outer doors.

For a while Ed didn’t move. He stood inside the airlock and looked out at the planet’s surface. Earlwin wondered if he had lost his nerve. After a very long minute, Ed took a few steps forward and climbed down six stairs. The seventh landed his boot on the surface of Archmed Bianco.

The planet’s gravity field was far more intense than Earth’s which had been replicated inside the colony. Ed felt like he had lead weights strapped to his back. The rat was working now. He felt fantastic, like a convict who had just escaped from jail. He looked up into the sky and saw two of the planet’s seven moons for the first time. One of the planet’s twin suns had set and the other was flooding

the landscape with vermillion twilight. The sky was filled with stars that looked as if he could reach out and touch them. The colours were indescribable.

Wow.

He dragged his heavy body away from the colony and turned back to look at it. He was only about three meters away, not far enough. He had been right about the baby rats. They were nowhere near as strong as the equivalent weight of adult male rat would have been but that was a minor concern now.

The planet's surface was smooth and flat where the colony had been built but then appeared to fall away into extremely rugged terrain. He could see mountains that dwarfed the colony's dome. The whole landscape had an eerie purple hue with occasional splashes of red and yellowy green.

It amazed him to think that all those people lived in the dome behind him. His whole life since he and his family had arrived on the planet had been spent inside that dome.

The planet's surface felt squishy like a sponge. He looked down and realised that he was slowly sinking into it. He dislodged his feet and kept moving. There was absolutely nothing that he could relate to conditions on Earth. The whole planet was utterly alien. It was so blissfully peaceful and completely empty.

Suddenly, from his extreme right, an intense flash of orange and blue light became his entire reality before everything went black.

Immediately he became aware that he was no longer on the planet but was in a dark corridor heading towards a distant spark of bright white light. As he drew nearer he was able to discern that he was, in fact riding on some sort of white chariot that was being pulled along by six gigantic white rats. He could hear a sound like rushing wind, in

stark contrast to the silence that he had so recently been enjoying.

Gradually the light became bigger and brighter until he felt that he had somehow arrived inside it. He was greeted by a figure, dressed in a flowing white robe who looked a bit like some of the pictures he had seen of the prophet Errol. The figure was holding what looked like a white clipboard. It regarded Ed through eyes that looked like portals into deep space. “Ah, Edwinkle Henderon, I’ve been expecting you.”

Around the figure were several floating clouds. They were semi-transparent and seemed to be moving independently of each other. The figure did not appear to be aware of their presence, or was ignoring it. One of the clouds was hovering just above the figure’s right shoulder and appeared to grow an arm which then tapped the figure on its shoulder.

The figure turned but appeared not to see anything. It turned back to face Ed and returned its gaze to the clipboard. There was an eerie silence. The figure coughed to clear its throat. After shuffling the papers on its clipboard for a few moments it looked up at Ed and said, “You don’t appear to be on my inventory. You must go back.”

At that moment the entire scene dissolved into a spinning vortex of light. Ed had the feeling that he was being sucked backwards very quickly. He tried to look over his shoulder to see where he was going but could see only intense black darkness.

Back inside the colony Earlwin had seen the flash as the colony’s defensive blazer system had sensed Ed’s presence and blasted him.

Ed had never been a lucky person. Most people considered that the hand nature had dealt him was

extremely unlucky. However, outside, on the surface of Archmed Bianco all that changed dramatically.

Firstly, Ed was lucky that the colonies' founders had considered Archmed Bianco to be devoid of all life forms. Otherwise they would have installed a more sophisticated and irrevocably deadly Raypov defence system that would have reduced Ed to a harmless shower of inert sparks beyond any help in the living universes. The blazer had merely cut Ed's body into two halves.

Ed was also very lucky that the cut was clean and that none of his major organs were badly damaged.

However, the crowning glory in his trinity of luck was that some of the Biancans had also witnessed his emergence onto the planet's surface. They were present when the deadly Blazer had been activated. They responded quickly and removed both his halves from the blazers deadly track. After collecting his spilled entrails, they pulled his two halves together and then stopped his blood from spilling out onto the planet's surface. The blazer rays passed harmlessly through them.

From within the colony, CCC began to monitor the situation as soon as the blazer was activated. They were quick to mobilise an emergency crew and even though nobody believed a human could survive being cut in half, Ed was retrieved and within four minutes the two halves of his body had been placed on life support.

That Ed had survived was the result of at least two miracles that the doctors could not explain. He should have died instantly but thanks to the Biancans, both halves were still alive when he was pulled back into the colony. He had lost minimal blood and appeared to be amazingly well for somebody who had just been bifurcated.

There was no rational explanation. There wasn't even an irrational explanation. Any attempt at a medical explanation would have required all of the medical textbook libraries in the universes to be completely rewritten and then burnt.

Human beings were not designed to be cut in half. It had always proved fatal in the past. In fact split physicality had been employed as a consistently successful method of execution throughout many of the bloodthirsty ages of human history. Monsieur Guillotine was doing cartwheels in his grave on Earth but Ed was still, unbelievably, alive. And he was repairable!

He lay unconscious with lots of expensive medical devices monitoring his mysteriously vital functions. Doctors came and went, usually having raised an eyebrow or two and often muttering under their breaths some personal theory that they hoped would in time make them famous.

There was no precedent in all of recorded medicine that even came close to explaining how Ed's body had been able to survive after what it had gone through, or more to the point after what had gone through it. Suddenly the old magicians' trick of sawing his assistant in half seemed old hat, passé. That could always be explained logically, but Ed was a whole new category of phenomena that defied logic. He defied common sense. He even defied abject stupidity dressed up as some new fangled form of otherwise inapplicable wisdom.

For 12 days he lay in a coma. Regina and Felacia spent many hours at his bedside, although Felacia spent most of it wishing she was somewhere else. Regina, for the first time in her life actually felt proud of her unconscious husband. If only he had always been like this, they would have gotten along a lot better.

## Chapter 5

The 31<sup>st</sup> century had witnessed the life of one of the greatest minds that the human race would ever produce. His name was Heinrick Imnothero. Considered by many of his contemporaries to be an eccentric, his chosen field of endeavour was astrology. After establishing his credentials by discovering many new phenomena in space he postulated a theory that was to destroy the very foundations of traditional human thought. Dealing with the hitherto uncharted territory of the human imagination, the Imnothero Principle eventually proved to within nine and a half million decimal places, that relativity is relative, although not the type of relative that brings beer or even chimpanzees.

One afternoon while he was cleaning his telescope Heinrick Imnothero had an intriguing thought. It occurred to him that the invention of the first magnifying lenses had made possible both the invention of the telescope and the invention of the microscope. This had allowed early scientists to look more closely at very small things as well as at very large things.

The fact that they found solar systems in the sky and atoms in puddles of dirty water was significant to Heinrick Imnothero. He considered that they'd found exactly the same thing looking in two opposite directions.

At the time these discoveries were made, medieval humanity did not possess a very sophisticated vision of reality. The medieval world view was dominated by the Christian Church that ruthlessly enforced the idea that God was the centre of existence and that everything else revolved around Him.

Nearly twenty centuries later, Heinrick Imnothero put these three historical facts together and came up with the

Imnothero Principle. His contention was that humanity had only discovered what it was capable of imagining based on the beliefs of the time. Early mono-theistic religions had only allowed for one expectation of the nature of reality. The fact that exactly the same thing was discovered in two completely unrelated areas of scientific research proved a conclusive link between expectation and causality.

He was able to prove that these tandem identical discoveries were statistically improbable. Their dual occurrence could not be explained by chaos theory, random chance or any explanation other than the creative powers of the human imagination.

Backed by the cold predictability of statistical analysis he was able to enunciate the highly unpalatable contention that if enough people believe in an idea, then that idea will eventually become truth and the physical universe will manifest a corresponding set of circumstances to justify the belief. He proved that reality is the direct result of thought. In short, 'we think therefore it is'.

He applied the Imnothero Principle to other discoveries in the natural world, specifically the giraffe, the zebra and the kangaroo. Europeans had imagined that the world was filled with strange exotic creatures many centuries before they were actually discovered. It was this belief that actually created the creatures, or at least created the space necessary in human thinking, for them to eventually manifest.

Mermaids were a notable exception that he claimed proved the rule. Let's face it, how many sailors, at sea for months on end are going to waste their time imagining a species of large breasted, beautiful women whose thighs can never be parted? Most sailors believe women like that deserve to be extinct. According to Heinrick Imnothero that was the reason why a very novel idea, highly appealing

from the religious point of view, was unable to fill the oceans with extra fishy, non-vaginal women.

He went on to cite examples presented by the study of subatomic particles. He claimed that their ability to dematerialise and rematerialise, apparently at will, as well as their ability to be in two places at once, was only discovered after most scientists had become bored with the rigid predictability of science.

The Imnothero Principle created a huge crack that eventually split the accepted human reality paradigm down the middle. No longer were the powers of the imagination to be held in check by a tyrannical and false assertion that reality came before thought, or that thought was merely a reaction to reality. Objective reality, as a concept, was no longer sustainable.

The Imnothero Principle finally and comprehensively debunked science. Science had always depended on the contention that things were real and that belief was the result of verified reality. Not the other way around.

Science had unwittingly discovered the Imnothero Principle way back in the twentieth century. Science called it the placebo effect and proceeded to specifically ignore and even exclude its effects from experimental data for the next thousand years.

By the time it became obvious that science was just another narrowly defined set of expectations and preconceived beliefs, it had been relegated to the realms of religion, possessing far too much real estate to just go away.

It finally deteriorated into several cults that continued to insist that nuclear energy had been a good idea, that medicines really did cure diseases, that all those guns and bombs were a great investment and that they were doing it all for the ultimate good of mankind.

Science was replaced by Commerce. Commercial considerations are far more realistic and much more predictable than science had ever been. Commerce gives people what they want and there is no placebo effect.

Commerce had always been the major driving force behind science. It was the ultimate cause of whatever science 'discovered'. By accepting this, humanity was able to access a far more fundamental level of reality. It was able to appreciate that the real cause of most of what it had imagined was commerce, or stated more simply, the system of personal gain.

Archmed Bianco had been discovered in the 32nd Century during the classic Imnothero period. At that time the majority of humanity held the belief that because the cosmos is infinite, then every possibility can and must exist in some form, somewhere. Consequently, the universe had manifested a planetary system in orbit around a giant beer can and an empty cigarette packet.

This caused astrologers a lot of problems. For a start they couldn't establish whether the can was full or empty due the intense radiation that the twin 'suns' produced. Their greatest fear was that if the brands on the two colossal cosmic containers were identified, somebody was either going to sue the universe for copyright violations or claim for themselves the greatest advertising campaign in the history of jumping up and down and yelling 'look at me'.

On the thirteenth day, Ed stirred. The first thing he noticed was the smell. He mumbled, "Bloody rat!" then opened an eye. He closed it again preferring unconsciousness to what he hoped he had not really seen. Eventually he opened the other one. Not much better with

limited prospects of any improvement. In desperation he opened them both.

“This doesn’t look good,” he lamented quietly to himself. “So what happened and what’s that funny smell?” he wondered. “Why can I feel my toes over there? In fact why can my toes feel my head over here?” A million previously unthought thoughts ricocheted around in his brain.

One of the machines that he was connected to suddenly became active. Its little indicators nearly produced excrement in the excitement of having something to measure for the first time in 13 days. It whooped and squealed like a schoolgirl being offered a lift home in a Rolls Royce.

A nurse appeared at the door, then quickly disappeared. A few moments later Ed could hear footsteps rapidly approaching and a doctor burst into the room, panting like somebody he should have been treating.

Ignoring Ed, the white coated imitation of a caring human being (although to be fair, they were rare in any profession in space) began frantically adjusting the various controls on the machine which appeared to be having its own coronary. He stroked it. He whispered words of comfort to it and at one point he even embraced it. The company would require his blood if it was proved that the machine had malfunctioned while in his care.

Eventually the machine calmed down enough to allow the doctor to give some of his attention to Ed. He produced a very small sensory device and waved it dismissively above Ed’s upper body. Then he moved it to Ed’s lower body which was on another bed nearby.

Both Ed’s halves lay still. His options were extremely limited. He had no idea where he was. The aroma was peculiar. Definitely unfamiliar although it reminded him of

something more unpleasant than anything he cared to recall.

The nurse, who had followed the doctor into the room, began to fuss with some other pieces of equipment that were also connected to Ed. The doctor began to mutter to her about “vital signs,” and voltage spikes. As far as Ed was concerned they may as well have been speaking in Braille.

Eventually they left.

Ed wondered whether he had been captured by aliens. He couldn't move and there was that smell.

Regina arrived ushered in by another nurse telling her that her husband needed to rest and that she was not to get him too excited. Apparently excitement was something that was reserved for the machines. Regina took his hand and brought her face up to within a few centimetres of his. He recognised the smell of guptide.

“Darling, you're alive!” she sobbed.

Ed felt perhaps he should apologise but was incapable of producing any response. Not responding had sometimes worked in the past and he felt reassured when it worked again. At least it didn't make things any worse.

Regina continued to stare intensely into his eyes while holding onto his hand as if letting go might suddenly cause a comet to smash through the colony.

Ed became aware of a disturbance outside the closed door. Somebody was trying unsuccessfully to get in. Moments later the door opened and a man in a suit stepped into the room and pointed a visio-recorder at Ed. There was a flash and then he was gone. Ed could hear what sounded like a lot of people arguing outside the closed door.

“Don’t worry darling,” Regina used the ‘d’ word for the second time in ten years. “It’s only the press. They’ve come a long way to see you.”

“All right Mrs Henderon, I think he’s had enough for the time being.” The nurse stepped in like a nightclub bouncer and escorted Regina to the door. They both left the room.

Ed heard the disturbance outside his room grow to a crescendo. He could see lights flashing under the closed door.

A few minutes later an entire team of doctors in white coats entered the room. Once again they ignored Ed and concentrated their attention on the machines. One of them eventually appeared to notice him lying there and shone a small torch into one of his ears.

“Uh huh,” said the doctor formally before disappearing back into the crowd of his agitated colleagues. One by one they left until Ed was once again alone in the room. Each time one of them left, the crowd on the other side of the door surged forward and had to be physically restrained from entering the room.

“Something important must be happening out there.” Ed thought to himself as he drifted back into a deep sleep.

When he awoke, Regina and Felacia were sitting beside his beds and several nurses were attending to the machines. He wondered if anyone else had noticed the strange smell.

“Hello daddy,” said Felacia. She had never imagined that her father could ever be more interesting than a solid gold planet but today he actually was.

Regina smiled down at him and said, “Don’t try to say anything. The doctors have told us that you need to rest.”

Ed had no problem with any of that and just lay there, wondering whether the universe had gone mad while he was asleep or whether he just hadn't noticed it before.

Felacia continued, "The doctors told us that you're a miracle. They said that you've defied medical commerce. I'm so proud of you daddy. I hope you get well soon."

"That's enough Dear," interrupted Regina. "We don't want to get daddy too excited."

Ed attempted to smile.

The nurse returned and gently shunted his family out through the door. The crowd on the other side once again erupted into a frenzy of noise and flashes of light. Ed went back to sleep.

This went on for about ten days as far as Ed could tell. He started feeling very comfortable about his situation. He had never been the centre of so much attention before. The press gallery outside his door continued to harass everyone who came near him and he felt like a movie star. His family had finally developed some respect for him and everything seemed pretty rosy from his hospital bed.

The unusual smell was the hospital itself. It was made from synthetic flesh and despite the best efforts of the aroma management team, the entire building emanated a strong olfactory disturbance that penetrated many other planes of reality, annoying even the Biancans.

Centuries before, medical commerce had realised the unprofitability of keeping living bodies in a sterile environment. Any germs present immediately headed straight for the patients, causing horrible infections that had often proved fatal and always expensive. It was the hospital accountants who eventually realised that medicine would be far more profitable if the hospital itself was dirtier than the patients. In a really filthy environment the

germs do not bother with the patients. This breakthrough revolutionized hospital care by making it safe for living creatures. Over time, synthetic flesh was developed as a building material and was used for the construction of hospitals.

With the addition of several buckets of excrement left discretely in the corners of each ward, all forms of infection were eventually completely satiated, without any need to bother the patients at all.

Ed slowly adapted to the olfactory side effects of modern hospital care.

Then, one day the nurse ushered in two men whom he had never seen before. They introduced themselves as Barlow and Bartholomew and sat down on either side of the bed containing Ed's upper torso and head.

Barlow began after a brief exchange of pleasantries, "So why were you outside the colony?"

"I was curious about the planet." Ed had suspected that eventually somebody would start asking the questions he didn't want to answer and had prepared himself to parry the first few.

"Curious about what?" Barlow continued.

"I just wanted to see what the planet looked like."

"Why didn't you go through the normal channels and get permission?"

"I didn't know there were any normal channels. Nobody I spoke to has ever been outside the colony."

"Didn't you realise that it was dangerous?"

"I didn't know we had a blazer system out there if that's what you mean."

The two investigators exchanged a brief glance. Barlow continued, "Where did you get the suit from?"

"I borrowed it."

"From who?"

“I just borrowed it from the supply department.”

Bartholomew leaned forward threateningly and spoke for the first time, “From who?”

“I have a friend who works there. I don’t want to get anybody into trouble.”

“Anybody else you mean,” Bartholomew had a very abrasive bedside manner.

“I take full responsibility for my actions,” Ed was starting to feel uncomfortable. “What’s this all about?” he asked in a half-hearted attempt to take the initiative.

Bartholomew leaned forward again. “This is about theft of company property, and violations of articles 41, 93, 134, 168, 212, 416 and 696 of the company handbook.”

“Sounds like I need a lawyer.” Ed understood articles 267-274 which guaranteed all employees the right to silence and to legal representation.

“Fine,” interjected Barlow. “You can have a lawyer if that’s what you really want. Otherwise we can clear this whole thing up right now if you will just answer the questions.”

By now it was occurring to Ed that he wasn’t going to be able to bluff his way through. “I want my lawyer. This interview is terminated. Thank you gentlemen, now kindly leave.”

Barlow and Bartholomew exchanged another look. It was the kind of look used by executioners as they divided their victim’s boots between themselves after a hard day at the office. It was the kind of look exchanged by holders of a winning lottery ticket, seconds after the draw. The two B’s stood up in unison and left without another word.

The press gallery parted silently like the Red Sea before Moses. The two investigators slipped through like the proverbial red-hot poker.

The next morning Ed's lawyer arrived. Biergitte Escablebint normally wouldn't have bothered with a case like Ed's. There were no damages for her to take a hefty chunk of. There was no property, assets or anything else for her to appropriate in lieu of fees. They were only fighting for the poor fool's life and had that been worth anything, there wouldn't have been a fight in the first place.

He did however have seemingly unlimited attention from the intergalactic media which meant instant superstar status for her, whether she saved his worthless life or not.

