

A vintage jukebox is the central focus, glowing with warm orange and yellow light. A white electric guitar is mounted on top of the jukebox. The background is a vibrant space scene with a large, reddish planet on the left, a smaller planet on the right, and a starry sky. The word "Sample" is written in a large, red, stylized font across the middle of the image.

Sample

Milky Way
Marmalade

Michael DiCerto

The Moby Dick was cruising at a comfortable clip...

...and Caffrey's feet were up as he played air drums along with Keith Moon. Yin disrupted his bliss.

"Ahhh...folks. What, pray tell, is that?"

A spiraling tube of blue energy was winding its way from a singularity in space and moving toward the *Moby Dick* at an alarming rate of speed.

"I am afraid we will not be able to outrun it!" Angie cried.

"Some sort of wormhole, I suppose," said Caffrey.

"A wormhole of the usual sort requires energy exceeding Planck levels. the *Moby Dick* is picking up only a mild static, no more than would be produced by rubbing a foot on a shag carpet," Poe 33 announced.

Caffrey gave the android a strange glance as he tried to guess where in the endless light years of adventuring he would have come across shag carpeting.

"What is this if not some sort of black hole?"

"It is a mylaxic eel," Poe 33 explained.

"Never heard of it," Yin admitted.

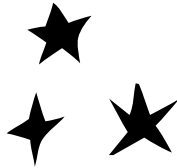
"Me neither. Angie-girl, you find anything in your zoological files on mylaxic eels?"

"Just a moment, my sweet leather volume. Yes. Found. Mylaxic eel: an extremely rare member of the genus *Electrophorus electricus gigantus*, found only in comet-rich regions of the Plethorian Sector. Its unique digestive system links two distinct points in time and space, illustrating in astronomical grandeur the philosophy of never defecating where one resides."

"I could have told you that," Poe 33 mumbled.



MILKYWAY
MARMALADE



by

Michael DiCerto

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual locales events or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

MILKY WAY MARMALADE

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Dedication

To my Father, Dominick, who filled my world with spirit and wonder.

To my Mother, Dolores, who filled my world with her strength.

To musicians, with their longhaired souls, who filled my world with endless joy.

And to my wife, Suzy, who is my world.

FOREWORD

BOOKS FOR AND ABOUT EVERY WALK OF LIFE, FROM JAMES Joyce to James Patterson, might get the characters right, the emotions right, the plot, the place, the architecture right—but they almost never get the music right. Or care.

Milky Way Marmalade is the music. It's life, music, and desire, all unfolding with a freaky-deaky beat poet sensibility. The characters are out where the buses don't run, but, then again, in 3265, the bus schedule can be unreliable at best. We fly through the galaxy, through thousands of years in existence, with a Rosetta Stone juke box as our guide, hoping to fight the ultimate evil, hoping to connect to the ultimate good—and laughing along the way...

Rock music has always been one of my best friends; I can't even begin to count how many lonely miles Bob Dylan has traveled with me. How many mind-numbing traffic jams I've survived because the Grateful Dead soothed my nerves or the Beatles fed my mind. Thirty-some-odd years since its creation, classic rock continues to live, thrive and accompany lonely travelers on their journeys. It will be ever thus 1200 years from now.

The truths of the Universe might be in the Bible—or in “Layla,” or in *Milky Way Marmalade*—it's up to you, and it's well-worth the intergalactic, alien gourmet delicacy trip to find out!

— Ken Dashow
Q104.3, New York

INTRODUCTION

A MESSAGE FROM THE WISEST SUB- STANCE IN THE UNIVERSE

THE UNIVERSE, I ONCE NOTED, IS NOT ONLY STRANGER THAN you can imagine, it secretly dresses in studded-leather feety pajamas and spiked fuchsia pasties. The fact is the oddness of the universe is a part of its very essence. If looked upon as a whole from some far-out, Godlike point of view it would appear quite dull. Normal. Beautiful, perhaps, but predictable in its patterns of stars formed into disks of galaxies that in their totality make up the realm oft referred to as “the Cosmos.” The untrained eye must peer deeper into its heart to truly appreciate its bizarre reality.

I should know, for I am a reflection of that reality.

I am not God. Nor am I a goddess nor the Lord nor the Supreme Being. I am not the Creator. I am not the Divine Spark, nor the Ultimate Entity that runs the show. I am certainly not the Cosmic Big Kahuna.

I am a cube of orange-colored gelatin the size of an average throw pillow.

I know what you are thinking—actually, let me rephrase that—I know all the possible thoughts you can think, have thought or will think: how smart and powerful can a lump of orange, gelatinous star-stuff be? Well, not very—yet infinitely so. I am the complete record of the universe—all its creatures, places, things, events and potentials in every time that will ever be and in every dimension that exists or

may exist. I am the music, but I did not write the song.

I have had many names given to me by many beings with various levels of intelligence and beliefs. From your own world they include: the universal hologram, the Philosopher's Stone, the Holy Grail, perfected bliss, the Akashic record, manna from heaven, ether (soniferous or otherwise), the Cosmic Mind, the collective unconscious, the morphogenic field, lucid dreaming, the Bread of Life, sacred geometry, novelty waves, the flower of life, teacher plants and fungi and even Reginald by a pompous but good-hearted gent of royal heritage. A popular moniker amongst powerful off-Earth circles is simply "The L'Orange."

There are an infinite number of other names and concepts on an infinite number of other worlds, but I will leave that for you to discover. Regardless of the label used, all are incomplete in their perception of my true nature. While I am perhaps the wisest substance in the universe (potentially), I have no true innate power other than the knowledge and wisdom that can be accessed by any object, idea or creature with a consciousness. Although I exist in physical form, I am within everything and everything is within me. I will manifest most densely where creative forces spark, and I tend to hightail it (in a quantum manner) from locales where destructive folks and their dark ideas loiter.

I was formed in some ancient time by an unknown intelligence, unknown hands or, perhaps, an unknown machine. Perhaps I am the squishy orange turd of God? While it may seem odd that a gelatinous record of the All is unaware of its own origin, it only goes to prove my opening thesis: it is, indeed, a strange universe.

There is, however, one thing of which I am certain. Of all the forms of matter in the universe, the one that gives the Cosmos its Technicolor sheen and adds to its fruity flavor is found scampering atop, swimming beneath and flying above the countless balls of stone orbiting countless suns.

Life.

The unbelievable diversity of living creatures, no matter the form, intelligence, belief structures, political systems, social strata and annoying habits, is where all the utter weirdness is found. Dip beneath the skin of these beings, take a peek into the psyche—into the circus of the ego, id and the crayon box of mental workings—and the penultimate and wondrous freak show will be experienced. If the universe is music then life is Rock 'n' Roll.

And while I'm on the subject of life, let me answer one question

that has haunted many a burgeoning civilization—No, Johnny, you are not alone in the universe. Not by a bloody long shot. It is a normal developmental stage in the formation of a sentient being's psyche to fear not being alone. Imagine yourself standing in a pitch-black cave where a few million bats, insects and carnivorous mammals make residence. Are you mentally prepared to light a torch?

Unknown to most lifeforms, due to their limited perspective, is the potential of interconnectedness among the living. Even if separated by light-years of space and eons of time, the coyness of the Universal Mind may send two apparently unconnected lifeforms on a journey to a crossroad. At this crossroad seemingly impossible and completely unforeseeable synchronicities will take place. There are no truly random events.

Although my existence includes infinite variations, I do exist in a three-dimensional form. In fact, being a physical entity, my own path has led me to interact with a plethora of intelligent beings. One such on a more intimate physical level: the Guardian Android, officially known as The Portsmouth (or, albeit rather pompously, I confess, The Portsmouth to the Wisest Substance in the Universe), who escorts and protects my physical presence. These androids, designed and built using strict, ultra-secret ritualistic practices by an impossibly ancient race, each serve a term of time called a Round—about a thousand Earth years.

The story that follows deals with a Portsmouth and a good-natured human who doubts my existence. It is also a treatise on music and the many, many instances of the synchronicities that sprout like magical mushrooms when the conditions are right.

And, most importantly, it is dedicated to the most powerful force the universe has ever, or will ever, know.

CHAPTER 1

Magic Carpet Ride

(Steppenwolf)

CAFFREY QUARK FELT LIKE THE WHITE RABBIT. ALTHOUGH he hadn't consciously made the literary connection, he was late, very late, for a very important date.

He sat with his fingers intertwined behind his head in the cockpit of his spacecraft, the *Moby Dick*. He was in a traffic jam of epic proportions, and although his was the sole ship in the entire sector, he could not move. Any further travel had been made impossible by the sphere of shimmering red energy encasing the entire Freega System. He could do nothing but listen as the official announcement of the Emergency Broadcast Station, backed by cold and lifeless music, reminded him he was not going to make his appointment.

MUSIC (*myoo'zɪk*) n. [ME. Musike <ancient ErSolOFr. Musiquei <ancientEr1SolL. Musica <ancientEr1SolGr. Musike (techne), musical (art), orig. an art of the Muses < mousa, Muse] 1. An artificial construct of electronic sounds, used to convey the attitude, theme or moral values (overtly or subliminally) of various goods and services usually broadcast between adverts and/or emergency broadcasts.

This was the unfortunate definition on which Caffrey's ears had been raised, and he'd grown to despise the very notion of music. He rubbed his temples and stared out at the seemingly infinite net of energy that would hamper his journey to the forested world of

Careem 6. Vivid thoughts of taking large sledgehammers to the satanic equipment producing such rubbish filled his imagination. A sudden burst of static added a bit of character to the musical sterility, and a voice filled the cabin.

“Be advised that due to an Anomalous Planetary Event, spacecraft without official personnel, insignias or external advert billboards will not be allowed into the Freega System until further announcement. Please enjoy our continuous play of ‘The Flight of the Ravaged Ignorants Interlude,’ courtesy of Orington Munitions Corporation.”

The voice faded; and the computer-generated music continued, failing miserably in its attempt at symphonic beauty.

“Another APE?” Caffrey wondered aloud, turning the volume of the radio down to zero.

“It’s becoming an odd trend, my beleaguered banana muffin,” observed Angie, the in-dash computer assistant with a voice as smooth as a mercury milkshake.

“Angie, you know how punctual the black-winged trinka is. I have exactly thirteen hours to reach Careem Six, hike six kilometers through impossible-to-land-in swamps then climb a kilometer and a half to the edge of a steaming pit and catch the bloody trinka before its post-coital suicide.”

“Actually, you have fifteen hours. The black-winged trinka sings its pre-death songs to its mate for two hours before it leaps into the pit. So romantic,” Angie sighed.