Besides, Bierg's career was not exactly enviable to date and if he had not been a second rate space cadet, he wouldn't have taken her on either. So all in all it seemed like a good match. Bierg breezed into the hospital in her Cosmo Dior power suit, wearing perfume designed to cripple star systems and carrying her Paco De Spirall designer, extinct Hemophine gblirl, brief case.

She spent 15 minutes dealing with the press corps assembled outside Ed's door before entering in a haze of 'Feminine Conquistador', the perfume of the new generation of super-power bitch. Destiny had arrived. Suddenly the hospital didn't stink anymore. Ed attempted to sit up.

Bierg opened her expensive briefcase and produced the company's assessment. Put simply, it stated that Ed wasn't worth the cost of the necessary repairs. His career advancement prospects were rated at minus 3 and the expense of sewing him back together was more than he would earn in 14 lifetimes. The company's verdict was "Write-off". Ed's costs were already more than his current employment status was worth to the company so without wealthy financial backers his only hope was the ancient, seldom invoked defence of compassion. In this regard he could count on the media and there was a remote

possibility that his story could be sold to the tabloids. However this was unlikely to result in the necessary funding to finance a complete recovery, without which he would be considered worthless by the company.

Bierg paused. “Is that all perfectly clear to you Mr Henderon?”

“Um er, I suppose so.” Ed blinked in the brilliance of her presence.

Bierg continued, “We do have three appeals in the event that the defence of compassion is rejected by the board of directors. I suggest we lodge the first appeal immediately, so that they can’t short circuit the process by ordering your life support to be terminated, sub gratia. How do you feel about that option?”

Ed was stunned. “What do you mean ‘life support terminated’?”

“That means that all these expensive machines which you depend on to stay alive will be disconnected.”

“You mean turned off?”

“That’s right.”

“What will I do then?”

“You’ll die.”

“Oh.”

There was a substantial pause while Ed waited for the good news.

“So I assume we will be lodging the appeal then?” Bierg continued.

Ed was silent. Staying silent had got him by in the past and it didn’t seem like a good time to experiment with untried strategies.

“We need to establish a basis for the appeal,” she continued after it became obvious that Ed had nothing to say.

“What about the fact that I don’t want to die?” Ed played the only card in his diminished deck.

“According to article 1261, that is merely an animal desire and therefore doesn’t count in terms of company policy for human employees.”

“What about my wife and daughter?”

“They will receive a pension under section 874.”

Once again Ed couldn’t think of anything to say.

Bierg continued, ”The only basis’ for appeal are; unconsidered potential for future advancement, miscalculation of either current or future worth, miscalculation of the cost of repairs, or unconsidered financial resources. Otherwise we’ll have to directly challenge the company’s right to make termination orders or its ability to carry them out, which in this case I don’t think is in question.”

“So what’s our best shot?” Ed was stunned. Ten minutes ago he’d imagined that he was a celebrity. “Can’t we bring up the fact that my survival was a miracle?”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to try to embarrass the company. They saved your life originally and even a miracle wouldn’t have helped you if it wasn’t for the company and their technology. I think we should steer away from that.”

Ed was dumbfounded.

“I think our first appeal should be based on questioning all the calculations made. If we can prove that just one of them is incorrect then we should have a good chance of bringing the whole thing down. If the foundations are shaky it’s just a house of cards. It’ll collapse and you won’t have to prove anything.”

Ed liked the sound of that a lot better. He nodded his assent.

“All right then,” Bierg snapped her briefcase shut, slightly annoyed that Ed didn’t appear to have noticed the

ostentatious logo it bore. “I’ve got work to do. I’ll be in touch.”

Just as she had entered, she was gone. She walked out of the room and into the waiting media like a trapeze artist landing in a safety net at the end of a sold out performance.

Ed’s whole life, or what was left of it had just been turned upside down and dropped on his head. Where was his safety net? Surely it was against religion to just turn off the machines and let him die. What was the point of a miracle if it didn’t save his life?

Ed didn’t sleep very well that night.

The next day it was the intergalactic news media’s turn. Ed had ceased to be news. His recovery had lost the interest of the majority of the journalists who’d been staking out his hospital room. They’d rushed off to cover freshly breaking stories that the universes were throwing up at every moment, mostly without even a backward glance at Ed’s deteriorating predicament.

The few journo’s who remained were mainly from the intergalactic women’s magazines and were more representative of current affairs than cutting edge news. They were shown into Ed’s room by a nurse and were allowed to compete for Ed’s answers for about half an hour, after which they were ushered back out into the corridor.

During that half hour they took a few photos but Ed wasn’t particularly photogenic. He appeared to have no idea how he’d survived and was evasive about the circumstances that had gotten him outside the colony. So that really just left the fact that he was a family man who the company had deemed not worth the cost of the

treatment he needed. What kind of a story were they expected to write about a loser?

His lawyer knew more about his status than he did and made much better pictures. She had recently posed nude for one of the men's publications and seemed to have succeeded in eclipsing poor old Ed who was described in one of the subsequent articles as "two halves of a half wit."

When Regina read the article she was mortified. It was bad enough that her husband had embarrassed the whole colony with his juvenile antics but now his stupidity was being broadcast across the universes.

Felacia locked herself in her room and refused to have anything to do with anyone. At first her friends had thought her father must be some kind of 'cool rebel' but as the story unfolded it became obvious that he was more of a cold idiot. As for his 'miracle', most people decided that he was just too stupid to have realised that he was dead.

Felacia didn't care what other people thought. She was still proud of her daddy. For the first time in either of their lives he had actually done something different. She didn't care that most people thought he was stupid. She thought that most people were stupid and at least he had done something that nobody else could understand or explain.

If she really had discovered a solid gold planet then she would be able to pay for his treatment with the proceeds. So she sat in her room, glued to her zisk monitor attempting to pilot her probe back within range of the phantom planet so that she could conduct a thorough scan and analysis.

Deep space travel had revealed that there were in fact three speeds at which light travels. The speed of light mach one (or sol mk 1) is 186,000 miles per second and is the

velocity of normal starlight in the visible light spectrum. Light speed mach two (sol mk 2) is considerably faster at approximately 2 trillion times sol mk 1. It is the speed at which black, or invisible light travels. Technically it can be understood as the speed of dark, which is really just light travelling so fast that it can't be seen.

The speed of light mach three (sol mk 3) is the basis of Zisk technology. Named after its discoverer, Dr Votiz Zisk, it allows information to be transferred from one location to another instantly. This is achieved by harnessing the ability of subatomic particles to dematerialise and rematerialise anywhere at will. By attaching a message to a subatomic particle and directing its rematerialisation it is possible to instantly send information from anywhere in the universes, to anywhere else.

Dr Zisk had accomplished this by realising that subatomic particles are actually an extremely intelligent life form existing on another scale. Their equivalents exist in the scale where humanity exists as well and were known as UFO's until Dr Zisk demystified their existence, renaming them IFO's (Identified flying objects). He was able to make contact and eventually signed a treaty with subatomic particles (or very, very tiny IFO's) by which they agreed to transmit humanity's messages across the time/space continuum in exchange for humanity leaving them in peace and halting all further invasive studies of their activities.

The treaty was ratified by Intergalactic Mining and Settlement in the 33rd century and since then Zisk technology has become the principle communication system employed by humanity. Without it all interstellar communication would have been practically impossible due to the vast distances involved. Subatomic particles exist in enormous quantities absolutely everywhere. Even if every member of the human race were to spend every possible

moment sending zisk messages they would only ever be able to involve a minute percentage of the available subatomic IFO's.

Felacia's probe had been travelling at sol mk 2 when it passed the solar system allegedly containing the golden planet. It analysed the light of the twelve worlds in the system as it had swept past at about four million trillion miles per second. At this speed it had only been able to take a brief snapshot of the system. By the time Felacia had been able to assess the data, the probe was several billion dark light years further away.

Turning it around at this velocity had required a turning circle several galaxies across and then to pinpoint the actual system and run another scan was like trying to find one specific grain of sand on a beach using a telescope on another planet.

A few days later Bierg returned to see her client. She was wearing a lot more jewellery this time.

"I've found a small loophole," she began. "I checked the company's calculations and I found that they made a mistake when they calculated it would take you 14 lifetimes to repay the debt. On your current pay scale, factoring in all the inflationary increases it will actually take you over 16 lifetimes to repay the cost of your treatment."

That didn't sound very helpful to Ed.

Bierg continued, "That miscalculation could work in your favour to cast doubts on the overall accuracy of the company's claims. It will certainly qualify as a basis for a first appeal which will at least buy us some time to look into grounds for a second appeal at a later date."

"So they won't be able to turn the machines off?"

"Not until all the appeals have been heard."

“What about my treatment? When can they sew me back together?”

“They won’t do anything until after we’ve lodged a successful appeal. Until then you can consider yourself lucky that they’re keeping you alive.”

Ed didn’t feel very lucky.

“So,” Bierg continued, “I’ve taken the liberty of lodging the first appeal and with your permission I will start digging around for grounds for a second appeal should this one, as is most likely, be rejected.”

Ed nodded his head weakly. “Is there anything that I can do to help,” he offered.

“Just don’t tell the media anything about why you were outside the colony. Otherwise if I need anything I’ll let you know.”

Bierg closed her brief case and left Ed wondering if he could reach some of the machines to turn them off himself.

Later that day Earlwin appeared at Ed’s bedside.

“How are you doing?” Earlwin could see that the answer wasn’t going to contain many if any positive adjectives, but he felt that he should at least act as though there was a possibility.

“You certainly confused all those doctors,” he continued not giving Ed a chance to state the obvious. “It must’ve been something in the rat that saved you.”

“I haven’t been saved yet,” Ed was happy in a depressed kind of way to see his friend.

“They won’t pull the plug. Too much media attention. It’ll make the company look bad.”

“They say I’ve already made the company look bad.”

“Well that’ll make them look even worse.” Earlwin was desperate to appear optimistic, but he knew in his heart

that Ed was a goner. The company only cared about its profit sheets. They would have pulled the plug on the whole colony if it wasn't for the rats.

Earlwin tried to change the subject. "I haven't seen any rats anywhere. Looks like Ophyn got the lot."

"Good. I never want to see another rat as long as I live."

Earlwin refrained from the obvious reply. "I've still got a few on ice," he replied with unusual tact.

"You'll have to find somebody else to help you with them. Even if I get out of here in one piece, I won't be doing any of that again."

The rest of the conversation degenerated into blokey drivel.

Earlwin left.

Once again Ed didn't sleep very well. He had a dream that he was in court being tried in front of a rat judge with a rat lawyer accusing him of causing all the rat deaths in the colony. He woke up grateful that it was only a dream.

Bierg appeared the next day, fresh from a television interview in which she'd spelt out the grounds for Ed's second appeal. She thought that she'd better inform him of what they were and of the fact that his first appeal had been rejected.

"They threw it out," she said bluntly. "They said it strengthened the company's position and weakened ours. I knew that would happen."

Ed looked even more pathetic than usual.

"But," Bierg continued, "I have been studying the company handbook and it appears old Jeremiah Horton may have unwittingly thrown us a lifeline. When he wrote Errolism into the handbook he failed to delete a few

contradictory earlier clauses. These relate directly to the company's right to terminate the lives of anybody for solely commercial purposes. If we can substantiate the relevance of several of Errol's key postulates in regard to company policy, we may be able to undermine the company's position in regard to its religious responsibilities, at its eventual termination."

Ed hadn't understood a word since being told that his first appeal had failed but he gathered from Bierg's mannerisms and tone that there was some form of hope. "Great," he muttered weakly.

"If we can prove that by turning off your life support, the company is in effect discarding you, then according to Errolism, you will be awaiting the spirit of the company when it finally ceases trading at some hypothetical future date and under article 467, clause 11b of the Intergalactic Bankruptcy Act, you would then have to be listed as a liability against the company's resources to be reconciled when the company is finally wound up at some time in the future."

This made even less sense to Ed who tried to look intelligent as she continued.

"So what that means is that rather than having to list you as a future liability, the company would be better off keeping you alive and thereby not having to deal with your soul upon its ultimate liquidation." Bierg beamed happily at Ed. As far as she was concerned this would keep the case in the news, and if she could prove any of it in court, it would guarantee her a place in the annals of legal precedent.

Ed had nothing to lose by supporting the appeal and everything to lose if he didn't.

“Could you please explain that again using smaller words?” Ed felt that if his life was going to be saved, he should at least try to understand some of it.

“Its quite simple,” Bierg attempted. “If they throw your life away because you’re damaged and they can’t be bothered fixing you, then you qualify as rubbish according to the precepts of Errolism. That means that when the company dies you will be waiting for it on the other side.”

“Oh,” Ed cheered up a bit. “That makes sense,” he said proving that he had no idea of how sense was made.

“According to the company handbook, throwing anything away that can be recycled is forbidden.”

“So they would be breaking their own rules,” Ed understood. “That’s funny.” He added smiling for the first time in days.

“Its even better than that,” Bierg continued. “They will have to list you as a liability to be settled when the company winds up under the Bankruptcy Act because you will still exist as company property even though you will, by then, be dead,”

“I don’t like the sound of that last bit,” Ed was confused again.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s all theoretical. They will realise that it’s a lot simpler and less expensive to keep you alive.”

“I like that idea.”

Bierg left the hospital feeling triumphant. This case was not only going to make her famous but she was sure the company would offer her a huge cash settlement to keep it out of court.

Ed slept well that night and the next day at his own request was visited by MER Merily Winthrop. Ed thought that if religion was actually going to save his life then he should take a little more interest in it. So far the only

interest he had shown was to let his wife and daughter attend some Errol Events.

MER Winthrop held a handkerchief to his delicate nose as he sat down beside Ed's beds. He could not remember ever having seen either half of Ed before. He vaguely remembered his wife and daughter but thought better than to allow himself to cast aspersions on the soul of a potential member of his flock, especially one so close to a personal relationship with the prophet. He greeted Ed warmly and presented him with an abridged version of The Chronicles of Errol.

"What's this?" Ed had never seen the Babble before.

"It's the teachings of our great prophet of course." MER Winthrop was genuinely incapable of imagining that anybody could not be familiar with the words that had formed the foundation of his entire life. He smiled piously at Ed, breathing through his mouth.

He had heard about the miracle that had saved Ed from certain death. The prophet Errol had not been big on miracles. He had declared them to be 'beyond the realms of normal desire' which equated to heresy in his church.

"They tell me that you're lucky to be alive," continued the pastor, his nostrils twitching slightly under the unaccustomed olfactory bombardment.

"I'm going to have to be even luckier to stay alive."

"Is it painful?" enquired the pastor wincing uncomfortably.

"No, they keep me dosed up on painkillers. Its a lot better than being dead."

"Would you like me to pray for your soul?"

"I was hoping you could explain a few things to me." Ed wasn't particularly interested in the practice of religion, just its theory and how he could use it to stay alive.

“Certainly,” replied the pastor who loved expounding upon the sacred teachings of his beloved Errol. “What did you have in mind?”

“If the company lets me die, will I become its garbage?” asked Ed innocently.

The pastor laughed, “Of course not. Your soul is holy and will travel to the place where all your rubbish and everything you gave away went to.”

“Oh,” said Ed suddenly more confused than usual. “In that case where will the company go when it closes down?”

“The company?” confusion is contagious among small minds.

“Yes. When it stops expanding into the universes and finally dies, what will happen to it?”

“Nothing. Why should anything happen to the company?”

“Doesn’t the company have a soul?”

“No, it’s not a person. It doesn’t need a soul. There’s nothing to go anywhere.”

“So you’re saying that the company is not alive?”

MER Winthrop pondered this for a moment. The company certainly possessed human desires. It desired to be great and to conquer the universes. It desired to have dominion over millions of worlds and to be profitable. In a way it was alive because it was made up of living people. But he doubted that it possessed a soul because it didn’t possess the souls of the people who had created it. Jeremiah Horton had died well over 1,000EY earlier, and the idea that the company might in some way possess his soul was both sacrilegious and obscene. “No,” he said finally, “the company is not alive.”

That was the end of Ed’s appeal then. That meant that he also would soon not be alive. He’d never liked religion and at that moment he liked it even less.

“Thank you,” he concluded. “That’s all I wanted to know.”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t like me to pray for your soul?”

“No.” said Ed firmly.

“Might I suggest that you chant the anti-mantra to relieve your mental suffering?”

“The anti-mantra?”

“Yes. If you chant ‘Ferdie tiddle dum do’ your mental anguish will be greatly relieved,” explained the pastor innocently.

Ed said nothing. His look was enough to push planets out of their orbit.

The pastor realised that anything he said would merely be awaiting Ed on the other side. He made his way to the door, hesitating briefly before the smell got the better of him and he hurried gratefully back to the faithful.

Ed threw *The Chronicles of Errol* into the rubbish bin.

“I might have a look at that if it turns up after I’m dead,” he thought.

## Chapter 6

Sonia Bergonia was the kind of girl who should have required a development permit when she was growing up. The effect her development had on the sexual politics in her immediate vicinity made her a lot more than politically expedient.

She was the only adult on AB 27 who had not officially been subjected to the gene screen because she was the Chairman's wife. A distant relative of the original whore of Brenagh, she refused to accept that life had to be utterly boring and was determined to make sure that her life was everything but dull.

She had married Ernstheim Bergonia many years earlier after he had promised her complete freedom to do as she pleased. That she had taken him seriously was possibly the only aspect of their relationship that most of the other colonists would have considered warranted the use of a word like serious. She was as close to the ideal of unconventionality as the fact that she continued to breath would allow.

Both she and her husband were involved in extra marital affairs most days. They considered the mundane model of human monogamous marriage to be a death-trap for people who had already been dead for several lifetimes. To them a secure monogamous relationship was less exciting than a fart in a milk bottle. Their relationship was based on diversity, deviation and an acceptance that the desire for variety was one of the things that they had in common.

Their relationship acted as a safety net. Both of them were prepared to lie for the other should either be compromised in a socially unacceptable, sexual situation,

and had both done so profusely to protect themselves from Archibald Henschwhistle's inquisition.

They were the cutting edge of scandal, both pursuing every possibility for forbidden romance to the limits of their abilities. They were both quite thoroughly shocking and at times were in open competition to see who could rewrite the bottom line of sexual misadventure and deviation with the most spelling mistakes.

Nearly every attractive person on the colony had had an affair with at least one of them. They knew no fear when it came to stalking a new lover. They accepted no limitations or boundaries. As a couple they were a match for Sodom and Gomorrah except that they hadn't abandoned morality, neither of them had possessed it in the first place.

Ernstheim Bergonia was the Chairman of the colony's board of directors. His wife was chair-mistress of the bored and erect. He had only slipped through the gene screen by being able to provide it with the answers it sought. He created his own gene map in a laboratory.