Caffrey shrugged and scanned the shimmering black heavens before him.

“What the hell is going on out there? Anything on the local channels?”

“Negative.”

“Damn. Do you know how much a black-winged trinka goes for?”

“Anything caught by you, my love, is priceless.”

“Twenty thousand glid. Twenty-five, if it still has all six of its penises.”

“Quarky!” Angie scolded, managing an auditory blush.

“Check GS.”

“Aye-aye, honey-pot dumpling,” Angie said, responding with one of her ten million pre-programmed cute and oft excessively sugary monikers.

She searched Galax-Skein, the ever-growing database that had

permeated and branched across the Cosmos for eons. In seconds she had an answer.

“There are rumors all over the local chat channels that the world of Careem Six is going through difficult times.”

“Difficult times?”

“The specifics are being argued vehemently. Everything from angry spirits, corrupt official activity to inter-dimensional terrorists. In any event, the one thing they do agree on is this: Careem Six is missing.”

“Missing...” Caffrey bemoaned. “This is getting a bit tired. Three planets in three weeks.”

The exotic meat collecting business relied on place and time. It relied on punctuality and an encyclopedic knowledge of galactic fauna and their individual mating, scavenging, migrating, hibernating, hunting and dying habits. But perhaps most importantly, success in the business relied upon the planet containing the exotic edible to have the decency to be there when one arrived.

Caffrey had inherited, rather reluctantly, his father’s moderately valuable Supper’s Ready meat collecting business. His parents, who had decided to run off for an indefinite second honeymoon ten years previous, had had enough of the dead meat trade.

Caffrey was easily bored with mundane routine. To assure each hunting expedition would be unpredictable, he added the word exotic to the company logo and set his sights on some of the more peculiar examples of the Milky Way’s cornucopia of edible creatures. He knew he could make a bundle selling to an endless stream of obscenely rich, impossibly powerful, embarrassingly pretentious and esoterically psychotic clientele, who were sexually aroused by ingesting creatures from the twisted side of nature’s imagination. Caffrey wasn’t one to toy with semantics—his business card bragged he was “the prime purveyor of exotic meat delivered fresh from the stars to the stars”—but he was feeling more and more nauseous in his killer role as each day passed.

“Set a course for Geraplond, Angie-girl. There’s a spotted glumox there with my name on it. I’ll have to convince the Duke of Bron Yraur that black-winged trinkas are passé. He’ll buy it. Bloody poser.”

“Course set for Geraplond, sweet tush.”

The *Moby Dick* turned and set off to the bizarre jungle planet and home of the deadly glumox.



The bartender working the late shift at Marti Oh's Pub wiped down the bar top. It wasn't in need of cleansing, for there had been no patrons since the day shift of the local Star-Transport engine plant had downed their last potables and headed home. It was simple boredom, and he scrubbed at a stain that had never lifted from the fine grain surface and probably never would.

The barman cast a pity-filled glance at the android who sat alone, watching his every move with an odd smirk. The artificial being's skin was soft and almost flesh-like. He was unclothed but devoid of any exposed sex organs, rendering the term naked inappropriate. The top of his head had a slightly raised, horseshoe-shaped ridge of sorts that gave the android the illusion of male-pattern baldness. His knuckles, elbows and knees were quite evident and appeared solid and powerful. His facial features were arranged in a perpetual smirk that hinted of great arrogance—yet a certain amount of sincere charm as well.

“Sure there's nothing I can get you?” the barman asked of the handsome blue android, whose sheen reflected the soft white and blue lights of the bar with unexplainable orange glints.

“Not unless you can lead me to the trophy of my programmed charge. I have become mired in a wash of nihilistic ripples and attacks of confusion. It would be best I do no further damage to my neural network. I am, however, enjoying your company.”

His voice had a wonderfully rich texture that was at once seductive and creepy. It had the tones and timbre of a late-night radio personality. His was a voice one might hear on a radio show while driving on some road to nowhere at four a.m., and it seemed somehow appropriate for someone sitting alone at the dark end of the bar.

“Actually, I'm enjoying your company as well,” the bartender replied, just to be nice. He tossed his towel down and leaned three of his ten arms on the bar. “How about some music?”

“Sure,” the android agreed, sitting up taller. “What is it?”

“Music? Surely, you must have heard...” Maybe not, he said to himself. “Here—listen.”

The bartender switched on an old rusted machine that sat on a shelf below rows of exotic liquors. The sound of a soothing reed instrument of some sort emerged. The android began swaying his head along with it. He seemed to smile.

“Yes, I believe I have experienced the sensation of music before. If my defunct memory serves me at all, it was with a tall and

rather handsome fellow who was attempting sexual reproduction with a large drum of some sort.”

The bartender smiled, poured himself a short shot of Rekinese twisteroot whiskey and proposed a toast.

“To finding your memory for whatever it is you’ve forgotten.”

“My memory has been behaving erratically of late. What did you say your name was?”

“Junik,” the barman replied, trying to regain control of his six eyes, bugged out from the potency of the booze. “Have you remembered yours?”

The android shook his head. “Not yet, Junik. Although I have recalled my favorite rock—subanite. My favorite cloud formation—the photo-nimbus of Gertika Five. And my favorite nocturnal mammal—the silver-furred inistra, found in the dark forests of Ool. Cute little bugger.”

“Ool? You’re a pretty well-traveled android. That’s way out in the Soronian Sector.”

“It is, isn’t it?” the android recalled with amazement. “Well, ain’t I a wonder!”

The front door opened, and the tintinnabulation of the ancient jingle bells danced with the music. A tall female humanoid entered. She was dressed in a black leather trenchcoat that fell like a waterfall over her toned frame. Her hair was coal black and cut in short, dynamic angles. She strolled to the opposite end of the bar and took off her deep indigo sunshades to reveal a pair of purple eyes, their brightness pumped up by the aid of their own bioluminescence.

“Good sun-gone,” greeted Junik, using the colloquialism.

She nodded and threw a nasty gaze at the music machine.

“Is that necessary?” she asked tersely.

“What?”

“The music. It’s vulgar. It’s the source of all that’s wrong with the galaxy.”

The bartender rolled four of his eyes and lowered the music a single notch.

“Can I get you a drink?”

“Yes,” she replied, studying the android. “A Bloody Dragon.”

As Junik mixed the drink the purple-eyed woman tossed several more glances at the artificial man.

“What’s your name, android?” she asked without a single degree of warmth.

“Beats the living shit out of me!” the android confessed with a goofy smile.

“Have you been indulging in a magno-mix?” the purple-eyed lovely asked, referring to a magnetically charged gas inhaled by artificial lifeforms to induce the sensation of a high.

“Nay, lady. I have enough problems,” answered the android. “Funny, I’m suddenly recalling the thing called music. Although nothing’s clear in my mind, it seems I have some sort of innate relationship with it.”

The purple-eyed woman fired a flare of disgust with her eyes and took her drink in her hands. She lifted the large transparent bowl to her lips and sipped the frightfully spicy drink. The android watched as a few drops of the crimson liquid dripped from the rim of the glass to the bar top. He seemed to be fishing for a memory.

“Blood,” the android concluded after a few seconds.

“What about it?” the barman wondered.

A strange, staring expression swept across the android’s face, and he stood up with a slight whine of his knee servos. He puffed out his chest and raised his chin. Junik watched him with unwavering amusement.

“What is it, buddy?”

“I am Poe Thirty-three. And I am the most important android in the universe.”

“Good for you, pal,” humored Junik.

Poe 33 bowed, turned and walked out the door. The purple-eyed woman watched him leave, downed her drink, tossed a few glad pieces as payment and exited. Junik chuckled, shook his head and went back to work on the stubborn stain.



Exotic meat collectors galaxy-wide had been duly warned about the deadly allure of the glumox. Yet, as Caffrey studied the creature from behind the safety of a huge boulder, he felt no fear. Only pity. Although the glumox resembled a nude female human, dancing in vain attempts to lure him closer, Caffrey knew the real threat waited beyond in the mouth of its cave. With his Worthington Starlight-77 Blaster, known affectionately as Willy, set for high kill, he peered through a few strands of black hair that hung before his dark-brown eyes, let the laser system lock on to its target and launched a sizzling strand of electric-blue spaghetti.

Wisps of black smoke, a result of the sine curves branded on the fleshy form, took to the breeze. A sickening scent of burning flesh entered Caffrey's nose. A roar boomed out. He held his aim as the figure twisted and rose into the air on the thick tentacle that ran from the back of the woman-like appendage and into the cave. More cries of defeat sounded as it was flipped about like an inflatable love doll attached to a runaway fire hose.

Reminiscent of the Earth's anglerfish, with its worm-like lure for hunting smaller fish, millions of years of evolution had perfected the glumox and its adaptive decoy for hunting whatever happened to unsuspectingly pass by. Reading the bio-electrical blueprint transmitted from the part of the prey's brain describing what turned them on, the amazing creature morphed its lure to a close approximation of a perfect mate.

Nonetheless, it was no match for Caffrey. Perhaps due to some subtle cosmic flaw, nature tended to forget firearms when designing the natural defenses of its wonders. The glumox's globular body rippled with death twitches on the floor of the cave.

"Poor bugger," Caffrey mumbled softly, taking a large knife from his belt as he ambled over to the corpse.

He sliced open a pocket in the animal and, like some horrific Jack Horner, reached in and pulled out a round object dripping with ochre-colored jelly. He turned the melon-sized body part around and smiled. It smiled back. Decidedly not a plum, it was a small, perfectly formed pair of buttocks.

For the cosmo-zoologist, the glumox was the only creature known to sport an internal tushie. To the practiced Epicurean, this forgotten body part, rendered useless by the fickle workings of evolution, was well worth ten thousand glid per ounce sliced, grilled and served on a bed of glass noodles with the red wine of your choice. For many, it was worth celibacy.

Yet, as valuable as his quarry was, Caffrey felt more and more disgust with each miracle of diversity he killed. He made vain attempts to rationalize that the slaughtering of critters for their nutritional value was simply what his father, and now he, did for a living. It was no different than selling personal spacecraft or hyper-travel survival insurance.

Or was it? Caffrey had decided, when he took over the business, that he would build himself a tidy nest egg and simply allow the corporate license to expire. He wouldn't even sell it. And although he wasn't sure what the definition of a tidy nest egg was—nor if he'd

achieved such a level—he was feeling further disdain as each exotic lifeform was handed over for the oral pleasure of folks whose sense of entitlement had gone really, really awry.

A soft squeak sounded from behind him, and Caffrey turned.

“Oh, bloody beautiful,” he mumbled to himself in utter despair.