They had only survived the recent purge initiated by Archibald Henschwhistle by weaving an intricate web of deceit that extracted them from the scandal that they had initially instigated in their shameless search for new depths to dive into. Most of the other people involved had been deported and that left them both short of playmates.

Sonia had been amusing herself with several of the colony's security guards. This appealed to her because they were expected to police the rules, one of which prescribed strict monogamy for married couples. The company viewed sexual promiscuity as being synonymous with imagination and adventure.

Errolism expressly forbade sex outside of wedlock as being detrimental to the health and spirit of religious expression. Errol had been most vehement in his

condemnation of loose sexual practices during his youth. However as he had grown older his own behaviour had not mirrored his words. His 'Proclamation of in a sense' is one of the finest examples of the human ability to display and justify weakness.

The prophet had emulated the trend of most males throughout history and had been a complete hypocrite when it came to matters of the flesh, especially once he had become successful and thereby better qualified for promiscuity.

When her security guard de jour told her about an incident that involved a Gosha girl and a rat, Sonia was intrigued. She managed to get him to divulge Earlwin's name and from then on Earlwin was a wanted man. She had never in her extremely kinky life heard of anything as bizarre as whatever sexual ritual the guard had interrupted when he had entered the Sleazerium.

Nobody in history had ever been able to get a Gosha to run away from an erect penis, especially not screaming for help. It was unheard of. Those girls were trained to handle anything. Sonia felt personally challenged. She had no idea what had happened and that made it all the more delicious as her rampant imagination filled in the details.

The fact that this man lived in her colony was almost unbearable. How had such a deviate not automatically gravitated into her steamy clutches before now? Sonia started making plans.

Sonia's official capacity on the colony staff sheet was 'social coordinator'. This vague position was open to a broad range of interpretations due to the lack of any official job specification. It was the traditional role enjoyed by the wives of colony's Chairmen across the constellations and was interpreted according to the talents that the various women brought to the job. In Sonia's case there

were no official duties and she was free to ad lib as she saw fit. The only talents she had ever bothered to develop all involved seduction and sexual prowess and these abilities were not officially recognised.

She sent Earlwin an official letter using the colony's letterhead, requesting a meeting to discuss his 'social agenda'. When Earlwin ignored the letter she decided to personally visit him in his cubicle. Unfortunately when she arrived he was not there. Sonia was not used to being avoided by men. Especially not single, heterosexual men who lived alone on a colony in deep space. This was a most unusual specimen that she was attempting to deal with.

Finally she decided to visit Earlwin at work. She knocked on his office door and was invited to, "Come in."

Earlwin was seated at his desk still half ratted from the night before. It had been his first solo event since visiting Ed in hospital. He was not expecting a gorgeous brunette wearing what appeared to be a low cut cocktail dress and stilettos to strut into his office as though she had just walked into a nightclub. Earlwin couldn't help himself, he just stared.

He had seen Sonia, accompanying her husband on a number of official occasions. Close up she looked a lot more girlish than the big boss's wife generally appeared. Earlwin had absolutely no idea why she had just entered his office.

"You must be Earlwin Zittler," she purred, impressed at the sight of the gnarly storeman who sat before her.

"Yes, can I help you?"

"Yes, I'm sure you can." Sonia burned a hole in the back of his skull with her smouldering green eyes.

Earlwin had never seen an emerald before but he suddenly realised why they were considered precious.

“I’m the colony’s social coordinator,” Sonia continued knowing that she held all of the cards. “I’ve been reviewing your file and I believe you are in serious need of some social coordination.” She paused for effect.

Earlwin immediately thought of 17 or 18 smartarse replies but swallowed them all and said nothing.

Sonia continued, “I’m hosting a dinner party tonight in my apartment. Would you like to ... come?”

Earlwin had never experienced such a blatant invitation in his life. He nearly came on the spot.

“Yes,” he managed. “I’d love to.”

“Good.” Sonia dropped her calling card onto his desk. “Eight o’clock, your time.”

Earlwin swallowed hard; hook, line and sinker. “Shall I bring anything?” he tried to hide the quiver in his voice.

“Whatever you like,” and Sonia was gone.

Earlwin stared at the space she had just occupied. He snatched up her card fearful that it too might disappear.

At two minutes to eight he rang the doorbell. He was wearing his best suit and tried to give his shoes a last minute polish on the back of his trouser leg before the door opened. Sonia was wearing a long black silk gown. Her abundant breasts seemed to leap out into the corridor to meet him. She hauled them back into her apartment and invited him to follow them in.

Earlwin was surprised that nobody else was in the room. He had gone over their initial meeting a few thousand times in his mind and had convinced himself that she must have been inviting him to some company function.

Sonia closed the door behind him. He could smell her perfume. The lights were dim and some relaxing music was dancing across a candlelit table. It was set for two.

The next morning Earlwin crawled out of Sonia's pleasure pit carrying his shoes and still reeling from the intoxicating aroma of her perfume. He wondered if he was in love, and then unable to control his pirouetting emotions, burst out laughing. He'd just spent a night of unbelievable passion with the Chairman's wife. His senses were utterly intoxicated. That had been even better than the biggest male rat he'd ever dreamed of.

Sonia was happy, but didn't feel as though she had quite struck the vein she was after. Yes, he was good in bed and well endowed but any Gosha would have handled that comfortably. She felt that she had missed something. It hadn't even been particularly kinky. He'd seemed perfectly happy with oral sex and the missionary position. He had flinched when she had attempted to penetrate him and all in all it was fairly ordinary stuff.

Bierg arrived at the hospital with more bad news. The press were all gone and the place was going through a particularly distasteful stage of decomposition which eclipsed both her breath freshener and perfume. Ed was pessimistic so her news was not unexpected.

"The second appeal was rejected," she stated calmly.

Ed looked a little sadder than usual.

"The judge ruled that religious considerations are a secondary aspect of company policy and therefore do not outweigh the need to make a profit. He sympathised with our position but stated that according to the company charter it was the inalienable right of the company to terminate any aspects of its operation that it deemed to be non-cost effective. In terms of your qualification for consideration as company refuse, he held that it was not within the court's jurisdiction to rule upon matters

pertaining to the afterlife and not within the scope of the Bankruptcies Act. He did however leave the way open for a final appeal on the basis of the question of whether your termination may result in some unforeseen loss to the company. Under article 419 of the company handbook, all officers of the company are expressly forbidden to knowingly undertake any action that may result in future detriment to the profitability of the company. This is our last hope.”

Ed groaned. He knew the second that preacher had walked into his room that religion wasn't going to help him. He didn't need the fancy legal jargon to inform him that religion was only of use to rich arseholes.

Bierg continued, “Do I have your consent to lodge the final appeal?”

“What else can we do?”

“I'm sorry,” Bierg pre-empted Ed's death sentence. “We either lodge this appeal or they can come in here tomorrow morning and turn you off.”

Ed felt like telling Bierg that she was the most useless excuse for a lawyer that he had ever heard of. For Errol's sake! This was his life that they were playing with here. Did all of the eloquence in the universe only add up to a smokescreen that a whole lot of useless idiots could hide behind. He was fighting for his life. This was last-ditch stuff and all she had to offer was a big pile of legal gibberish that he was beginning to wonder if she understood. He needed some rat flesh! Then he would get to the bottom of all this crap. Had the human race really deteriorated to the point that a human life was worth less than the cost of the machinery that maintained it?

Suddenly he was calm. He had to be. Stuck on two beds in this stinking medical establishment he realised that he was systematically being destroyed by a system that human

beings had ultimately created to ensure their survival. Were they trying to tell him that he wasn't human any more? Were they attempting to establish that he did not qualify for the gains that human society had made over the past thousands of years because some aspect of his humanity was faulty? His ability to generate income was being assessed as though it was the ultimate measure of his humanity. This was evil. This was obscene. How dare they assess his right to life on the basis of his input to the colony.

“But the company did this to me.” Ed tried to apportion some blame elsewhere.

Bierg continued, “I have devoted a lot of my personal time to this case. It appears to me that the legal basis for any further appeals has been exhausted. However I am prepared to assign one of my juniors to further your cause for humanitarian reasons. I'm sorry.” And with that she left the room.

Ed lay on his beds completely stunned. This final betrayal had been worse than being cut in half by the blazer. At least the blazer hadn't tried to tell him that he wasn't worth the energy required to maim him for life.

Regina and Felacia were shown into the room. Regina coldly kissed her husband on the cheek. Felacia was spontaneous and warm.

“Hello daddy,” she beamed.

Regina sat like an iceberg at the height of winter. In fact she made an arctic winter seem quite tropical. She smiled the obligatory smile that wifhood demanded and then relaxed her face back into her normal, general purpose scowl.

Ed smiled at his daughter as he tried to summon the indifference necessary to ignore his wife's unstated judgement.

“So what’s the matter?” He asked innocently like a virgin summoning the dragon from its lair.

Regina wasn’t expecting her husband to bring reality into their interactions. He’d always avoided it before.

“Where do I begin?” she began theatrically. “My husband is the laughing stock of the entire universe, the company is about to cut off your life support and you are asking me what’s the matter!” She burst into tears.

“Daddy, I can save you.” Felacia began, but her good intentions were slaughtered by her mother’s withering look.

“You can save him?” sobbed Regina. “What for? So he can embarrass us in front of every single living creature, one more time!”

“I can save him so he can be my daddy.” Felacia wasn’t fazed by threats of cosmic disapproval.

“I don’t need you to save me,” Ed lied. “ I’ve got a lawyer.”

“But what about our reputation?” Regina bawled.

“We don’t need a reputation,” Felacia continued. “We just need money.”

At this point Ed was having problems choking back the tears. Of course they only needed money but the horrible truth was that they didn’t have any.

“We haven’t got any!” for the first time in her life poverty was on Regina’s side and she was on its side. “Your father is not worth the cost of his treatment.”

The two females started to cry. Felacia was the first to rally. “We will get the money. I will get the money.”

Ed started to cry. The real horrible truth was that he had no better option than to rely on an emotionally distraught eleven year old. “Thank you darling,” he whispered.

Sonia wasn't satisfied. She had been led to believe that Earlwin was a sexual deviate and she wanted it. Perhaps she hadn't given him the right signals. After all, she was the Chairman of the Board's wife and that had proved to be an anti-aphrodisiac in the past. Their disappointing encounter had only succeeded in elevating her curiosity to the level just above excruciating.

Two days later she arrived at Earlwin's cubicle. She was the last person he expected to see. A secret corner of his heart did a little somersault, but the rest of him just stared in disbelief.

What did she want?

He knew women. He had grown up pushing them away until eventually they had got him into so much trouble that he'd had to run away to outer space. He'd had four women claiming that he was responsible for the paternity of their offspring when he finally managed to substitute a forged gene map and wangle a passage to another world.

Even then he was pursued by them demanding that he support the illegitimate fruits of their mutual stupidity. Earlwin had never been the marrying kind of man. He preferred Gosha girls because they never tried to blame him for irregularities in their menstrual cycles and stated up front, at the beginning, exactly what they expected in return.

So what did this bitch want? He wasn't so stupid as to imagine that his sexual prowess had managed to cancel out millions of years of evolution. She could have anyone. She was irresistibly gorgeous, stinking rich, and had the colony at her fingertips. Why was she bothering with him?

"Hello, remember me?" she purred.

"How could I forget?"

“What are you doing now?” she regarded the zisk console with the casual disinterest she normally reserved for rotting carcasses.

“Nothing.” Earlwin replied swivelling towards her in his chair.

She stepped into the cubicle. It was small and Spartan, a distant corner of a distant galaxy that had never had to deal with a woman’s touch.

She closed the door. “The other night,” she began, “I didn’t manage to explain what I am coordinating.”

“I think I got the message.”

She moved towards him. “Good.”

Three hours later she slipped out of the cubicle. They had engaged in respectable sex but once again Sonia felt as though she had been cheated. Yes, he was sexually competent and everything had been very satisfactory, but she still had expectations that hadn’t been met.

For the first time in her life Sonia felt inadequate. What did that Gosha have that had turned him into a deviate that she didn’t have? She could have satisfactory sex with nearly every man in the colony, and quite a few of the women. Sonia was developing an itch and she needed to have it scratched by something that Earlwin was hiding from her. She went home to her husband in a mood that she couldn’t even explain to herself. He was having sex with one of the other director’s wives so she didn’t interrupt and retired by herself.

Earlwin was equally intrigued but for completely different reasons. He had never known a woman who didn’t have some ulterior motive and he suspected that this one was not fundamentally different. But what could she want from him? He decided that if she ever came back he would give her something that she’d never imagined. He

went to sleep hoping he had a new partner for a good ratting.

The next day he thawed out two large males from his secret stash. That evening he filleted them and fried them up and resisted the temptation to have a small taste before taking them back to his cubicle.

Two days later, Sonia reappeared at his door. She had given up on anything kinky and simply wanted a good fuck. She knew he was extremely capable of basic housewife sex and arrived without any other expectations. To her surprise, Earlwin offered her a pre-coitus snack and he had somehow secured what looked like a reasonable bottle of red wine.

Sonia accepted his hospitality but suggested they retire to her apartment. Earlwin brought the wine and rat and they locked themselves into her sumptuous entertainment suite. He uncorked the wine and offered her some peculiar smelling hors d'ouvres.

The flavour reminded her of deep fried chicken.

“What is it?” she enquired innocently.

“Do you like it?”

“It tastes like meat. Where did you get it?”

Earlwin smiled an evil smile. She liked it and continued to nibble.

A few minutes later they were naked on the bed. Sonia was beginning to feel very peculiar. She could feel her heart beating in her chest and her body felt like a huge drum that was beating out a rhythm she had never noticed before. Earlwin's face was glowing red and she could see the veins in his flesh like creepers wrapped around a tree. When he touched her, delicious sensations rippled through her body, swamping her senses with an almost unbearable ecstasy.

Suddenly he was on top of her like some giant primal monster. Before she could even think the word ‘foreplay’ Earlwin had arrived with a burning urgency that completely melted her body. She stopped being a human and responded from some inner essence that had lain dormant in her being for a very long time. She could hear moaning and muffled shrieks as they rolled together through a void, bodiless points of pure sensation against a background of flowing red-hot lava. The universe exploded into a trillion tiny sparkles of light then reassembled itself around them like a giant cocoon. It throbbed as all of the life in the cosmos flowed through her forming a series of concentric circles that expanded outward, beyond infinity.

The next morning she awoke in Earlwin’s arms lying on the floor surrounded by wreckage. She felt as though she had hosted a tap dancing competition for sumo wrestlers on her back and shoulders. Her body was black with bruises and she was covered in scratches and dried blood. Earlwin didn’t look any better. He had a large gash in his left arm and was bleeding quite badly. The room was trashed. The walls were smeared with blood and most of the furniture had been pulverised into unrecyclable pulp. She had splinters down one leg.

“What the hell was that?” She untangled herself from Earlwin’s still slumbering form. He grunted but didn’t move.

She went into the bathroom, and was grateful that it had somehow escaped the fury unleashed in the other room. She looked at herself in the mirror.

“Oh my God!” She had a black eye and looked as though she’d spent the night in a concrete mixer with a few house bricks.

Now she knew why that Gosha girl had run for her life. She had to admit, that was the most intense sexual experience she had ever heard of. She could barely crawl. Every muscle in her body had been worked to the limit. Even her toenails ached.

After removing the more obvious wood splinters from her aching flesh, she showered.

Earlwin was snoring loudly as she removed herself from the ruins left in the wake of their passion. Wearing a dressing gown, she slunk out into the corridor hoping that nobody would see her. Nobody did and she slipped into her husband's empty apartment collapsing onto the bed. She reached over to the bedside table where a packet of guptide cigarettes lay invitingly agape.

For the next few hours, guptide and sleep combined their miraculous healing powers inside the slumbering temple of her magnificently abused body.

Meanwhile, the nightshift storeman had found some dead rats in the storeroom freezer. He thought that they must have got in there somehow to escape the slaughter and had frozen to death. He put them in a bag and left a message for Ophyn Krapton to come and collect them.

Ophyn picked up their sorry corpses a few hours later and disposed of them in his furnace. He couldn't imagine how they had got into the storeroom freezer either. The storeroom had been one of the few places in the whole colony that didn't have any rats. Well it definitely didn't have any now.

In the hospital, Ed's life continued to be maintained by a rack of disinterested machines. Regina and Felacia came to visit him most days, stoically suffering through what had become utterly depressing occasions. His imminent demise

hung in the room like a black cloud that threatened to drown the three of them in a deluge of hopelessness.

Even Felacia appeared to be succumbing to an inevitability that gained momentum every day. Her space probe had managed to relocate the solar system containing the golden planet but went silent before it could broadcast any further data. Felacia suspected that it had flown too close and had been caught up by the extra gravitational field that such a concentration of gold could not help but produce. It had most likely crashed into the planet, taking her father's last hope down with it.

Bierg was exercising her humanitarian prerogative to stay away.

When Earlwin limped happily into work that day, having had eight stitches sewn into his arm and a guptide poultice applied to most of the rest of his body, he was in no psychological state to deal rationally with the news that the night shift had found some dead rats in the freezer and had them vaporised. He went into a rage and punched a hole in the wall. He cursed and swore like a wounded soldier hearing that the war had been lost.

“Who told you to destroy them?” he bellowed at Norbert. He slammed his office door and wasn't seen for the rest of the shift. He spent most of the day vindictively pulling the legs off cockroaches, finally emerging like a bad joke at a boring party.

He had no idea what had happened to Sonia. Presumably if he had killed her he would have heard about it by now. He had just discovered the Eldorado of sex only to have it wrenched from his grasp by a bunch of morons who thought rats were a pest. As far as he was concerned he had single-handedly made one of the greatest discoveries in the history of the universes. He had found

the ultimate aphrodisiac. He had to get off this horrible colony and start marketing his discovery. As long as nobody else knew that it was just rats he could make billions. They were everywhere, they cost nothing, and he had discovered an attribute they possessed that humanity had pined for since Eve had given the apple to Adam. Maybe she had actually given him a rat!

Sonia awoke from her slumbers. The guptide had helped but she dared not let anybody see her in this condition. She had no idea what had happened and if it wasn't for the state of her body she would have decided by now that she had somehow imagined it all. But her imagination had never been that good before. If her imagination could do that then she didn't need men any more. She didn't need anything any more. How could a mere mortal man do that to her? She'd had plenty of men but nothing compared to that. She couldn't even describe what had happened. Sonia for the first time ever, was Absolutely Fucked!

## Chapter 7

Ed's final appeal was heard by a panel of three judges sitting on the bench of the High Court on Earth. How they managed to have a 'high' court on terra firma defies all but the legal mind to which the concept is not only rational but probably even perfectly obvious. The judges were aware that a man's life hung in the balance, but refused to be drawn beyond consideration of the relevant points of law. They were not there to exercise mercy. Their job was simply to decide whether or not Ed's lawyer could find a loophole in the company handbook and could somehow construe his death as a loss to the future profits of the company.

They looked down on the courtroom with a disdain fit to rival the truly pious. They wore gowns that would have distinguished them as extremely unfashionable mourners in any other setting. Their unappealable authority was framed by wooden panelling made up exclusively of extinct species of tree. Millenniums of intimidation had etched themselves into every gesture that elevated pretension to an expensive art form.

Then, of course there were the horsehair wigs. Baldness was no longer an issue in the forty third century, but judges still clung stubbornly to the tradition of falsifying the prodigal nature of their scalps. They wore deceit as though it was a crown, distinguishing them as men qualified to discern truth.

In any other civilised society their regalia would have been considered far more suitable for clowns, but on Earth it signified that they possessed the authority to demote Ed's living body to a lifeless piece of unwanted meat. To do this they required no more than words. If they spoke the wrong words, Ed was dead. If they uttered the right

ones, he might live to bounce his grandchildren on his knee. Such was the human concept of justice.

Erehwon Nam had been given Ed's case because Bierg had already wrung all the possible personal advantage out of it, to no advantage. Sure, she was a lot more popular in nightclubs since her nude spread, but her career was no better off, and she had barely gained enough financially to cover the cost of having first said "Hello."

Erehwon took the case because he naively hoped that a human life had intrinsic value beyond what could materially be assigned to it in the blind drive to make a profit.

He had attended law school believing that he was empowering himself to make some positive changes to the course of human evolution. However after five years of legal training he realised that it had changed him far more than he would ever be able to change it. He felt as though the top of his skull had been lifted off and an egg-beater had been applied to the contents. His sense of right and wrong had been so badly undermined that words like 'truth' and 'justice' gave him a headache.

Somewhere in all that legal training he had lost sight of his original goal but had steadfastly refused to replace it with the prescribed self aggrandisement and blind desire to accumulate obscene wealth, to which all of his class mates had fallen victim during the course of their studies. He had managed to preserve the notion of ideals but unfortunately he was no longer entirely sure what his ideals were any more. Despite all his efforts to the contrary the system had managed to absorb him like a whale might absorb a speck of plankton.

Ed's case appealed to him because it was black and white. A human life was about to be snuffed out by the largest company Earth had produced simply because it ceased to be profitable. This rang alarm bells loudly enough to

awaken some of the pre-law school ideals that still slumbered somewhere in the forgotten back-lots of his mind. Erehwon desperately clung to the highly unfashionable hope that he might be an idealist. A champion for the downtrodden of the universe which guaranteed him an infinitely large potential client base with infinitely small resources to reward his efforts.

The legal system had become lopsided. Those with a just cause had simply been bulldozed by those with enough money to ensure that they got their way. This had set precedents that merely systemised the unfair advantages of the greedy and selfish, and the result was that human rights out in the cosmos had been subjugated to the needs of corporate efficiency.

Erehwon was Earthbound. He did not qualify as a colonist because his genetic makeup did not insinuate to the company that he was a spineless conformist. On Earth he fought to try to preserve what was left of human dignity. In space he would have been a liability.

Erehwon had only received his brief a mere three days prior to the hearing date and had not slept since. He insisted on a zisk linkup so that his client in hospital on Archmed Bianco would be present at the appeal on a large screen at the back of the courtroom. Ed would be able to watch the proceedings on a screen in his hospital room.

In court, when the preliminaries had been skimmed over by the court's disinterested bailiff, the senior judge indicated that it was time for Erehwon to present his case.

Erehwon addressed the court;

“May it please your Lordships, my client Edwinkle Henderon is a family man. He has been a faithful employee of The Intergalactic Mining and Settlement Company for over seven years. During this time he has faithfully devoted his energies solely to the service of the company in his

capacity as a maintenance technician on the mining Colony AB 27.

As a signatory to the company rules and conditions he has happily subjugated all of his inherent rights and privileges as a citizen of Earth to the overall benefit of the company. At no time during his faithful years of service has he ever previously been in breach of the said rules or has there ever been any implication that he did not at all times serve the company's interests to the best of his ability. In short, he has been a model employee for the entire duration of his contract.

It is our contention that the termination of his life-support by the company will irrevocably bring contempt upon the company from all fair-minded employees of the company itself and from all fair-minded citizens of Earth.

The circumstances surrounding the tragic accident that has left my client in the condition where he requires extensive reparatory surgery are well known both to your Lordships and to most of the population of human imagined space. He was the subject of extensive media activity during the early stages of his hospitalisation. It is our contention that in the face of the extensive publicity that this unusual case has already generated, the termination of Mr Henderson's life at the hands of the company will expose the company to avoidable odium, ridicule and contempt, in the eyes of all fair thinking people who are familiar with these circumstances."

He paused for effect. The three judges looked bored paying him minimal attention from their elevated vantage point.

He cleared his throat authoritatively and continued, "Under article 419 of the company handbook, all officers of the company are expressly forbidden to knowingly undertake any action that may result in any future

detriment to the profitability of the company. It is my contention that it is impossible to measure what future detriment the company may suffer due to the loss of reputation inherent in Mr Henderon's termination. It could quite foreseeably discourage future employees from accepting employment with the company on the basis of its diminished reputation. Who, in their right mind, would knowingly submit to a ruthless commercial enterprise with a track record of killing unwanted employees? I submit, your Lordships, that the company can ill afford to terminate Mr Henderon based upon the future uncertainties of the labour market and its potential impact on future profitability."

Ed watched from his hospital bed as his life was coldly analysed, solely in terms of its financial benefits to somebody else. The fact that that 'somebody else' was a company, whose only purpose was to create profits and it treated human beings as if it owned them, made him feel even less comfortable than somebody who had recently been cut in half, would normally feel. The whole thing was preposterous. Why should his life automatically have to be of any use to anybody but himself? One of his distant legs twitched slightly as he felt the urge to kick the viewing monitor off its stand.

Regina sat rigidly at his bedside. They had both decided that Felacia should not have to sit through the humiliation of her father's life being reduced to an unflattering economic equation. Regina lit yet another guptide cigarette. Besides needing a smoke it was the only way she could deal with the stench of the rotting flesh that emanated from the walls, floor and ceiling of the hospital. Her hands were shaking as she drew the pungent smoke into her lungs. Not only did she stand to lose her husband because he wasn't

deemed valuable enough to be worth saving but now she had to sit through a bunch of lawyers trying to decide whether or not killing him might end up costing too much money. This company had first reduced her to a cleaner and now it was trying to make her into the widow of a disgrace. Surely a human life was worth more than this! All her life she had tried to do the right thing.

She sat mesmerised by the screen unable to take her horrified eyes away from what could only be described as an obscenity. How dare these over-learned buffoons decide that her family was worth less than a profit sheet!

Back in the courtroom Erehwon had gone on to describe in pathetic detail what a faithful employee Ed had always been. He had distinguished himself by obeying to the absolute letter, every whim anyone senior to him had ever manifested. He had attended all of the optional seminars and had never once complained to anybody about anything. He had never requested a pay rise, had never been late for work, had taken minimal sick leave and had never spoken back to a superior. He had been a credit to the gene screen. He had demonstrated a propensity for conformity that would have made most sheep look like terrorists. The only unpredictable act in his whole existence had been on that fateful day when he had literally demonstrated, that he had real guts too. And even his guts had conformed to the company's ultimate needs by somehow jumping back into his body the moment they had been spilled, avoiding the need for a time consuming clean-up expedition. Nobody could have imagined a more accommodating employee than Edwinkle Henderon.

The description of his years of unwavering dedication brought a tear to Ed's eye. He reached over and took Regina's trembling hand.

One of the judges interrupted, “Yes, quite Mr Nam. However these details are hardly relevant to today’s hearing. We are here to establish whether or not Mr Henderon’s death is likely to cause the company a loss of profits in the future. Kindly keep your remarks on the topic.” The two other judges grunted their concurrent disapproval.

Ernstheim Bergonia had had a hard day. There was a leak in one of the quandalude storage batteries that had allowed 11 quadrants of production to discharge back into the planet. After the recent fiasco with the rats, the colony could ill afford to be behind its production schedule. As usual, nobody was prepared to take responsibility which meant that ultimately it fell on his weary shoulders. He arrived home three hours late to find his wife submerged in the bath. He was tired and after a lonely meal bid his wife goodnight through the bathroom door.

Sonia had no idea how she was going to explain her battered condition. If her husband ever found out that another man was responsible that would be the end of Earlwin. She lay in the bath and listened as he climbed into bed and turned out the light. One less problem to contend with for now.

On Earth Erehwon began his summing up. “May it please your Lordships, Edwinkle Henderon has proven himself to be an exemplary employee. If the company terminates his life this will send a message that will reverberate through the ages to every other potential employee; that this company has no regard for performance or indeed for the integrity of its staff. They will have deduced that this company does not reward

diligence or loyalty and therefore such attributes are deemed by it, to be completely worthless. Future employees will be aware that they have no value beyond the cost of their services. This will destroy any desire to excel as an employee and will make anybody who does any more than adhere to the rudimentary job specification appear as a fool not only to his colleagues but to the general population. A judgement against my client, besides devaluing the fundamental sanctity of human life, will devalue every human attribute that an employee could bring to their job. In terms of future profits, such an assault on the culture of employment will forever weaken the bond between the company and its people. The cost will be immeasurable and may ultimately result in the downfall of the company as a commercial entity.

In conclusion, Intergalactic Mining and Settlement cannot afford to terminate the life of its faithful employee Edwinkle Henderon. By so doing, it will terminate its unwritten contract with the human race to be the tool, and consequently the servant, of human expansion throughout the universes. It will deem itself to be more important than the fundamental human condition that spawned it. I submit that Jeremiah Horton himself will be spinning in his grave if this court fails to recognise that a human life is not a mere commodity to be bartered at the whim of the company he established.

Should profit be held to be more sacred than human life, then every human life in human imagined space, will be devalued as a result. This is a consequence that the human race cannot and I submit, must not, allow to be imposed. If we are, by the conquest of the universes, allowing ourselves to be undermined, then I submit, we are the conquered. We have been conquered by our own

hands. We have put ourselves second to the notion of profit.

And what is profit, this notion that in this court threatens to diminish the entire human race? Profit is an entirely human creation. It is something that is gained beyond the normal needs of survival, as imposed by nature. Profit, I submit, is merely the thinly veiled desire of one man or group of men, to subjugate their fellow men, and thereby to reduce them to slavery. It is the driving force that enables a certain class of humanity to imagine that it is somehow superior to its fellows. The notion of profit is an abomination in nature. It is the driving force of damnation. If this court determines that the notion of profit reigns supreme above the reality of human life, then this court will in effect be declaring itself in favour of the notion of abomination. I submit, your Lordships, that ideals must always regulate ideas. Profit is merely an idea and if we allow it to become an ideal, then we are assisting in the denigration of reality itself. Reality as is understood by the billions of members of the human race who created courts such as this to protect themselves from exactly what is being suggested here. If Intergalactic Mining and Settlement is allowed to take the life of Edwinkle Henderon for the sake of protecting future profits, we are damned.”

With that Erehwon shuffled his papers in the most meaningful manner that he could muster and returned to his seat. He had given it his best shot and had felt that on a few occasions during his speech, he'd managed to attract and hold some of the judges' attention.

For a full three and a half minutes the courtroom was silent. There was the odd cough and a small amount of embarrassed fidgeting.

Finally, the senior judge announced, “The decision of this court must, for the moment, be deferred. My colleagues and I wish to retire to consider our verdict.” With that the three judges stood up and took their pomposity elsewhere.

On the other bed, Ed’s lower abdomen passed water for the first time since it had been hospitalised. The tubes that were specifically connected to deal with such an event, failed to contain the flow and it dripped off the bed and onto the floor. Regina burst into tears. Some of Ed’s machines registered disturbances to his life forces and every Biancan in the vicinity embraced confusion for the first time in their civilisation’s long history.

Sonia had an apartment to repair. She zisked Regina Henderon because she knew that she could count on Regina to be discreet. Regina’s answering service invited Sonia to leave a message. Sonia declined. How did everybody seem to be able to sense when they were needed most and simply disappear? She didn’t have anywhere to sleep! Her apartment had been trashed and her husband was snoring contentedly in his. They were not in the habit of sleeping together unless Ernstheim felt like having sex. This was not one of those occasions.

She went back to her apartment. It looked even worse now that Earlwin had gone. With him asleep in the middle of it, it had somehow managed to look quite funny. Now it just looked as though several battalions of Justice Commandoes had used it for target practice. She pulled together the remnants of her bed and curled up in the middle of it.

Her body ached deliciously as she thought about the previous evening. What was that? How had this man done

that to her? She had experienced a lot in her 32EY, but nothing came close to that. It was a whole new category of experience, one that she hoped to become better acquainted with. It made the old type of sex seem like chopping wood. Eventually the fire got going but then you had to stay close to keep warm. This was like being the fire. You consumed everything. It was a total experience and everything else was just fuel. She shivered at the thought.

Next morning she awoke, still in the wreckage. She had slept another dreamless sleep. The dream was now to be found in her waking hours and she was hungry for it. She wanted Earlwin. The wreckage was like a badge of honour, or dishonour, or whatever. She felt proud to wake up surrounded by physical proof that what she had experienced was real. She wanted more!

She returned to her husband's quarters. They were far more salubrious than her apartment and his zisk informat could access the personal schedules of everyone in the colony. Within seconds, she was perusing Earlwin's schedule. In three hours he was due to finish his current work quadrant. She would be ready.

She applied guptide to all of her wounds and frantically smoked as many cigarettes as time would allow. She could feel the vitality of her flesh as it healed. The bruises were fading, the black eye diminished. She needed to be sexy.

Earlwin arrived home from his shift feeling very sore and looking forward to a good quadrant of sleep. Sonia was waiting on his bed. She had accessed the entry code not wanting to be seen waiting outside Earlwin's cubicle.

"What are you doing here?" Earlwin was annoyed. He didn't have any more rat and he couldn't be bothered.

“Hello.” Sonia was genuinely offended. She had at least expected that he would be happy to see her. He was, but not right now.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’ve been having a bit of a hard time at work.”

“I really enjoyed the other night,” Sonia was usually much more controlled but she just couldn’t help herself.

“Sorry about the apartment.” Earlwin’s hormones were formulating a plan. She looked gorgeous in a battered sort of way. He would have been happy to go again on the floor, but he knew that without the vital ingredient he would never live up to his last performance.

Sonia didn’t know that and hadn’t come to his cubicle to reminisce. She stepped forward and took control.

Half an hour later, as she lit a guptide cigarette, she was a very confused girl.

Earlwin said nothing. There was nothing to say. Now more than ever, he just wanted to go to sleep.

“What happened the other night?” she finally asked after extinguishing the butt.

“What do you mean?” Earlwin wasn’t in a confessional mood.

“What do I mean.” It wasn’t even a question. She seemed to be examining the words like an anthropologist attempting to isolate some mysterious feature of a particularly intriguing fossil.

“I mean why haven’t we destroyed all your furniture?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Oh yes I do! Whatever happened the other night certainly didn’t happen just then!”

“If I told you, you wouldn’t believe me.”

“Well I don’t believe that so don’t worry about it.”

“OK, we ate some dead rats.” Earlwin was too tired to invent a convincing lie and figured that the truth would be just as effective.

“What?” Sonia didn’t disbelieve him, she just didn’t understand what he had said, except for the words.

“I said, ‘We ate some dead rats.’”

Second time round Sonia’s brain made a connection with something the security guard had told her he saw. It didn’t explain anything but it was consistent. She said nothing in all the four and a half trillion known languages that the universes had so far yielded.

Earlwin was happy to have some peace and went to sleep.

Felacia felt that because of her, her father was going to die a failure. She had spent hours trying to re-establish contact with the probe but the little speck of hope out there in deep space remained silent.

Her mother had returned home after the hearing finished and locked herself in her bedroom, more to shut out the embarrassment than to hide her grief. Felacia could tell that it hadn’t gone well. She guessed that they were waiting for the final bad news. She could smell guptide smoke and was happy to leave her mother to create her clouds in peace. She still had the coordinates of the golden planet but now it seemed almost as hopeless as everything else without any way of verifying her discovery. She went to bed feeling miserable and lay there wondering how she could possibly organise another probe.

Edwinkle Henderon lay alone in his hospital beds. His two halves both sensed that they would never be one whole again. The lawyer had done a fabulous job pleading his case but he knew that the company had no regard for

the welfare of its employees, once they ceased to be profitable.

Look what had happened to AB 13. The whole colony had been terminated, rats and all. Despite this, the company had no problems recruiting whoever it wanted from Earth. What were those judges deliberating about? He might as well turn the machines off himself to save them the trouble.

During his life, Ed had not bothered to waste many of his few thoughts on the subject of death. He had always regarded it in much the same way as he regarded life. He couldn't recall sitting around before he'd been born wondering what being alive might be like. He'd always assumed that death would be just another natural process he would undergo at the appropriate time, just like everybody else. He never expected it to be pleasant. He'd never heard of anybody bothering to do it twice.

But now death was sitting on the end of his bed, grinning at him like some medieval gargoyle, its imaginary fangs dripping with anticipation. He could feel the life force in his blood urging him to fight. He didn't want to be a corpse, or a casualty. Both words were inherently offensive.

The word corpse was a loner in the language. It ended with an 's' as though it should have been plural but nobody had ever produced more than one. The very sound of the word implied that you were trying to say something else but got cut off in the middle of it. It was like a medical term that had been shortened for the benefit of the uneducated masses. He would have felt a lot better becoming a 'corpsecum' or a 'corpsoration' or even a 'corpsorium'. There was something decidedly unfinished about ending up as a corpse.

And as for the word ‘casualty’! It was despicable! What General had first uttered that hideous term to mask his guilt over the bloodied, scattered remains of a long forgotten, failed military campaign? A description of men who had been loyal and brave. Men prepared to sacrifice their entire future in some gloriously futile bloodbath, only to be assigned one extra indifferent syllable in dispatches than the word ‘casual’. Death was anything but casual to the dead! Perhaps it helped the living to be able to fritter other peoples’ lives more easily because they were mere casualties. The word was obscene!

These were to be the last moments of his life. There was nothing anybody could do to save him, without failing to do their job properly and all because he had eaten a few rats.

He’d always felt stupid but now it had an extra dimension to it. He was dying of stupidity. He wondered how many other people in history had realised at the moment of their death that the cause had been their own stupidity. He could think of quite a few likely candidates. The captain of the famous deep space explorer, ‘The Intrepid’, must have felt very stupid when he and all his crew were incinerated as they passed too close to the giant star Ringo in the Mersey Nebular. Or the General who had attacked a planet of insects with a force of 300 men only to briefly discover that the insects had developed thermo-nuclear weapons.