Three miniature women, like dress-up dolls for a human child, danced and shimmied on the dusty ground. Three baby tentacles wound from the backs of the little lures to the pudgy forms of three baby glumoxes. The children of Caffrey’s prey tempted him with their innocent mimicry of their slain mother’s hunting lesson.

He crouched down and studied the mogies, as baby glumoxes are called.

“I’m a serious creep,” he advised them. “Please feel free to kill me.”

They backed off some and squeaked and made deep growling sounds. Caffrey placed the expensive butt in a special storage bag, bit his lip and, not looking back, exited the cave. He would leave the corpse of the glumox behind, as its remaining anatomy had been deemed worthless by those who set standards for such things. And although the woman-like lure held value to rich perverts with bad breath and with interstellar porn producers who used them as cheap cast members, he decided that letting it rot wore less on his sense of humanity.



The *Moby Dick* had lifted off the surface of Geraplond and was making its way out to deeper space. Caffrey stood by the aft window, the light of the jungle world’s sun, Sedujik, on his face.

“Love monkey,” Angie called, “it’s nineteen-hundred hours. Would you like your usual?”

“No, Angie. Give me five to go over my meat.”

Angie giggled.

“Angie-girl, don’t be bad.”

“I thought you liked me best bad?”

“Angie—the inventory.”

Angie snickered, cleared her ethereal throat and switched to her best business tone.

“In alphabetical order, the refrigeration compartments contain the following: Algonian tubeworm, quantity fifty; lung of Borellion crabwolf, quantity four; back skin of Cuvinese anthropig, quantity fifty square meters.”

“That was a big old bastard, wasn’t it?”

“It put up quite a fight, if I remember correctly. You had dropped your Willy in a chasm. You were amazingly brave.”

“Thank you, Angie.”

Caffrey loved having a built-in electronic suck-up, especially one with the ability to adjust her vocal waveforms to produce a very pleasant tickle.

Angie resumed her listing.

“To continue: one baboolie of glumox, weight five kilograms.”

“Baboolie?”

“Tushie?” Angie suggested, checking her built-in thesaurus.

“Whatever. Please continue.”

“Knuckles of green-backed mukiro, quantity forty; two buzzing Rayni toads, weight forty-seven kilos; one giant vufalisp, length thirty-three meters, and one beautiful, twenty-kilo specimen of a blue-winged zalceeva.”

Caffrey nodded quietly and placed Willy into its recharge cradle. He plopped down before the G.S. station, staring at the blank screens.

“What’s wrong, my stellar stud? I sense a touch of sadness in your silence.”

“I made a little bungle in the jungle.”

“Huh? What do you mean, my enigmatic eye-candy?”

“I don’t know, Angie-girl. Guess I’m getting tired of killing creatures whose only crime was the unfortunate luck of having been born delicious.”

“How sweet,” Angie offered sincerely. “Can I assume we’ll be heading to the Middle City?”

Caffrey sensed a little drop of bitter lemon in her honeyed voice.

“Where else?”

A passing petulant pout crept into the waveform. “I hate this part of the expeditions. You’ll auction your meat, make a fortune in glid then wander around that horrid town spending money on some slut who couldn’t care less for you!”

The waveform of Angie’s voice changed rapidly from tickly to prickly. Caffrey hated when her voice got prickly.

“Actually, Angie, I have a surprise,” he said softly. “I’m retiring.”

“You’re retiring?”

He smiled. It felt good just saying the words—and it felt great hearing Angie say them.

“Yep. I’m selling this haul for as many glid as I can, then I’m

going to find a little shack where I can start over. Be the happy fool. Find my purpose. Turn the page.”

“Where?” There was a slight worry riding the waveform of her voice like a midget surfer.

“Someplace far from Earth Five.”

“Good. It seems Earth, no matter what rendition, is doomed to failure.” A sense of unabashed relief backed up Angie’s once-again sweet tones.

Caffrey had been born and raised on Earth V, the fourth planet of the Shetlin System. An exact duplicate of Earth IV, it had been modeled after the original Earth (abandoned some ten centuries earlier) as were Earth II and III. All had managed to go the route of hell-in-a-fruit-basket as industrial pollution, overpopulation and humanity’s favorite population-control spectator sport—i.e., war—remained trendy. The continued downward fall of Earth V did boost the real-estate prices of the in-production world of Earth VI but also helped to prove the adage that those who remember the past are doomed to repeat it out of some perverse need for nostalgia.

He let Angie cruise out to the neighboring star system of Byro and the fifth planet of Minkx, home of the Middle City Edible Life Form Auction. Flipping through screens of some of the Milky Way’s more alluring locations, he was lost in daydreams of his future.

“I was thinking of Hyroopa,” mused Caffrey. “They have terrific weather.”

“You’d hate Hyroopa. They’re dry.”

“Since when?”

“Since they were invaded by the Oploosians.”

“Bloody teetotaler reactionaries. How about Lyre Two?”

“Perfect. I can see you living in bliss on a world where public humming can result in a public caning.”

“For godsakes, what’s going on in this galaxy?”

Caffrey flipped through a few more screens, scratching his temple with a determined gaze in his eyes. He got up and strolled to the bow viewport.

“I have a map and a ship. It’s my staircase to the heavens. There must be someplace.”

“I’m sorry to interrupt your pensive moment, my self-reflective rice cake, but there’s an object approaching. Dead ahead.”

Caffrey furrowed his eyebrows as the object caught his attention.