He certainly wasn’t the only human to have died of stupidity. A lot of the rest were quite famous. In fact most of history was made up of people who had died of their own stupidity. This thought made him feel a little better.

Earlwin woke up to find Sonia asleep beside him. Her bruises had nearly all vanished and she looked beautiful as

she slept peacefully in his arms. He couldn't understand why such a gorgeous woman, with everything at her fingertips had bothered to single him out in the first place. The colony was full of lonely men. The ratio of men to women was about 70-30 and most of the women were married. The few available women had a smorgasbord of male availability laid out like a banquet.

They had a saying, "the odds are good but the goods are odd". Sonia's goods were as good as they got.

Most of the men eagerly awaited the arrival of the Pleasure Ships every hundred days. Up until Sonia, Gosha girls had been Earlwin's only sexual outlet during his time in space.

Sonia stirred and opened her eyes. She snuggled closer to him and he could feel her warm breasts rubbing against his chest. He only had an hour before his next work quadrant so he didn't waste time on preliminaries and soon Sonia was lighting another guptide cigarette, even more confused than she had been the previous evening.

"You said 'we ate rats',"

"Did I"?

"Well what happened the other night? It didn't happen last night and it didn't happen just then." Sonia had listened to enough bullshit. Now she wanted some answers.

"OK. When I told you that we ate rats, I was telling the truth."

"How can eating rats make sex so unbelievable? I don't get it."

"Neither do I. I started eating rats a while ago because I got sick of vegetables and I noticed that they made me feel very weird. That's what Edwinkle Henderon had been doing when he left the colony and got cut in half."

“What, so eating rats means that you can survive being cut in half as well as having great sex?”

“I know it sounds ridiculous but it’s the truth. I don’t know how he survived. I guess it must have had something to do with the rats, but I don’t know why.”

“Well let’s get some more rats then. They must have developed some miraculous powers.”

“That’s the problem. The rats have all been wiped out. There aren’t any more.”

“What? You mean we’ve just discovered the greatest aphrodisiac in the universe as well as something that heals better than guptide and they just wiped them all out?” Sonia was flabbergasted. “If it was rats that made us have the wildest sex in history, I want more!”

“So do I. I had some frozen in the store freezer but they found them and vaporised them. They were the last ones.”

“But how can rats do that to you?”

“My best guess is that all the rat poisons they’ve been fed over the centuries have somehow changed their molecular structure. They’ve become toxic in some positive way. Maybe by surviving all that poison, their life force has been enhanced and when we eat them it affects us”

“What about cockroaches? They might have the same effect.”

Earlwin was silent. He hadn’t considered eating cockroaches. “Never thought of that,” he said finally. “I suppose it’s worth a try.”

“Where can we get some cockroaches?” Sonia was eager to try.

“The store is full of them. How are we going to eat cockroaches?” Earlwin considered cockroaches just a little bit too revolting to eat. At least rats were mammals and had flesh. Cockroaches were insects and would be crunchy on the outside and squishy inside. Yuk!

“Maybe we could cook them and crush them into powder and then mix them with water,” said Sonia.

“I’ll bring some back tonight. You can prepare them and we’ll see what happens.” The mere thought was enough for them both to decide that it was time to indulge in a second round of inferior, unsupercharged sex.

## Chapter 8

That evening, or whatever it was in terms of the highly synthetic, and sometimes negotiable time environment of Archmed Bianco, Earlwin returned to his cubicle with a container incarcerating roughly 40 cockroaches.

They were not particularly impressed at the prospect of being part of an experiment that might mean that after 50,000 odd years of partnership, the human race was finally about to realise a small percentage of their usefulness. By the time Earlwin handed them over to Sonia they were really annoyed.

As far as they were concerned humans were merely their means of infiltration. Once the humans had got them to a destination, the humans became an annoying nuisance. The cockroaches would have preferred that the humans just left like any decent elevator operator or bus driver. But no, for some reason the humans needed to hang around and then feed off cockroach civilisation for as long as the roaches could afford to maintain them.

Humans were parasites as far as your average cockroach was concerned so they were not prepared to cooperate when Sonia tried to put them onto a cooking dish. Eventually she managed to squash most of them.

Thirty seconds later, Sonia removed their lightly grilled corpses from the quandalude oven. They didn't have much to complain about anymore as she crushed their dehydrated bodies into a fine powder. They seemed to be more happy to cooperate.

Sonia then scraped them into a glass of H<sub>2</sub>O, gave it a stir and drank half of it. She handed the half empty glass to Earlwin and then began gagging at the disgusting flavour that had exploded in her mouth.

Earlwin gulped his share down and then immediately wished he hadn't. In his life he had tasted some disgusting things but this was like adding them all together and multiplying the result by ten thousand. His tastebuds tried to resign and move into his armpit. Sonia was blue with putridity. She was silently gasping as though she had just eaten several tons of chilli in one ill considered mouthful.

Earlwin ran to the sink and gulped down as much water as he could squash into his system without drowning. Sonia was there too. The colony's water dispenser registered a slight blip as its flow momentarily peaked.

The two of them sank to the floor. Sonia was sure she'd been poisoned. Nothing but death could possibly taste that bad. She stuck her fingers down her throat in an effort to throw up, but all that did was make the tips of her fingers feel as though they too had been poisoned.

Earlwin was first to speak. "Yuck!" he gasped.

Slowly the disgusting flavour ebbed and became merely revolting. Earlwin spat. So did Sonia. They looked at each other like two people who had just witnessed the end of the universe. Sonia fumbled for a guptide cigarette hoping that she could form her face into a suitable receptacle to receive it.

Eating the disgusting things alive couldn't have been any worse. Earlwin didn't care if it meant never experiencing the best sex in the history of the universe ever again. He wasn't going to do that again. Sonia agreed. Sex was supposed to be pleasurable. She wondered if childbirth could be that painful. She decided it was time for their reward.

"Fuck me you bastard," she said grabbing Earlwin by the crutch.

Earlwin had been looking forward to just such a request all day. The disgusting taste in his mouth stayed just as disgusting but suddenly became less relevant.

They ripped each others' clothes off and got on with it. The sex was great. Earlwin felt like a locomotive running on pink steel. Sonia was relieved that at least she was finally getting a decent fucking and ascended to the orgasm plateau like a regular VIP celebrity entering first class.

After a few milliseconds an unknown extra walked onto her stage. She opened her eyes. She was looking up at a skull. The jaw was opening and closing and it was connected to a skeleton. The skeleton was on top of her!

She screamed and at about the same time the skeleton screamed too. They leapt apart like two old ladies who'd just realised they were sitting on the same toilet seat. Sonia looked at her hands. They were bones. She looked down at her body. Her voluptuous, beautiful flesh was all gone. She was a skeleton.

Earlwin had gone through a similar process and was standing a few feet away staring at his hands. They looked at each other and both screamed. Sonia looked for the door to try and run away, but there was no door.

She could see several other skeletons in the distance, performing various human tasks as if they were, in fact, perfectly human. Everywhere she looked she could see nothing but skeletons carrying on as if they weren't skeletons. She could even see a pair of skeletons engaged in what might otherwise be thought of as sexual intercourse, accept that they were skeletons.

Earlwin's skeleton stepped forward and grabbed her by the arm bone. His jaw was moving but there was no sound. His skeleton tried to pull hers closer. She panicked and started to throw her bones around. Again she screamed, but this time less convincingly. It must have been the

cockroaches. Her mind slowly came to terms with the fact that she was somehow seeing x-rays. She relaxed slightly and Earlwin's skeleton threw its bones around her.

They didn't move and eventually the situation was able to establish a base camp of reality in both their minds. It didn't feel unpleasant. Besides only being able to see skeletons there were no immediately discernable bad side effects, but it certainly wasn't the aphrodisiac that they had hoped for.

Sonia didn't like the idea of a man being able to see her skeleton. She felt shy for the first time since her stepfather had invited her into the shower many years ago on Earth. She had always felt intensely proud of her body but now that it had disappeared she wasn't so confident about her feelings of self projection. She had always assumed that her skeleton would reflect her outer attractiveness but now that she was faced with its unconsidered reality, she had her doubts.

What if her bones were ugly? She knew that they were, deep down. Everyone's bones were ugly. Earlwin's bones looked disgusting.

She also felt that she should be scared. Skeletons had always been used to scare people, like in horror movies, but really when you were faced with a few bones they just looked quite pathetic. They were no more scary than your average, flesh clad human. They were about as scary as an invitation to a charity fund-raiser.

Skeletons never held Raypov or blazers, even in movies. They were less than people, not more. The mystery had disappeared with their flesh.

The sound that Regina and Felacia had been dreading since the courtroom had fallen silent echoed through the

apartment. They both froze, mother and daughter, together in an immobilised state of suddenly shattered denial.

Felacia knew what she had to do. She was 11EY for Errol's sake. What did they expect? She was going to go out there and make them all understand that her daddy's life was not negotiable. She had all of the coordinates of her golden planet, several data analysis sheets, as well as a crudely drawn map and was ready to hand it all over just to get her daddy back. Felacia stepped out of her room determined to send this bullshit back to wherever it had come from. Blood is thicker than water and bullshit is thicker than blood, but gold is thicker than them all.

Ed's lower half evacuated, noisily. The sound on the monitor was the death knell he had almost convinced himself, would never sound.

On Earth the judges returned solemnly to their bench. Ed could tell from their expressions that it was all over. His life was about to be turned off because a bunch of overpaid, over-intellectual buffoons had refused to acknowledge that he was just like them; that he felt everything just like they did and that it was just as important! Surely these highly educated paragons of the human condition could identify with his predicament and do the right thing. Surely the human thing was to do everything possible to save a fellow, feeling, thinking human from everyone's greatest fear. Or did they imagine that his flesh didn't experience the same agony at the cold, calculated threat of imminent death that their's did? How would they feel if the roles were reversed? How would they feel if their lives were about to be ploughed into the company balance sheet? Would they sit up there in their finery and their pomp and crap on about 'what was not relevant to the case,' if they were about to be murdered?

The senior judge began, “It is the considered opinion of this court that the plaintiff, Edwinkle Henderson has failed to produce any credible argument that his demise would somehow have a negative effect on the future profitability of the company. Therefore we must, regrettably, find that the application shall be refused.”

With that the three judges left the courtroom, two of them to play golf and the third to play squash. They had done their job and were not prepared to allow the emotional aspects of their joint decision to stand in the way of an afternoon’s recreation. None of them gave the matter any further thought.

Regina and Felacia arrived at Ed’s bedside a few minutes later. They had missed the judgement but knew instantly that the outcome was not favourable.

Ed was not celebrating. They could smell fresh excrement against the general background stench of the hospital. All three were silent. Felacia screwed up her map and began to cry. It was all pretty horrible.

Eventually a team of doctors arrived and herded Ed’s distraught family away from his bedside. Regina gave him a last kiss and was gone. Felacia was hysterical and had to be sedated so she could be dragged away from her doomed daddy.

“Would you care to see the pastor?” one of the doctors offered. “He’s waiting out in the hall should you require his ministrations.”

Ed had had little use for religion during his soon to be fore-shortened life. He could see no use for it now. “No.”

“In that case, this won’t take long. I’m sorry.” The team of doctors began to systematically shut down the machines that were maintaining Ed’s vital functions.

Several Biancans were present in the room. They had understood everything except why Ed was being killed. They considered all life to be sacred, even human life.

They began to feed energy into Ed's etheric field. Several of them worked on each half of his body as the machines closed down. They maintained his life force with telekinetic resonance.

Ed braced himself and awaited his final breath. He kept waiting until one of the doctors, in a state of extreme agitation took his pulse. His heart was still beating and even more mysteriously his lower half also seemed to have a pulse. The doctors started hitting the sides of some of the machines suspecting that they had failed to shut down. They disconnected the quandalude supply but still Ed continued to sit up with his eyes open, very obviously alive. His lower abdomen passed wind rather noisily.

"So, am I dead yet?" he inquired. "Smells like my bottom half died a long time ago." None of the doctors thought his joke was funny. Ed continued, "How long is this going to take? I don't want to be late."

Nobody laughed.

Ed was enjoying the doctors' obvious confusion. As far as they were concerned he should have been dead.

"Shall I hold my breath?"

Sonia's skeleton found that the invisible wall still presented an impassable barrier, even though she could see through it. She could see the bones of everybody in the colony. She could also see some very strange clouds moving, unimpeded through the colony. They were mostly the size of a basketball and seemed to be able to travel in any direction under their own propulsion. There was a large group of them congregated in the direction of the hospital.

She could see several agitated skeletons fussing around two halves of another skeleton that appeared to be lying down. The clouds were swarming around the two halves and she could see a dull purple light that connected them to it.

She became aware of sounds and turned to face Earlwin's skeleton. It seemed to be trying to tell her something. His voice sounded as though it was being played backwards through the anal sphincter of an unhappy goat. He pointed a bony finger towards one of the clouds. It was moving towards them.

Sonia was terrified. Walls did not seem to be any barrier to it as it drifted towards them. It kept coming until it was in their immediate vicinity, then it stopped. If a cloud could be considered to be intentionally doing anything other than raining, it appeared to be observing them.

They both became aware of some foreign thoughts circulating at the periphery of their mental fields, like dimly remembered dreams. As she concentrated Sonia realised that the cloud was attempting to communicate.

"You can see me," seemed to be the essence of its message.

Suddenly she was aware of Earlwin's thoughts as well. He had stopped attempting to speak and she was aware that he was trying to project his thoughts to ask the cloud what it was.

"My name is ~@&^%~," it answered. "I am a native of this planet. We have been observing you since you arrived. This is the first time that any of you have tried to communicate with us."

Both Earlwin and Sonia were amazed. Nobody had ever considered that Archmed Bianco could be inhabited. It had a thin atmosphere of fluoro carbons that were deadly to every known life form that humanity had been able to

identify and then slaughter. Even guptide could not survive in fluoro carbons.

~@&%~ sensed their confusion. “This planet is teeming with life. You just cannot normally see it. We exist at a frequency that your senses are usually impervious to. There are thousands of different species here. We are the most advanced and we accept our role as servants to preserve the other species so that they will eventually evolve to our level and beyond. We are the custodians of life on this planet.”

As the words were forming inside their minds, it seemed to both of them that a sort of tapestry was unfolding as a background to their thoughts. Suddenly they could see an enormous variety of living entities. The planet had huge cities filled with cloud-like life forms similar to the one revealing the picture to them. They could see swarms of airborne creatures floating above vast cities and an enormous array of other entities that appeared to be growing out of the planet’s surface shimmering in the light of its twin ‘suns’.

All of the life forms lacked the kind of density that humans were accustomed to conquering. They appeared to be gaseous, without possessing any formally targetable shape yet somehow managing not to disperse. They weren’t substantial enough to project colour but somehow implied opaque shades of blue, red and violet. The whole picture was of harmony and balance and gave off a deliciously relaxing sense of beauty and wellbeing that neither Sonia nor Earlwin had ever experienced before. A type of peacefulness that was almost hypnotic radiated, filling the space around them. Their minds relaxed into the scene as though it was a well poured marguerita.

Time became irrelevant, not exactly slowing down but blending into the whole vision like cream being poured over strawberries.

As the vision began to fade, Sonia noticed that Earlwin's body was slowly rematerialising around his bones. The cloud had disappeared completely as they found themselves back inside their normal flesh bodies, surrounded by the colony's walls and furniture.

"Was that an hallucination or what?" Earlwin was first to commence operating in the normal realm of his human senses.

"I don't know," answered Sonia realising that she was still naked. She put her clothes on. She had transcended any desire to have sex.

"Did you see that cloud thing too?"

"I saw a lot more than that," said Earlwin looking at the pieces of meat that had reappeared as his hands. He glanced further south, grateful that his masculinity had also been restored in its entirety.

"Did you see the cities and all the other life?"

"And all the skeletons," said Earlwin confirming that they had both experienced the same hallucination. He put his clothes back on. "I don't think cockroaches qualify as an aphrodisiac," he added.

"That's the first time I've ever tried to have sex with a skeleton. Definitely the last too."

Earlwin nodded his agreement. "Skeletons just don't have the right bits."

"So what did you think about that cloud thing? Was it for real?"

"Who knows," replied Earlwin.

Felacia and Regina were allowed back into Ed's room. Nobody had told them Ed was still alive. The doctors were

too embarrassed. Ed's torso was sitting up in bed looking very pleased with itself as they entered. His toes were twitching away happily on the other bed.

"You're not dead!" Regina fainted.

"Daddy, you're still alive. I thought they were going to turn the machines off."

"They did," replied Ed smugly, as his daughter ran to his bedside and gave his upper half a hug. "I suppose I just didn't need them."

"That's wonderful!" Felacia resumed crying but now they were tears of joy.

A nurse entered the room and lifted Regina's slumped form into a chair, where it remained motionless until smelling salts were administered. Regina regained consciousness just long enough to see Ed still hugging Felacia and fainted again.

Shane Omue was a minor technician on Archmed Bianco. He was a human turkey variant who so accurately filled the company's genetic profile that he wouldn't have survived beyond the age of ten prior to about AD1900. However, one evening he had managed to attract and hold Sonia's attention at a particularly boring cocktail party hosted by the Committee for the Preservation of Earth's Values, otherwise referred to as the C.P.E.V. This committee had taken it upon itself to treasure the otherwise irrelevant idiosyncrasies that life on Earth had forced them to endure. They sat around reminiscing about traffic jams and polluted sunsets and generally managed to depress each other whilst glorifying their dim recollections of life on smelly, overcrowded Earth.

Faced with most of the least inspiring people that the colony could assemble, Sonia had misidentified Shane as

somebody worth talking to and had eventually carted him off to her apartment for a sexual encounter.

Shane had proved to be less sexual than the pet frog she had starved to death as a child. The curtains in her bedroom were more of a turn on. She would rather have had sex with one of the tiles on her kitchen floor.

When he finally reached the peak of his utterly unsatisfying performance, she had rolled him off with military precision and reached desperately for the guptide.

Shane had the smallest penis Sonia had ever seen. It was so small that Sonia could only wrap two fingers around it and was unable to generate any friction without slipping off the end. The poor bastard wasn't even a wanker. He simply lacked the equipment necessary for any kind of normal sexual functions. To masturbate successfully, he would have needed to use chopsticks.

Not knowing how to cope with the situation tactfully, she had offered him a set of postcards showing pictures of his beloved Earth with most of the pollution painted out. To her relief, he gratefully accepted her offering and while he was admiring the pictures she made a few excuses about needing to be alone and pushed him out the door. She was left to ponder how she had allowed her standards to plummet to such disastrous depths.

The traditional one-night stand is usually the result of either one or both of the participants wishing that they hadn't gotten so intoxicated before the event. If the sex is acceptable, a one-night stand will generally develop into at least a couple of repetitions. It required absolutely no deliberation for Sonia to relegate her evening with Shane into the cast iron safe of one-night-standom. She had no intention of ever repeating that particular mistake again.