“What is it?”

The object was rotating, and flickered with colorful flashes as the starlight bounced off its shining surfaces.

“It seems to be a box of some sort. Made primarily of wood, metal and plastic. There are no lifeforms aboard. Shall I destroy it, evade it or grapple it?”

“Interesting. Grapple it. Please.”

Angie worked the *Moby Dick's* dexterous grappling hand. With programmed agility, she snagged the odd box and, after a few moments in the decontamination chamber, brought it inboard. Its exterior was a mess—cracked, rusted and dirty. However, the cleansing process had partially revealed some writing on its surface that, to Caffrey's surprise, was in an older but legible Earth language.

“‘Groovy Tunes Jukebox,’” he read, studying the set of black plastic disks that filled the interior beyond its clear domed window.

“These are musical notations,” he announced, pointing to the little notes painted all over the box.

He pried open the plastic window and extracted a handful of the small black disks. They crumbled in his hands. There were over a hundred of the objects. A few, although scratched, remained solid and had faded paper labels that Caffrey read with a certain curiosity.

“‘Light My Fire,’ The Doors. ‘Purple Haze,’ Jimi Hendrix. ‘Satisfaction,’ The Rolling Stones.”

One after the other he examined the plates, whose surfaces were etched with a continuous ridge spiraling in to the center of the disc, where there was a hole. Each was in worse condition than the previous, but in an inner compartment he discovered a single disk had been protected during its journey through the Cosmos. It had a plain white label with hand-scribbled words. His eyes widened, and his expression changed to a nervous smile as he read those words.

“‘Stairway to Heaven,’ Led Zeppelin,” Caffrey breathed as he shook his head. “It's happened again, Angie.”

It had, indeed. Throughout Caffrey's life the universe had winked coyly at him in moments of synchronicity. Time and time again, he would find a thought or recently spoken phrase manifest before him in unexpected ways and forms. Since his childhood the strange coincidences had haunted him like a mischievous ghost. It began happening so frequently it had become unnerving. Creepy. Although he never mentioned it to anyone, he was beginning to feel someone was trying to tell him something. If not for the rational side of his brain's constant assurance that it was all nothing but coincidence, he would have undoubtedly been kept up nights.

“Angie, run ‘Stairway to Heaven.’”

Oddly, a full thirty seconds passed before Angie responded.

“It’s an extremely obscure reference with only one mention in the entire system. It appears that ‘Stairway to Heaven’ is a song title, and ‘Led Zeppelin’ is the name of the group of musicians who created and performed it. Categorized as Rock Music. The genre, according to the official report, began as a subversive and socially destructive plot to subjugate the minds of the young that was slowly converted into the perfect backing track for selling luxury transportation vehicles.”

“Interesting.”

Caffrey placed the disc gently into a storage drawer.

“I’ll take that drink now, Angie.”

“Fine. But we are not done discussing your future plans,” Angie reminded in her best prickly voice.

A glass of Bezzie appeared in the MealPrepper. It was a silky blue liqueur from Vendix that was valued because it changed a prickly voice to a tickly one. Caffrey looked out at the starry blackness, sipped the Bezzie and closed his eyes.

“Perfect, as always, Angie.”

“We’ll talk later.” Angie wasn’t to be diverted.

“Yes, Angie. Of course.” The engine hummed, and the *Moby Dick* continued out into the charcoal black of space, the green sphere of Geraplond slowly falling away behind.

CHAPTER 2

The Life Auction

(Straubs)

MIDDLE CITY, ODDLY ENOUGH, WAS LOCATED BETWEEN LEFT City and Right City in what was perhaps the most mundane and sterile cosmopolitan center ever designed. Dead in the heart of the matrix layout was the four-acre Blood Bone Hall, where Quigmo Digmo, the leader of the Meat Collectors Union and one of the syndicate heads of the five galactic sectors, ruled.

Caffrey had last seen Quigmo at the previous year's Middle City Edible Life Form Convention. A Belkibon by birth, Quigmo Digmo was of a species for whom body weight was not something to be ashamed of or controlled, but, rather, expanded upon in a boastful display of corpulent grandeur. "You can never be fat enough" was the proud Belkibon mantra.

Quigmo stepped up to the reinforced podium, dressed in what was for all practical purposes a red-and-black tent masquerading as a suit, his waist-length blue hair falling like a rippling waterfall over his layered torso. Revealing a mouthful of teeth stained with the permanent brown of old blood, he smiled at the gathered crowd and cleared his throat for a full five minutes before finally dislodging an ounce of God-knows-how-old meat, which he casually spat to the stage floor with a solid, moist thud.

"Welcome. Welcome, you old meat jockeys. I hereby officially deem the Middle City Edible Life Form Convention of Thirty-two-sixty-nine open."

Half-hearted cheers filled the hall. Exotic meat collectors, as a rule, tend to make antsy crowds who despise the formality of such gatherings. Caffrey, as was his innate ability, found a seat beside a woman with hair so black it was as if a wormhole had opened and settled atop her head. He studied with great interest the length of thigh revealed beneath her semi-translucent pants and imagined the eternal joys that could be experienced in such a realm. Another round of cheers beckoned for his attention.

“I’m sorry, what did he say?” Caffrey asked.

“He said the first bid will be for a case of one hundred coolrip steaks,” she said, crossing her legs.

“You buying or selling?”

“Recruiting,” she replied tersely without looking his way—professionally ascetic.

“For?” Caffrey hated terse replies.

“You’ll find out if I choose to recruit you.”

“I see.” He didn’t. He did, however, recognize the irregularly shaped, eight-pointed red-and-gold emblem emblazoned on her lapel—the logo of the once immensely popular interstellar musician Spydersloth Blaust. Caffrey couldn’t resist one more flirtatious attempt to get her to face him.

“A Spydersloth fan, I see?”

Growing annoyed at his persistence, she turned and aimed her eyes at his. The purple blast caught Caffrey off-guard.

“One is not a fan of Spydersloth Blaust—that would imply I supported his past dabbling in the horrid art of music. One follows him on his new paths of disharmony and non-lyrical thought,” she returned, with a gaze that reeked of obsession.

Fanatic, he thought as he gave her one last faux smile and pondered running for the hills. He turned his attention back to the auction.

The case of Humproarian coolrip steaks went for ten thousand glid, purchased by a pair of co-joined Gavarians who continually, and quite foolishly, raised the stakes by trying to outbid each other. Then, with great musical fanfare, Quigmo waddled over to a large silver capsule lowered hydraulically to the stage. With a push of a button, the solid face became translucent and a gasp filled the room. The canister contained a frozen three-meter-long silver-finned rag-wisp. Caffrey pouted with an air of self-righteousness.

“So bloody trendy,” he said, just loud enough for the anxious bidder in front of him to hear.

For the dilettante of the cosmic culinary arts, a rag-o-wisp, with its delicate, flaky flesh, was hip. A silver-finned rag-o-wisp, found only in the mud bogs of Venever 5, was a guaranteed mention in the Society of Interstellar Blue Blood's "Posh Patter" column. A three-meter-long silver-finned rag-o-wisp meant guaranteed sex of any nature with any creature with the tendency for physical stimulation.

Caffrey wasn't impressed, and he left his seat and wandered down the aisle. Having been assigned a double digit in the random drawing, he knew from experience it would be at least an hour before his stock went up for grabs. He let his eyes fall upon the rows of anxiously waving arms, sweaty brows, impatient tentacles and bristled fins and smiled to himself, proud of his ability to not get caught up in the fickle trends of cuisine.

A cool breeze tempted him to the partially open rear door. He exited the hall.

A line of exotic spacecraft filled the landing zone, each glistening in the warm light of the sun. the *Moby Dick* sat at the far end, nestled between a sparkling new Heavenblaster 5 and a small, nubile Jetstar 1000. the *Moby Dick* looked, Caffrey strongly felt, the sexiest of the three.

A shriveled voice disrupted his gaze.

"She's a beauty."

Caffrey turned to find no one before him.

"Up here," advised the voice.

Caffrey looked up. Sure enough, hanging in the air like a day-old helium balloon was a ruddy-faced Kelfkin—one of a race of creatures who floated about in hydrogen-rich atmospheres extracting the light gas, which they store in special bladders at each end of their bulbous bodies.

"Have you auctioned your haul?" asked the Kelfkin.

"No. I'm up in about an hour."

"Good. I have been instructed to make you a private offer."

"Tsk-tsk!" Caffrey spat, waving a warning-filled finger at the creature. "No bidding outside the confines of the convention."

"This comes from Quigmo himself. It's his rule to bend as he wishes," explained the fish-faced balloon with a certain air of smugness that puckered Caffrey's lips like a bite of lemon.

His concern for the rules of the meat auction was, of course, a cautious ruse. It wasn't as if he were a virgin to closing deals covertly. Just three conventions previous he had sold a beautiful side of fri-

gamoose¹ for a record five thousand glid in this very same parking area. However, agents from the Meat Enterprise Advisory Team (MEAT) were notorious for baiting traders into illegal activity, and Caffrey was well aware of the penalties for unlawful actions.

“If Quigmo is interested in my cargo then he should approach me face to face.”

“He’s not interested in your cargo. He’s interested in your ability to gather cargo.”

“I’m retiring.”

“He is sure you will be unable to resist this prey.”

“Prey tell?” Caffrey inquired mockingly.

The Kelfkin pressed his fishy lips to Caffrey’s left ear and whispered. If not for the tensile strength of his optic nerves, Caffrey’s eyes would have shot clear across the landing zone.



Quigmo Digmo’s office was furnished with pieces dangerously close to overdosing on florid detail. The walls were gaudily adorned with tapestries illustrating great, obese moments of Belkibon history; and the ceiling was painted as if by some high-carb, high-protein Michelangelo.

Quigmo lounged naked in his Vibrundaspooner 500, exhausted from his seven hours of battling the forces of gravity at the podium. He moaned uncontrollably as the warming, vibrating, massaging mass of protoplasmic goop molded itself around him, sending sensual waves of ecstatic bliss to his every muscle and pore. Caffrey, employing a more conventional sitting apparatus, bit his lip in disgust and tried to ignore the horrid sound of goop kissing fat.

“L’Orange?” he asked in utter disbelief, for possibly the tenth time.

“Yes, Quark, L’Orange,” was Quigmo’s tired assurance.

Caffrey shook his head and tossed the Belkibon an amused smirk.

“Quigmo, you know I respect you and your position,” he lied smoothly. “But this is kwinkleshit. L’Orange is a myth. A tale akin to some Ancient Astral Mariner. The delusional fantasy of children or grown men of equivalent intellect.”