Shane, however considered Sonia to be a major conquest. He calculated that because he'd got the boss's

wife into bed once, the second time would be a lot easier. He generally managed to shame the few women he got to have sex with into a second encounter, usually because they felt so sorry for him that they simply didn't know what else to do about him.

He was very persistent probably because he had never physically compared himself to anybody else. He remained blissfully unaware of the embarrassing truth about his unfortunate specifications. He'd heard talk of six inches here and eight inches there but considered it to be little more than unabashed exaggeration on the part of men who obviously felt dissatisfied with themselves.

Even his mother had not been able to bring herself to explain to him that he would forever be considered a sexual dwarf. His father had been modestly endowed but compared to Shane even he was the male equivalent of the Empire State Building.

Sonia was good at avoiding people. She had made love to over 70% of the colony's male inhabitants and most of them were quite happy to accept that she was not their girlfriend, it was merely their turn. Shane could not. He tried to zisk her repeatedly but always got her message bank. She never returned any of his calls.

Undaunted, he began to frequent areas where she might appear in the hope of running into her. He never did. Eventually his infatuation, fertilised by frustration, grew into obsession. Night and day, quadrant after quadrant, he thought only of Sonia. He romanticised their initial encounter into an epic of lustful passion in which even the Whore of Brenagh would have been proud to have participated.

Sonia returned to her trashed apartment. Shane had been waiting and appeared in the corridor as she was

banging in the entry code. She turned to him in disbelief. “What are you doing here? These are the executive suites!”

“I was just in the neighbourhood and I thought I might drop by to see if you wanted some company.” At that moment the door to Sonia’s apartment swung open, revealing the carnage.

Sonia tried to close the door but it was too late. Shane had seen inside. “Oh my gosh! What happened? It looks as though somebody must have broken in!”

“Go away! I can handle it on my own. My husband will be here any minute,” she added hoping that would get rid of him.

“I can’t believe that anyone on this colony would do that to your room.” Shane pushed past her and entered the scene of the most intense sexual passion the universe had experienced since the nine tribes of Alacia had decided to bury their differences in a giant orgy that had gone on for nearly 12EY.

“Please leave immediately! I don’t want your help.”

Shane sensed he had found a damsel in distress. Damsels were at their most vulnerable when in distress and he intended to take full advantage of the situation.

This damsel decided it was time to share out the distress and did so by bringing her knee up, uncompromisingly, into Shane’s unprotected groin. Despite his other inadequacies, Shane had a well developed scrotum that contained a pair of testicles that were subject to the normal level of testicular sensitivity.

Consequently his face turned purple and he doubled up instantly as agony flooded his nether regions. He let out the obligatory “Orrgh,” that males in his unenviable position are prone to emit and collapsed onto the floor amongst the wreckage.

Sonia realised a few seconds too late that this had actually been a mistake. Rather than ridding herself of his unwanted presence she had rendered him incapable of making any kind of exit for several minutes and Shane was the kind of pain in the arse who would probably drag it out even longer.

The whole scene was a well crafted monument to the overall foolishness of sex. Every aspect graphically illustrated some small portion of the inherent weakness engendered by rampant, unchecked, sexual desire. It could have been used as an advertisement for the virtues of abstinence. Priests and nuns would have been ecstatic with such a teaching aid to extol the puritanical values of morality to wayward youth.

During this educationally priceless moment, Ernstheim Bergonia, Chairman of the colony's Board of Directors, arrived home after yet another gruelling day, attempting to ensure the continued survival of most of the members of his colony.

He was especially troubled because during the last quadrant, a giant space transport freighter had smashed into a planet two solar systems away. The freighter was carrying new mining equipment that was meant to upgrade production in most of the immediate galaxy. Its bulk was not measurable in planetary terms. It had been assembled in space to carry a load beyond the individual capacities of the planets that had produced the specific components. Collision with a small planet at sol mk 2, had meant that the planet had gained roughly a third of its original mass and was pushed several hundred thousand kilometres closer to its sun. It no longer appeared capable of maintaining its orbit.

This had never happened before and nobody could be certain what the consequences might be. The most likely

scenario theorised that the planet, with its extra mass would eventually crash into the star, possibly destroying the entire solar system. Fortunately, Intergalactic Mining and Settlement had no collateral interests in that system and its destruction would have no financial repercussions beyond the loss of the freighter and the equipment it was transporting. The freighter had been fully insured.

Ernstheim had spent too long involved in serious company business. He needed a distraction. He noticed that the door to his wife's apartment was open. It had been far too long since he had feasted upon the abundant bounty of her voluptuousness. It seemed to him the perfect occasion to bury his pound of flesh in her accommodating femininity. He paused at the doorway.

A man was writhing on the floor in apparent agony, surrounded by the remains of what had once been some very expensive furniture. The walls appeared to be smeared with dried body fluids and his wife was standing over the hunched form commanding it to, "get up and get out."

Ernstheim responded by laughing. He needed some light relief.

Sonia instantly recognised the laugh. Usually it was a most welcome sound. Ernstheim was very generous when it came to sharing his happiness with her. However, at that moment it failed to have its usual effect.

She put the boot into poor Shane, who continued to writhe and groan as only a man with a two inch penis can.

"My darling, what are you doing?" Ernstheim's mirth was beginning to fade.

"Look what this creep has done," she responded, gesturing to the state of her apartment.

Shane looked up from the floor and gasped, "Please help me."

Sonia kicked him again.

Earlwin went back to the store to find more cockroaches. He returned to his cubicle forty-five minutes later with a bag containing around thirty fresh victims. After another ten minutes he had their bodies cooked and crushed into a fine powder and was wrestling with alternatives to involving his taste buds in the absorption process.

He wished there was some way he could inject the substance but lacked the necessary paraphernalia. The thought of snorting it up his nose crossed his mind but didn't have immediate appeal. Maybe he could roll some of the powder up in paper and swallow it. Paper had survived into the forty third century only because of its unparalleled qualities when wiping excrement from the human anus. Earlwin requisitioned some toilet paper and used it to wrap up some of the crushed cockroach powder. He swallowed the result.

It still tasted inexpressibly vile. For a minute or two he regretted the whole exercise. Then the walls faded and disappeared. Once again he was able to see his fellow colonists in skeletal form. His own flesh had also disappeared and he became aware of the clouds moving freely through the colony as though it wasn't there. This time several of them noticed him noticing them and moved towards him.

“Greetings,” he attempted to transmit.

Again, communication began at the periphery of his consciousness, requiring a lot of concentration. No words were forthcoming. He felt relaxed in their presence and they appeared to be trying to communicate with him. After a while it occurred to him that his mind alone was not strong enough to receive whatever they were transmitting.

Eventually a somewhat less glorious tapestry unfolded beyond his thoughts and he was able to comprehend their reality although only faintly this time.

He became aware of a civilisation that was extremely ancient. Its members had existed for many millenniums as he understood time. They had no wars or conflicts of any kind and seemed intent on fulfilling a common purpose that Earlwin couldn't grasp. They had no personal desires but seemed to possess a common desire to do good. Very weird!

They desired to help him. They wanted to help everybody and everything. They wanted nothing in return. He became aware that they were helping Ed in the hospital. He hadn't thought much about poor old Ed since his last visit but they seemed to be very concerned about him. He got the impression that if Sonia had been present they would have been able to tell him a lot more.

He looked out beyond the walls of the colony and could actually see their city. In his current condition it appeared that the colony was in the middle of a giant metropolis. It appeared to have been situated in an area that was otherwise uninhabited, or possibly inhabited by lesser life forms than the clouds. Maybe the colony was in a park or something similar. He could see, what on Earth would be called skyscrapers, which had previously just seemed to be rugged terrain.

He looked around, mesmerised by a whole world that nobody else except maybe Sonia had ever seen before. Then he noticed within the colony a small concentration of very tiny skeletons.

Rats! They had managed to find a refuge somewhere and he could see them. This thought appeared to cause a reaction amongst the clouds. He got the very firm impression that they wanted him to leave the rats alone.

The more he thought about the rats the more agitated the clouds became.

Suddenly it became clear to him that the clouds wanted him to get Sonia back and in a condition where she too could see them. Earlwin concentrated on the skeletons, both human and rodent. He tried to place the position of the rats within the colony.

Then he turned his attention to observing Ed's skeleton over in the hospital, which was the other most interesting feature revealed by his altered perception. He could see a lot of other clouds attached to Ed's two skeletal halves by a dull purple light. He could see other skeletons fussing around and two sitting close to Ed's.

Then the walls reappeared and he lost the whole picture once again. He was alone in his cubicle. The clouds had disappeared as normal mundane reality reimposed itself. Earlwin looked at his time simulator and realised he was due back at work in under two hours.

“Great,” he thought, “I can get some more cockroaches.”

## Chapter 9

Ed had never felt better in his life. Maybe he really was dead. How was he supposed to know? The machines had been turned off, he was cut in half, what else could he be but dead? The fact that he could still speak to the living seemed unusual. Maybe that's what happened. Maybe you just carried on, just the same in another dimension or something. That certainly made as much sense as what religion had to say about death. He pinched Felacia to see how she reacted.

“Ouch!” she said pulling her arm away. “What did you do that for?” she had intense hurt in her eyes, far more serious than a mere pinch warranted.

“Sorry darling, I just wanted to make sure that I was still alive.”

“Aren't you supposed to pinch yourself?”

“I wanted to see if you could feel me too.”

“I'm not the one who's supposed to be dead! Of course I felt it.”

The simplest answer was that somehow he had survived. He had already survived being cut in half so why shouldn't he survive having his life support shut down.

It was typical of the arrogance of the company that they thought he couldn't live without them and their stupid machines. Well, he was showing them! They'd taken themselves so seriously for so long that they probably thought that the suns wouldn't rise without them. And what about those pompous morons who had decided that he was so inconsequential that it simply didn't matter if he died?

“Nurse, my feet are cold. Could you get them another blanket please?” He figured that he had survived for a reason and at this stage the best one he could think of was

so that he could be as big a pain in the corporate arse as his circumstances would allow.

Regina had regained the limited consciousness that had so far made her life possible. She sat by her husband's bed in stunned silence.

Ernstheim called security and they roughly removed Shane from the wreckage of Sonia's apartment. She faced her husband.

Blaming Shane didn't account for the state of the place. Ernstheim was intrigued. His wife had been a fantastic source of entertainment and mystery since before they were married and today he could sense that she was about to provide him with something utterly amazing and completely unique.

Sonia was running through the filing system in her mind trying and come up with something rational that might explain the situation. The search drew a blank.

That left just one option, the truth. But how could she ever explain the truth. Nobody in their right mind would believe it. Even somebody as broadminded as her husband was going to have difficulty accepting the idea that she had eaten rats as an aphrodisiac and then had destroyed her own apartment in the heat of unprecedented sexual passion. She was having trouble believing it herself.

And then there was the embarrassment. How could she possibly expect to retain any cultural credibility after admitting that she had eaten rats?

She decided to play for more time. She began to sob hysterically.

Ernstheim wasn't fooled. He knew his wife too well. "Come on darling, just tell me what happened. I could do with some light entertainment after the last couple of days."

“Do you promise you won’t get angry?” the sobbing stopped abruptly. Sonia looked her husband in the eye.

“I promise I’ll try not to.”

Sonia took a deep breath.

Earlwin lay on his bed and tried to get some sleep. Sleep crawled over his bedcover and wrapped itself seductively around the bedhead but failed to grant him any respite from his churning thoughts. Eventually it let out a shriek like a child who had just eluded being tagged and disappeared through the bathroom door. Earlwin was left seething and cursing, knowing that his hours of rest had already been absorbed by pointlessness which by now, had also departed leaving him alone, tired and irritated with nothing to blame for his predicament but himself.

He got up, drank a cup of guptide tea, splashed water onto his face and headed for the stores.

Once ensconced behind his desk, the fickle spirit of rest wrapped its arms around him and his snores reverberated throughout the complex. After a few indeterminate hours of merciful slumber, he was rudely awakened.

“The big boss himself, wants to see you,” reported Norbert, pregnant with the authority that only a command from the highest echelon could imbue upon such an otherwise humble waste of intergalactic space.

“Hmmmugh?” answered Earlwin, only bothering to respond because he sensed some hitherto nonexistent authority in his colleague’s voice.

“Ernstheim Bergonia has summoned you to the boardroom,” Norbert elaborated.

“Shit!” Earlwin realised that this was not only unheard of but really bad news. Ernstheim Bergonia was so far above the day to day functions of the store that he had probably never heard of its existence before.

“What does he want?” Earlwin’s mind began to erupt with possibilities, all of which suggested that he should run for his life in the opposite direction.

“He wants to see you.”

“What for?” Earlwin hoped it had nothing to do with the fact that his wife’s pussy now resembled the gates of hell after several ice hockey teams had used them for target practice. Maybe it had something to do with her furniture. He hoped so. Furniture could always be replaced. It could even be improved. He hoped she’d managed to clean the blood off the walls. That would be a bit tricky to explain.

He arrived at the boardroom feeling like a frog that had been invited to a French Fondue party. To his temporary relief, Sonia was present.

“He knows everything,” she said.

“Everything?” he replied innocently as if the word itself had confused him.

“I’m fascinated by your amazing experiments,” Ernstheim was keen to relax Earlwin and go forward. “I have no problem with your affair with my wife. In fact I’m as intrigued by it all as she is. Please accept that you are not here to be interrogated or punished. You are not being accused of anything untoward. On the contrary, I applaud you for your efforts. I hope to participate in the continuation of your amazing discoveries.”

Earlwin was massively relieved. He took a guptide cigarette that Sonia offered.

“Thankyou,” he uttered limply.

Ernstheim continued, “I’m especially interested in what my wife tells me you both experienced while intoxicated on dried cockroaches. Sonia believes you were able to make contact with a native species of this planet.”

“I’m not sure what they were, but yes, we were able to communicate with something. However, to be perfectly honest, I can’t be sure that they weren’t a hallucination.”

“Quite so.” Ernstheim had not entirely discounted that possibility himself. “But if there are, in fact, other intelligent species here then we need to know about them.”

“Well in that case,” said Earlwin, “We need to get hold of some more cockroaches and see what happens.”

“All right,” said Ernstheim decisively. “Can you get us some?”

“Sure,” replied Earlwin. “When shall we do it?”

“As soon as possible. How long will it take you to capture enough cockroaches?”

“I could have enough in half an hour.”

“All right, then let’s meet back in my apartment in half an hour,” said Ernstheim. “You know how to get there,” he added.

Forty-two minutes later, Earlwin arrived at the executive suite with a bag containing sixty-seven cockroaches. It took less than another ten minutes before they had been baked, crushed, and reduced to powder.

“Let’s snort it,” said Sonia. “I’m not going to eat them again.”

Earlwin agreed. They divided the cockroaches into three even lines and Sonia produced a straw.

“You first,” Ernstheim handed the straw to Earlwin.

Earlwin took the straw, bent over the table and sucked the first line up his nose. The immediate sensation suggested that his sinuses had just caught fire. Then his eyes responded by producing enough liquid to thoroughly drown the blaze. He raised his head to find himself in the presence of two skeletons on what appeared to be a large flat plain, dotted with other more distant skeletons and

several of the cloud things floating around. He handed the straw to one of the two skeletons sitting nearby. It leaned forward and made a noise like an elephant passing wind before passing the straw to the other skeleton.

Next he noticed a group of clouds approaching. He became aware of Sonia's mind and then became aware of Ernstheim's mind trying to adjust to their new surroundings. About five of the clouds were hovering nearby and he sensed that they were issuing a greeting. Suddenly a voice inside his head informed him that he and his friends were welcome and that the clouds wanted to help them.

"Its me, ~@&%~" a voice said clearly. "It is easier for us to communicate with more of your minds."

"Who are you?" Ernstheim's mind was wondering.

Once again a beautiful tapestry unfolded, showing the harmonious Biancan civilisation, but this time the picture was far more vivid and colourful. Earlwin became aware that their three human minds were able to float through the tapestry. They were able to embark on a guided tour with a commentary from ~@&%~ that felt like beautiful music being piped directly into their souls.

They saw huge gardens filled with exotic growths, buildings that were so magnificent that by comparison they made human architecture seem less sophisticated than piles of driftwood. They could feel the tranquillity as though they were soaking in it. After a while they became aware of a distant glow on the horizon. It became more intense as they approached. Slowly they came upon what ~@&%~ described as 'the centre'.

It was an enormous pyramid that shimmered like a mirage seen across a sweltering desert. It had the inexplicable effect upon their senses of somehow causing them to see, taste, hear and smell it, all at the same time. It

looked as though it was constructed out of light and as they approached it they could feel a low pitched hum.

To say that it was the most magnificent structure that any of them had ever been privileged to be in the presence of, seemed somehow trivial. It was beyond magnificence. No language that the human race had encountered anywhere in the universes had a word that even came close to describing it.

“This is our source of perfection,” ~@&0/~ explained. “Our entire civilisation draws the inspiration to aspire from it. It is the truth that holds our world together.”

Earlwin’s mind had fallen silent. His thoughts had been sent scurrying to the back of his mind where they were mute with awe.

As the three humans drew nearer, it seemed to be both attracting and repelling them at the same time. Earlwin felt like a moth in the presence of the sun. The delicious feeling eclipsed even his sense of self.

Suddenly the vision began to fade. It slowly dissolved into the walls and furniture of the Executive Suite. Sonia and Ernstheim appeared in flesh and blood. They had been nowhere but they had seen everything.

Earlwin watched as Sonia slowly became conscious as a body once more, followed by Ernstheim.

For a whole minute the three of them just sat and said nothing. They all looked as though they had just ridden a glacier down the side of Mt Everest, on their bare butts.

Ernstheim was the first to speak. “Was that a pyramid?”

Both Earlwin and Sonia began laughing uncontrollably. Ernstheim joined them. Eventually Earlwin managed to say, “Whatever it was, I want one.”

“Wow,” was all that Sonia could add.

“We need to get some more cockroaches,” said Ernstheim unable to suppress his excitement.

“Snorting is the best way by far,” added Sonia. “That was instant.”

“But it didn’t seem to last as long,” said Earlwin.

“We need to have a few lines ready so that we can go again as soon as it wears off.” Sonia had dabbled with cocaine back on Earth and knew all about snorting lines.

“We’ve made contact with a new civilisation!” Ernstheim had shed all of his initial scepticism.

“No,” corrected Earlwin, “They made contact with us. We just altered our perception so that we were aware of them and they did the rest.”

“That was much clearer than the first time,” said Sonia.

“They seem to be able to communicate better if there are more of us,” observed Earlwin.

“Let’s get some more cockroaches.” Ernstheim was keen to go again. As the colony’s Chairman he felt it was his duty to establish proper diplomatic relations with the newly discovered natives.

“So now do you believe me about the rats?” Sonia asked her husband.

“I saw the result,” Ernstheim fixed Earlwin with a look that suggested both disgust and admiration. Earlwin blushed for the first time since he had been a schoolboy. “It’s a pity we wiped them all out,” he added

“Not quite all of them,” Earlwin countered cryptically.

“You’ve got some more?” Sonia could not disguise the wanton excitement in her voice. She threw her husband a guilty glance.

“Let’s just say, I might know where they are hiding.”

“Well don’t tell me. My duty is to send in Ophyn Krapton to destroy them. But if you do find some, I’m ready to test your claims about them for myself,” said Ernstheim, torn between his duties as the colony’s boss and his desire to fuck his brains out.

“So what’s it to be then?” asked Earlwin. “Cockroaches or rats?”

“RATS!!!” they answered in unison.

The next day the colony was buzzing with gossip. The buzz was that somebody had vandalised Jeremiah Horton’s statue. It hadn’t been disfigured as such. It had been pushed over, leaving Jeremiah’s outstretched arm broken and gesturing in the direction of a public toilet. His arse was unceremoniously pointing at the stars while his face was covered in mud where it had landed in one of the floral tributes to his vision. All in all the company’s founder was very much the fallen idol, resting uncomfortably upon his beloved Chronicles of Errol.

Ernstheim was called to the scene by a distraught MER Merily Winthrop who had discovered the abomination during his morning stroll.

“How could anybody do that to our great founder?” asked the shocked pastor.

Ernstheim had his suspicions but kept them to himself. He could see that the base was hollow and appeared to have been the subject of a recent infestation. He also noticed a few splatters of blood on the floor around it.

“Disgraceful,” he concurred before heading quietly to his office. “I wonder how many he got,” he thought to himself as he entered his plush chambers.

Bad news awaited him. The planet that sustained the collision with the freighter had left its orbit and was heading for the star that controlled the system. The other eleven planets in the system were also beginning to display irregularities in their orbits. The whole solar system had become unstable which may ultimately have dire consequences for the entire galaxy of which Archmed Bianco was a part. That particular system had been a rich

source of guptide and vast colonies of the unique space herb were being incinerated by the atmospheres of the irregularly orbiting planets, adding to the chaos.

The press were back outside Ed's hospital room. They had come from every corner of human imagined space (HIS), eager to get a scoop on the second great miracle of Archmed Bianco.

Ed was eager to talk to them this time. He had plenty to say about the company which had deemed him unprofitable and thereby unworthy of the description 'alive'. He was very much alive. In fact he felt immortal. He felt impregnable. He was ready to spill his guts once again for the whole cosmos to see.

"Bring on the press!" He demanded from his beds. His doctors and the company representatives were less enthusiastic.

His wife was horrified. It had already been the most embarrassing series of incidents that she had been forced to endure in her entire life. The least he could have done was to die quietly. Now she would never be able to show her face back on Earth! The stigma would be unbearable. He'd heard the judges' verdict. Any decent man would have accepted his fate and bowed out with some dignity. Not her husband. Now he wanted to tell his disgraceful story to everything anywhere in all of the universes. Regina locked herself in her room and refused to come out. The press were even banging on her door!

Felacia had let them into the apartment. She held a press conference in the lounge room where she told them what a special man her father had always been. She posed for visios and even invited them into her bedroom to take pictures of her working at her desk.

Regina did her best to drown out the commotion with hysterical sobs from behind her locked door.

Earlwin arrived at the Executive Suite with a sack. After Sonia let him in, he produced the bodies of three fully grown male, five female and eight baby rats. “More than half of them got away,” he lamented.

“I don’t want to know where they came from,” said Ernstheim who already knew.

“Well done!” said Sonia as her pulse quickened. “Give them to me,” she demanded showing the first real signs of any culinary enthusiasm ever.

Half an hour later the males had been reduced to homogenised rat parts and the rest were safely in the freezer. The sizzle of frying flesh was soon heard while Ernstheim and Earlwin struggled to make polite conversation.

“One of us should abstain,” Earlwin informed his host. “If we all eat male rat there is no way to predict what we might do.”

“It sounds like you’re volunteering,” Ernstheim had no intention of supervising his wife and Earlwin together in carnal celebration.

Earlwin, for his part did not savour the idea of having to watch as his new lover had sex with another man, even though that man was her husband. He reluctantly agreed, regretting not keeping at least one of the males for himself to enjoy later.

Sonia arrived from the kitchen with a fairly large mound of fried rat parts. She offered them to her husband. He gave Earlwin a last sceptical look before sinking his fork into the forbidden flesh. Sonia followed his lead and soon the platter bore nothing but warm rat ooze.

Ernstheim rose, took his wife's hand and led her into the bedroom. In their enthusiasm they neglected to close the door.

Earlwin remained where he sat and soon he was listening to animal moans, the likes of which he had only ever heard in documentaries about the extinct species of their native Earth. As the sounds rose in intensity, Earlwin could feel pressure waves of passion erupting out of the bedroom door. Soon he could hear the sound of furniture being pushed beyond its physical limits. He heard what sounded like breaking glass amongst unnatural shrieks and howls that he would not normally have expected to hear anywhere outside a lunatic asylum.

When something hit the wall with an intensity that shook the whole apartment he decided it was time for a discreet inspection. He crept silently to the open door and looked inside.

Light reflected off the sweat that differentiated two naked bodies in the semi darkness. They looked like two snakes coiled together in a death embrace. They were writhing to a rhythm that suggested that the drum was about to be broken. The overall scene was like a plush quagmire of pornographic carnage, a sexual storm that was threatening to shatter its teacup and spew across the landscape in an orgy of wanton destruction.

Their bodies shuddered through an experience beyond the animal concept of orgasm. The intensity of the spectacle was almost terrifying. Earlwin was reminded of how fragile human flesh was. Even bones, that he had recently become personally acquainted with, were very easily broken and pulverised into powder. Without the human spirit, not only guiding but feeding off this otherwise suicidal physicality, the meat itself could not have endured. It was being tortured, pushed far beyond its

natural limits. It was only the intensity of sexual desire that stopped the two bodies from exploding and showering the room with blood and guts. This was a spectacle that by comparison would have made gladiators slaughtering each other appear to be tame and contrived. It made war seem peaceful. If this was the ultimate state of physical love, it seemed identical to the ultimate consequences of absolute hatred.

He returned to his seat. Unless they actually broke through the wall, there was nothing he could do. As long as they contained themselves in the one room, he hoped the physical damage would be manageable, that everything could either be repaired or replaced. There was no room in there for another human being.

Several hours later Earlwin woke up. He must have gone to sleep because he was still seated on the couch in the executive suite. The other room was silent. They were either dead or asleep. He got up and tiptoed to the open doorway. Amidst the wreckage the two bodies appeared to be at peace. He could tell by the movement of Sonia's breasts that she was still breathing. Ernstheim emitted the odd snore.

Earlwin let himself out and made his way home.

Next day he went to work as usual. When he arrived, Security was waiting for him.

"We'd like to ask you a few questions," began one of the three security officers.

"Really," said Earlwin. "What sort of questions?"

"Where were you during quadrant 34?" began the smallest officer.

"Let's see. When exactly was that?"

“You are now in quadrant 36,” replied another of the officers.

“I suppose I was asleep in my room. Either that or I was being entertained by the Chairman and his wife,” replied Earlwin smugly.

“The Chairman?” the first officer repeated in disbelief.

“Or I was asleep in my room. Why? What’s this all about?”

“Somebody knocked over the bronze statue of our founder.”

“Yes, I heard about that. Disgraceful! Naturally I am more than happy to assist with your inquiries, but I don’t know how I can help you.” Earlwin knew that Ernstheim Bergonia would crush the investigation as soon as he heard about it.

“We have visio records of the night in question and our main suspect bares a remarkable resemblance to you.”

“Did you get a gene scan?”

“Yes we did, but unfortunately it doesn’t match anybody on the colony,” replied the smaller of the three officers.

“Ernstheim will vouch for my whereabouts. Please excuse me I have a lot of work to do.”

The three officers realised that they were not going to get anywhere and left.

Earlwin zisked Sonia. She looked tragic. She was bruised from head to only her husband knew where else and quite frankly her night of unbridled physical gymnastics had not helped her appearance in any way.

“You poor darling, you must have had fun,” was Earlwin’s greeting.

“Oh my god!” was all Sonia could say. She said it again twice. She looked as though her vibrator had just conquered the galaxy.

“Sorry to disturb you. How’s Ernstheim?”

“He’s reassigned the next four quadrants to recreation. He almost looks as bad as I do. I think he broke some ribs.”

“Sounds like you had a wonderful time.” Earlwin was jealous.

“Oh my god!” repeated Sonia.

“I’ve just had a visit from security. They matched my visio with whoever attacked the statue the other night.”

“Don’t worry about it. Ernst will sort it out. Did they get a gene scan?”

“Not one that matched, fortunately.”

“Nothing to worry about then. I’ll tell Ernst when he wakes up.”

“Thanks darling.”

“We need some more cockroaches.”

“No problem. When will you be up to it?”

“I’ll let you know when Ernst wakes up. I better go. Bye darling.”

Her image began to flicker then disappeared.

## Chapter 10

Despite being sunned by a beer can and an empty cigarette packet, life on colony AB 27 continued in earnest. Hearts pumped blood and the human population continued to perform their appointed tasks as if doing so was somehow intrinsically important. The few who knew that their planet was orbiting a giant beer can and an empty cigarette packet didn't bother to give it much thought. The quandalude vein was rich and continued to supply the energy that the company needed to expand its vast empire, and they had a job.

The intergalactic press had turned Ed into a cosmic superstar and his two halves were regular features in media publications across HIS (human imagined space). Nobody had been able to satisfactorily explain how he had been able to survive being cut in half. Less than nobody had even been able to speculate about how he had then managed to survive having his life support turned off. These two alleged facts made him a threat to the entire notion of causality. He was a wonder, having defied the very definition of life itself.

One day, at the suggestion of the Biancans, Earlwin arrived at Ed's bedside with 'something new'. Ed was very sceptical at first but the powder looked harmless enough and so, after a lot of heavy duty persuasion, Ed finally agreed to snort a line of it up his nose.

"What is it?" he wanted to know.

"Don't worry, it won't hurt you."

"Isn't that what you said about the rats?"

Ed took the straw and leaned forward. At that moment a smallish piece of olfactory moistener (snot) dislodged itself from his upper nasal cavity. The result was a ticklish sensation that caused him to draw in a large breath and

sneeze. This in turn sent the powdered roach remnants, from the plate on his lap, into the air in front of him producing a cloud of cockroach dust.

Ed immediately began to gasp for breath. His circulatory functions ceased and his eyes rolled back into his skull from where his consciousness was unable to maintain its control over the data being produced by his physical senses. At about that moment, he became medically dead.

The disconnected machines seemed to give off a collective sigh of relief. Finally their efforts had been appreciated. Ed's feet gave a final twitch on the other bed and then abruptly discontinued all mortal functions. Rigor mortis began to set in and the slow process of decomposition began.

Earlwin noted that Ed had failed to draw another breath after his sneeze and tried to revive his friend by the time honoured method of giving him a good shake. This did nothing except accentuate the slumping of Ed's torso.

"Shit!" exclaimed Earlwin. "Are you all right?" he asked Ed's lifeless corpse.

"Nurse! NURSE! NURSE!!!"

Earlwin, Ernstheim and Sonia regarded each other over three meticulously aligned piles of crushed cockroach powder that lay poignantly on the glass topped table. There was another large pile of the powder that Earlwin was attempting to line up in order to prolong the experience that awaited them. It had been two days since Ed's unexplained demise and they were hoping for some answers. Ernstheim inhaled the first line. His face contorted into a pained expression of revulsion and regret for a few seconds as he handed the straw to his wife. Sonia

repeated the performance handing the straw to Earlwin who concluded the hat trick.

~@&0~ was waiting with several companions. The energy of the Biancans seemed uncharacteristically agitated. For the first time their presence failed to relax the humans. They were much less harmonious, as though they had recently discovered something worth worrying about.

“Greetings Earthlings,” ~@&0~ began.

The three human minds returned the salutation in unison.

No tapestry unfolded. It became clear that on this occasion the Biancans required information from the humans. “We have observed your preparations and we know that you ingest the dried remains of the insect form of your planetary life in order to be able to function in the spectrum that enables you to perceive us,” ~@&0~ began, oblivious to the human rules of sentence structure.

“What happened to Ed?” Earlwin’s mind cut through the pause with an urgency that startled the Biancans.

“We were maintaining your compatriots life force after your own hierarchy terminated support,” ~@&0~ explained. “However, when he caused the dried insect powder to infiltrate our personal atmospheres we were unable to continue. Those of us engaged in the mission were subject to severe perceptual distortions, not unlike those that have enabled you to perceive us.” ~@&0~ paused.

“So what did you see?” Sonia’s mind contributed.

“See?” ~@&0~ indicated that this was a human concept and did not apply to Biancans. The Humans were silent.

“We were not able to maintain life support and we fear that our inability has caused the universe to be denied a point of consciousness. This is a very grave matter of our

concern. We are committed to the preservation of all life for the greater good of all other life. This failure has sent a wave of despair throughout the universal consciousness of which we are all a part.”

“Yes but what did you perceive?” Ernstheim’s mind joined Sonia’s to represent the question.

~@&%~ continued. “We don’t know. Every Biancan was included in the experience. We understand that Mind is a function of the universe and that everything is connected to it according to its level of evolution. Your insect powder enabled the Biancan connection to universal mind to perceive a level of existence more subtle than our own. The experience was very limited and very little was learned. That is why we are here. We are hoping that you may grant us a further interaction with this conscious level beyond our own.”

Ernstheim’s mind assented to the request immediately and instructed Earlwin to blow some of the cockroach powder into the air.

Earlwin could not direct his body to perform any such functions at that moment. He was aware of himself and the others as skeletons but could see neither the powder nor the table upon which it rested.

Once again Earlwin’s mind asked, “What happened to Ed?”

“Ed is dead,” replied ~@&%~ with a finality that scattered Ed’s ashes into the corners of all the universes.

Ernstheim’s mind wanted to know more about the next level.

“We need to find out,” replied ~@&%~. “Biancans are aware that there is only one Mind. We tap into It according to our needs just like you. However we do not imagine that we are somehow separate. We are not individuals as you humans perceive yourselves to be. We

are merely individual points of consciousness within the Whole.

“So what was the pyramid?” Earlwin’s mind asked. At that point he became aware that the transmission was weakening. Ernstheim’s mind was falling away. He and Sonia were now stereo points of reception and the message that came through now lacked convincing reality. He could feel Sonia’s mind losing power also. Alone he was bewildered, still able to see the Biancans’ forms and the human skeletons, but not able to maintain the transmission.

Soon he became aware of flesh and the room they were in. The clouds were invisible once again.

Ernstheim had scraped the remaining lines off the table and was blowing them into the air. The room was full of dust.

“I kept us another line,” he said.

He began to divide the small amount of powder that was left on the table. He took the straw and sniffed the first line before handing it to Sonia, who snorted the second and handed it to Earlwin.

Once again they could see the Biancans but they were not communicating anymore. The three skeletons sat around trying to form relevant thoughts but nothing came back. The clouds were still present but they were focussed elsewhere. They didn’t bother with the humans.

Eventually the powder wore off and the three humans found themselves in corporeal form feeling like they had just attended the party of the century locked inside a wooden crate. All the powder was gone. None floated out of the air. It had all been absorbed.

Earlwin was exhausted. He excused himself and went home.

The Pleasure Ship arrived. It had been 100 days since its last visit and life on AB 27 had gone through more changes than a frog's egg. Earlwin was on the roster. He fronted up for his free dose of company thrills. This time he got one of the clones. She called herself Avanka and got down to business without much preliminary prevarication. This girl understood how the male psyche worked and was ready to milk it like a house cow.

She briefly paraded around the Sleazerium in her lace panties making small talk about the fantastic results AB 27 had achieved with its company quotas. Then she proceeded to mount and elicit orgasm from an otherwise disinterested Earlwin. Straight sex was like changing a light bulb. Once everything was in place and the power was on, everyone was happy. It was so typically human, completely devoid of anything unexpected that Earlwin couldn't stop himself from laughing as his penis finally came up with the goods. Then they both knew it was over and he had another 100 days to masticate on the experience.

As he was leaving, Avanka became alarmed and accused him of stealing her uniform. Earlwin submitted to a full body search that revealed nothing she hadn't already seen. He left the distraught Gosha without anything to protect her exposed femininity from random unsolicited attention. He hadn't seen where she had dumped her knickers and besides that being the most remarkable aspect of the entire event, he wasn't particularly interested.

For the next few days Earlwin waited patiently for Sonia's body to recover in the hope that next time it would be his turn to share some of the remaining rats. His interest in cockroaches had waned after the Biancans had abandoned them for more interesting playmates. Merely possessing X-ray vision had lost its allure without their

alien guides. It was a complete waste of a woman like Sonia.

Meanwhile things kept disappearing, usually at the least expected and most inappropriate times. As Earlwin stood up to go home from work, his left shoe was gone. And so was his right sock. They had leapt inexplicably into some tiny black hole that must have been following him around. Next morning, just as he was about to get dressed, the mirror that had always been on his wall, wasn't.

Sonia zisked him complaining that she and Ernstheim were experiencing the same kind of problems. All of their guptide cigarettes had disappeared. Ernstheim's briefcase vanished after he had placed it on the bed and that morning both their toothbrushes were gone.

Earlwin was collecting cockroaches slowly and knew that another meeting with the Biancans was not far away, but he felt in no particular hurry to get there.

Ernstheim had submerged himself in guptide and according to Sonia, was healing well. His desk had been buried in his absence, his workload continuing to mount as the company realised that the problems caused by its crashed freighter would not be limited to the solar system in which the event had occurred. The planet that sustained the initial impact had crashed into its star as had two of the system's other planets. The others were veering erratically through space and one had exited the system like a freshly spat watermelon pip.

Guptide was being incinerated by the atmospheres of the other planets as their orbits became less predictable and the whole system was full of smoke which was adding to the confusion and limiting visibility. It was the biggest mess that humanity had so far managed to create, threatening a domino effect in that particular galaxy which ultimately had no logically predictable ending.

Ed's funeral was a lavishly attended affair. Half of the Great Hall was filled with the intergalactic press eager to splash the final chapter of Ed's saga across HIS. The media had already been saturated with headlines like; 'Ed is Dead' and 'Ed's dead in his beds'. Practically the entire colony had shown up, spilling out into the foyers where giant screens had been mounted so that nobody would miss the show.

Ed's two halves, finally united in death, lay in a single open casket. His widow and daughter sprinkled rose petals onto the body that somehow was managing to look quite pleased with itself.

MER Merily Winthrop mounted the podium with practised solemnity. This was his biggest gig so far. He nodded gravely to Chairman Bergonia and his wife who were seated behind him and piously cleared his throat. A respectful hush fell over the assembly.

"Brothers and sisters," he began in the slow monotone that churchmen had used to pacify the masses since before there were masses to pacify.

"Today we are gathered in this place to bear witness to the passing of a truly remarkable man." Once again he paused for just long enough for most of his audience to begin wishing that he would just get on with it.

"Edwinkle Henderon, faithful employee of the Intergalactic Mining and Settlement Company, touched many hearts during his short and largely uneventful life. His story has echoed throughout the cosmos, a brave testimony to the power of the human will, and its resilience in the face of overwhelming adversity. He has served as an inspiration to countless billions, a champion of the downtrodden and oppressed everywhere. His passing, though technically in no way affecting the profitability of

the company, represents a great personal loss to every member of the entire human race. That he was able to continue in this life, his body severed in two, without the support of medical intervention, rates as one of the greatest mysteries of this, the age of space conquest.

“I will now read from the teachings of our great prophet Errol, a piece known to most of you, I am sure, as ‘The Itching’. These sacred words flowed from the lips of our beloved prophet one morning after he had awoken having spent the night on a flea infested mattress.

“The itching! The bloody infernal itching! These vermin that doth feast upon my flesh shall by sundown have perished. But the itching shall accompany me for many days hence, a tribute to their handiwork that creatures so small and of such minor consequence should affect a man in such an annoying manner. All creatures in performing their allotted tasks, no matter how annoying, are fulfilling the great destiny of the universe. The fruits of their labour shall fill the void with echoes of eternity. Behold ye, that which doth labour as the goat upon the mighty mountain, for I say unto ye that thy efforts shall all be joined to fulfil the great destiny of the cosmos. Even the slightest itch can reveal the proof of honest toil undertakeneth for the good of life itselfeth.’ Praise be to Errol!” He concluded.

“Praise be to Errol,” echoed the faithful, throughout the great hall and the labyrinth of attached foyers.

“Let us now chant the anti-mantra together to honour the memory of the deceased.”

A low murmur began to rise from the crowd.

“Ferdie tiddle dum do. Ferdie tiddle dum do. Ferdie tiddle dum do,” they drearily intoned in rough unison.

MER Merily Winthrop held forth a golden Baked Bean Can as Ed’s casket was placed inside a giant quandalude

burner and despatched with full honours to the garbage heap of eternity.

Several members of the press ran noisily from the building desperate to zisk their commentaries and visios back to their respective headquarters hoping to be the first to break the story.

Earlwin had witnessed the proceedings from the back of the hall. He couldn't help feeling responsible for both of his friend's untimely demises. If Ed had never met him he would still be alive, his wife would still have a husband and his daughter would still have her father.

When Sonia zisked him a few hours later these thoughts were still bullying his conscience from the safety of doubt's mighty fortress.

"I killed him."

"Don't be ridiculous," Sonia tried to console him. "It was his idea to leave the colony and it was his sneeze that stopped the Biancans from keeping him alive."

"If he'd never met me he'd still be alive."

"If he'd never met you he probably would've died of boredom. Remember that you've discovered a whole new life form on a planet that was considered dead, not to mention the most amazing sex drug in the history of sex. I'm sure Ed was glad to have met you. He was just unlucky."

"I noticed in his casket, he still had the straw in his hand," said Earlwin embracing the gloom in doubt's deepest dungeon.

"The biggest shame is that he never got to see the Biancans, and that certainly wasn't your fault."

"Yes, but all the rest was."

“We’ve still got a few rats left,” said Sonia, mischievously dissolving doubt’s mighty fortress into a mirage of erect nipples and moist pubic hair.

“But are you up to it? You really took a pounding from Ernst.”

“I can’t wait to take another one from you!”

Earlwin could barely stop himself from stuttering, “Whenever you’re ready.”

“I’m ready.”

“Don’t move. I’ll be right over.”

Sonia’s apartment had been cleaned up but she hadn’t bothered to replace the furniture. Instead she had a large mattress on the floor in the middle of the bedroom and very little else that might get in the way.

When Earlwin arrived he could smell the aroma and hear rat flesh sizzling in her kitchen. Sonia was only wearing a small apron as she peered around the door and let him in. He cupped her breast and thrust his tongue hungrily down her throat. She giggled, disentangled herself from his embrace and went back to pushing dead rat parts around the frying pan.

Earlwin was ravenous with lust and continued to molest her scantily clad body while she served up. Mysteriously the plate onto which she had intended to place the cooked flesh had disappeared as if swallowed by the air itself. Undeterred she took another and dished up the hot remnants. They didn’t wait for anything to cool down and had soon devoured the entire offering. Then they focussed their appetites on each other like two gourmets preparing to savour the main course.

Sonia threw her apron aside as Earlwin threw her onto the mattress.

Within minutes the universe was shuddering around them. Innocence and restraint were bleeding to death, crucified and abandoned in a dusty corner. Great pulsations of sexual energy reverberated in waves from their tangled flesh as they grunted and sweated like excited primal hogs enjoying the fresh mud of a brand new swamp. Together they became lost in a carnal tribute to their meathood, their freely flowing juices splattering the walls like fat from an overworked frying pan.

They didn't need technique. There was no game plan. This was pure physicality having a party just beyond the reach of thought. On and on they rutted, seemingly insatiable, neither asking quarter and neither prepared to grant it. At last the human race knew the real meaning of the word SEX. The absolute truth of the animal state had finally been dragged out of its burrow and into the light. It danced and sang next to the very roots of the tree of evolution while intoxicated songbirds petitioned the heavens from its shaking branches. Physical life had reached its zenith, its unbridled exuberance completely horrifying the assembled clouds of invisible Biancans.

Felacia was determined to get hold of another space probe. She had tried to contact the company that had sold her the first one but they were out of business and all their assets had been sold. To buy a new one from anybody else was almost as far beyond her financial abilities as paying her deceased father's medical bill.

But she had found a golden planet!!!!!!

She had discovered the fabled Eldorado; the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Her discovery was the one that had haunted humanity's myths since the beginning of time. Who needed the philosopher's stone, or the goose that laid

the golden egg? The touch of Midas had suddenly been rendered redundant. She had the ultimate treasure map!

If it proved to be what the initial data had shown, she would be able to buy Intergalactic Mining and Settlement and probably most of the rest of HIS. She had the coordinates, she only needed to register her discovery.

But even an 11 year old knew that the company could not be trusted. It would take over, exploit her find and forget that she ever existed, if she was lucky. It had a well documented history of not only stealing other peoples discoveries, but blotting out the claim by eliminating the discoverer as well. It had no ethics, no morality and as far as she could tell, nothing to even insinuate that it would behave in a fair or reasonable way.

It used Errolism and anything else it could get its greedy claws into as justification for whatever it needed to justify.

Her poor, stupid mother had become even more religious since the death of her father. Regina had been greatly relieved when Ed had finally done the decent thing and dropped dead. It had gotten rid of the press and at last she could continue her life without the constant stigma of being married to a man who despite all of the compelling medical evidence, refused to die. She spent hours chanting the anti-mantra.

Ernstheim arrived home after another gruelling day, examining fresh data from the disaster that was unfolding in the neighbouring star system.

The star itself was really angry. A bunch of careless meat beings from the other side of time and space had collapsed its system, wiping out several billion years of its evolutionary destiny. It was choking on its own guptide, three of its planets were hurtling through space as though

they had just signed up to the chaos theory, and neighbouring stars were treating it like it had smallpox.

Ernstheim was tired but despite his big picture ordeals, he knew it was his duty to continue to contact the Biancans and to try and learn more about their civilisation.

He was in no mood for what he found in his wife's apartment. The sounds of intense sexual activity were gushing from the bedroom like blood from a busy guillotine. The floor was shaking.

Realising that they had raided the rat stash, his level of annoyance raised itself another notch. There were some definite disadvantages to being married to the colony's biggest slut.

Any attempt to contact the Biancans by himself was futile. He had gotten one of his assistants to collect some cockroaches which were inside the bag he was carrying. He took them to his suite and settled in to wait for his wife and Earlwin to finish fucking.

He busied himself cooking and preparing the insects' bodies and by the time he finally gave up and went to bed, he had produced the biggest pile of cockroach powder ever seen.

The next morning Sonia and Earlwin awoke in quite a lot of pain. There hadn't been a lot of chattels for them to devalue so their bodies had borne the full brunt and thrust, while their libidos had soared like eagles dispassionately regarding the physical landscape with disdain from on high. Unfortunately they eventually crashed and were now suffering in the wreckage.

Ernstheim arrived, with guptide tea.

"Rise and shine my little sex rats," he greeted them. "Don't worry about the state of your bodies, today it's your mind's turn."

They groaned in unison and gratefully accepted the tea.

An hour later, showered and in less pain, they limped down the corridor to Ernstheim's suite and were confronted with three mountain ranges of powder.

"This time we won't run out," said Ernst.

Accompanied by a display of facial contortions usually reserved for the unfortunate victims of irritable bowel syndrome, they all dutifully consumed their designated line. The Biancans were already present as the walls and their flesh peeled away.

"We have been waiting for you," said ~@&0%~ with what felt like some form of alien urgency.

It continued.

"Your insect powder limits our perceptions in some ways, but in other ways it vastly enhances us. We were not able to maintain contact with you and we apologise if it appeared that we were ignoring you. We were able to make contact with the more subtle level of consciousness and they completely absorbed us. They are not like us. They appear to us to be utterly frivolous, even infantile. They do not share our attitudes towards the sanctity of life. They think it is all a big game for their petty amusement. They have completely bewildered us." ~@&0%~ fell silent.

"But surely if they are a more subtle life form, then they must be more evolved. They must be closer to perfection," said Ernstheim's mind.

"They are not a life form as such. They do not require any physical basis. They are pure consciousness. You Earthlings manifest your consciousness through bodies that are mostly water. We Biancans are able to manifest through what you would call gas. But these entities require no physical basis whatsoever. They are based on the ether or what you refer to as space. They have no bodies. We perceive them as collections of thought. This is what is

bothering us. Our notion of perfection is merely a joke to them.

We showed them our 'centre' and they turned it upside down and showed us how to use its parts to play a game not unlike your human game of football. Then they took the parts that were not completely obliterated and used them to destroy several of our cities in another game that they called cosmic bowling.

They told us that they were only doing this for our benefit and that eventually we would understand and thank them. They told us that we took ourselves too seriously and that our ideas were boring. Then they transported all of us who were under the influence of your powder to the other end of time and space and told us that the last one back was a rotten egg.

This appeared to amuse them even more than destroying our 'centre'. They were extremely disrespectful, until finally the powder wore off and mercifully returned us to our normal state and time. Since then it appears that they have been tampering with our normal functions. We have even noticed that they have started playing games with your reality."

"Is that why things have been disappearing?" the three humans asked in unison.

"That is just the visible aspect of their interference. They told us that you humans must learn to 'let go'. They claimed that your enlightenment requires you to completely eliminate all of your values and standards. We tried to point out that you have barely developed either of these things.

Then they told us that we have to completely let go of everything as well and that our notion of perfection is our final obstacle to attaining it. According to them, it can only be attained in the final realisation that it never existed in the first place.

They showed us their ‘centre of perfection’. It looked like a giant broken toilet brush that had been roughly put back together with string.”

“Do you wish to contact them again?” Ernstheim’s mind cut through the Biancan’s despair.

“We are afraid to,” replied ~@&%~. “However now that they are interfering with us we are also afraid not to.”

“We have prepared ample insect powder,” continued Ernstheim.

“Then we must attempt to reason with them.”

“Before we can do that we must wait for the powder to leave our bodies. Can you show them to us?” asked Earlwin.

“Absolutely not! They warned us that your minds are too frail to deal directly with their vibration. You would suffer severe psychological displacement. They did state that they would find it amusing to see if your insect powder was able to affect them. However they were not able to decide on a means by which they could facilitate such an experience.”

Earlwin could see the walls reappearing around him. Flesh was returning to his companion’s bones. The powder was beginning to wear off.

“After you have administered the powder for us, wait for half an hour before you take more yourselves. Then we will be able to inform you about what has happened,” said ~@&%~ as it faded away.

Within seconds, the Earthlings were all back in their fleshy bodies inside the executive suite. Ernstheim blew a handful of powder into the air.

## Chapter 11

Inside the Executive suite the three humans sat silently while the consequences of the latest alien revelation sank slowly into their minds. HIS appeared to have developed its own imagination. The universes were expanding in ways that humanity was not capable of imagining. Humanity had been infiltrated on levels that it never suspected existed. Being masters of the lowest dimension of meat had suddenly lost all its glamour. The notion of privacy had just been ripped out of the dictionary and fed to an extinct goat. It was just another aspect of human naivety. How many other levels of being were coexisting in the same space? Were they all totally aware of everything that every human did, said and thought all the time?

Humanity hadn't conquered anything. They had merely managed to pollute more space with their backward stupidity than any other lowly, basic life form.

Half an hour later, Sonia, Ernst and Earlwin had another line. The Biancans were tranquil once again.

~@&%~ spoke through their minds. "The superiors were able, briefly, to experience the insect powder. It has affected them similarly to the way it affected us, except that they have become humbled. They were able to enter our intelligence and use our perception.

They reported an even higher existence. They have requested that we allow them to experience it further. They apologised for playing games with our sacred beliefs and for destroying our 'centre'. They also informed us that they will leave you to evolve at your natural pace. We have been asked to request that you furnish a cloud of powder twice as large as the previous one. They informed us that they need a stronger dose to properly identify with the vast being beyond them."

The three humans were all left thoughtless. Between them they generated an empty silence. “How can there be anything beyond pure thought?” Earlwin’s mind asked eventually.

“We have no idea,” replied ~@&0%~ “This goes far beyond our experience. We will inform you as we learn.”

Earlwin and Ernstheim blew a huge cloud of dried cockroach powder into the air. The cloud hovered above them and then disappeared. The three humans sat and waited.

Half an hour passed. Earlwin was the least patient. Ernstheim handed him the straw and soon the three neat lines on the coffee table were gone.

~@&0%~ was waiting. For a cloud to appear breathless, extraordinary events are required far beyond the normal range of meteorology. ~@&0%~’s manner suggested that it had been philosophically ravaged. The message it was attempting to transmit was initially incomprehensible to the three human minds as they tried to receive it. Sonia’s impression was that the Biancans had just had a religious experience that contradicted everything that they had ever understood about religion. But it was even more than that.

~@&0%~ composed itself and attempted to communicate in a format that was useful to humans.

It began, “we have been informed by our superiors that the level of consciousness above their own is a complete knowingness. It is beyond thought and manifests between thoughts as a type of omniscience. It does not have individuality as we understand it. However, it wishes to be referred to as. . .” There was a pause.

Simultaneously the thought burst into the three human minds.

“The Grand Taroonie,” said ~@&0%~ almost apologetically.

“The Grand Taroonie?” repeated the three humans in synchronised confusion.

There was a lengthy silence, of the kind generally experienced for mere microseconds in between thoughts. The three human minds struggled to contain the explosion as their conceptual boundaries rapidly expanded to accommodate this new unimaginable information.

When the mental dust had settled sufficiently to allow further communication, ~@&%~ continued. “This great being is ubiquitous. According to the superiors it just is and always has been and always will be.”

“You mean it’s God?” Ernstheim’s mind interjected.

“Not exactly,” ~@&%~ replied. “There are levels of consciousness that are beyond it, but they form part of its knowingness. It did not create the universe or any of us, it just knows absolutely everything that there is to know about everything and everybody. It is the knowingness that can never be known. I cannot express any more to you than that. It must be experienced to be understood and even then, your minds do not have such a capacity. Everything I have attempted to explain is a simplification, tailored for your mind’s capacity to accept it.”

“So how does it affect us?” asked Earlwin’s mind.

“It doesn’t,” came the reply. “It isn’t interested in the level at which you perceive yourselves or It. It isn’t interested in us either. The superiors say that It already knew that they were coming and wasn’t interested in them in the slightest. It informed them that It was the knower, not the known and that they had no right to try to know It. It actually told them to ‘piss off and don’t come back.’”

“That doesn’t sound very friendly,” thought Sonia.

“The superiors informed us that they had learnt enough from It in that small encounter to render their next cycle of

evolution irrelevant. They also learnt that very soon we will all lose this opportunity to learn more.”

“Because we are running out of cockroach powder?” asked Ernstheim.

“We can always get more,” offered Earlwin enthusiastically.

“The superiors learned that because we are relying on the insect powder to reach omniscience, we have assigned the insects a higher role in the evolution of our consciousness than is karmically commensurate. We have effectively, turned evolution upside down and have placed your Earthly cockroaches at the top, beyond the saints and great seers of history by making their physical bodies the vessels of our enlightenment.

Normally the universe will tolerate a lot of variation within the workings of evolutionary mechanisms. But in this case, too many levels of life have been affected, from the cockroaches themselves right up to The Grand Taroonie. Such a significant tampering with the natural order of progression is not acceptable. The portal that they have opened is about to be sealed shut. Forever.”

“How?” asked three bewildered humans.

“We don’t know. We are also guilty of artificially stimulating our own evolution with your insect powder. The superiors are behaving like naughty children after a good spanking. They are silent on these matters.”

At that exact moment, the angry star whose system had disintegrated after the collision with the freighter, decided it was time to explode.

The explosion was very spectacular. It obliterated all of the system’s remaining planets and sent out a blast-wave that swept out into deep space capturing the guptide smoke that filled its solar system.

A guptide shockwave was driven out into the cosmos at dependable old sol mk 1 destroying everything in its path, including the star system closest to the one containing Archmed Bianco.

By the time it reached Archmed Bianco, the wave had dissipated slightly and was not quite as deadly. The planet was rocked and tilted on its axis by three degrees.

The empty cigarette packet at the centre of the system was instantly replenished with a full compliment of gigantic, billion ton cigarettes.

The beer can flashed the word 'Heine' at the universe for a few fractions of a second threatening Earth's religious balance and changing drinking patterns that had been entrenched for generations. It was to result in a brewing monopoly able to claim divine endorsement for its products and offer their consumption as an alternative to all forms of traditional religious practice on Earth.

The effect on the colonies, including AB 27 was like an Earthquake measuring around 6 on the Richter scale. It was not enough to cause any serious physical damage to the colony although several minor injuries were reported amongst the inhabitants. Quandalude extraction had to be suspended for several hours while the equipment was tested for faults.

Radiation caused all of the human flesh that was facing the direction of the blast to become tanned. People who had been standing side on, found that half of their body was tanned golden brown while the rest remained its natural colour.

It took a few hours before anybody noticed that all of the cockroaches in that particular galaxy had been vaporised. Only a few skinny little legs remained to be swept up and sent to await the faithful colonists on the other side.