He could have gone on for hours but decided he’d made his

¹ Frigamoose, the largest land creature on Gegimonz 3, is the only known animal to have just one side.

point. Quigmo burst into laughter, great guffaws of roaring, crackling blasts of air that blew back Caffrey's hair and wrinkled his nose with the slight but definite stench of old bacon and tooth gunk. The Belkibon managed to lift his arm from the tub of goop and point to a small wooden box sitting alone on a long, polished-stone table.

Caffrey lazily stretched his arm for it but to his dismay was a foot short of the object. After a few moments of attempting to bring it to him with some deeply repressed telekinetic power, futility won out and forced him up. He took the small, pretty cube in his hands and admired its soft grain. He lifted the hinged cover. Inside was a small, crystalline cylinder. He held it up to the light.

"It's empty."

Quigmo, expecting the response, rolled his eyes and pointed his arm to the table again.

"Use the glass."

Caffrey, who hadn't noticed the gold-rimmed magnifying glass lying a few feet from where the box had been sitting, did as suggested. Peering through the antique instrument, he focused in on the mere dot of orange something-or-other that was made barely visible by the lens.

"What am I barely looking at?" he asked, his face contorted as he eyed the miniscule particle.

"L'Orange," Quigmo boasted. "The only sample of the mystical substance ever to be obtained by any creature with the ability to obtain."

"And that lucky creature was you, Quigmo."

"Exactly."

"You're a magician, Quigmo."

"You are well aware of my chain of contacts, of which, my old friend, you are one small but trusted link."

Caffrey moved the glass to and fro as he tried to focus on the tiny sample.

"How do you know this isn't a speck of orange snot? Sneezed into this tube by a Truplimouse? They do, as I am sure you're aware, have orange-colored snots." He loved playing these games.

"I am well aware of the color of Truplimouse mucus. That substance, however, is a true and authentic sample of the L'Orange mentioned in the great Books of the Camgari, lauded in the songs of reverence of the Baggolits and worshiped in the many magnificent cathedrals of Spandibo. It is real, my doubting Tomasso. You are

destined to cross paths with the great L'Orange!" Quigmo pontificated with great enthusiasm.

"Why?"

"Why? You are the nephew of Greppledick Quark!"

"Who vanished into the cosmic ocean."

"Exactly. An eternal mystery."

Caffrey rolled his eyes. The Belkibon pursued its line of argument.

"It has been rumored that he constructed the last Portsmouth. Your degree of separation from the mystic L'Orange is but a stone's throw!"

"Quigmo, I heard all the stories about the L'Orange from Greppledick when I was five. He was a loon."

"The mighty Frigonese oak is a nut who held its ground," Quigmo philosophized.

"A lovable loon."

"If anyone can track it down, you can. You know the folds and crevasses of this sector better than I do."

"Are you suggesting I take this magnifying glass and travel every square inch of the cosmos seeking out every floating speck of magic orange snot?"

Quigmo laughed again, and Caffrey casually covered his nose.

"You are droll, my friend. Very droll," Quigmo mused, his flesh shuddering obscenely with the remains of a chuckle. "That cylinder was found in a slimy hotel room on Yeplu Seven. A hotel room which, witnesses claim, had been occupied by an android getting his master cylinder lubricated, if you catch my meaning. The Portsmouth. There are rumors spreading that the Great Orange One and his protective escort have been separated. Never before has such a scenario become reality. If it is true, then the L'Orange is vulnerable. And I want it."

"Why?"

"Why? It is the essence of the All! The Liquid Fire of Antrisa! The Tears of Umalaze! The Milk of the Grand Teat! The purest form of the Prime Matter! The—"

"I've heard all the nicknames."

"And there is something else afoot, my narrow-bummed friend—I am losing worlds. Valuable worlds that I have spent a lifetime achieving control of."

Caffrey raised an eyebrow. This was interesting.

“I am not sure who is behind this attempt to control what is mine, but I shall not allow it. I sense the time is at hand. He who controls L’Orange will control the galaxy. I want you to get it for me. Will you attempt the greatest hunt since the Uldafter Fomaster²?”

“That would put me in quite epic company.”

“Accept my offer.”

“I’m retiring, Quigmo.”

“Don’t be a fool, Quark.”

“That, my portly prince, is exactly what I plan to be,” Caffrey retorted, with a wave. “I’ll take cash if you’re still interested in my meat.” He got up and exited the room.

² One of the “Seven Grand Tales” of Gromet’s *Odyssey*. The hero, Lether, traveling the worlds of the Vespucci System, bagged a twenty-ton flabunkor using a twig, pocket lint, snow and a small plum.

CHAPTER 3

Jukebox Hero

(Foreigner)

I AM PICKING UP RATHER SWEET OSMIC FREQUENCIES. Symilia flower oil, to be exact,” Angie said with a definite accusatorial tone.

“Angie-girl, your nose is as sharp as a vexenhound’s. Quigmo had perfumed the goop of his vibrundaspooner with that very fragrance,” Caffrey fibbed.

“The only essence Quigmo is fond of is that of his own fat lard oils. You visited Typura Moora again, didn’t you?”

Caffrey smirked and ignored the question, pretending to be distracted by the colorful Groovy Tunes Jukebox sitting prominently in the center of the cabin.

“Caffrey Trinesmart Quark the Second, how could you!” Angie scolded in her most prickly voice.

“Oh, Angie, relax. Her voice can never compare with yours.”

“And her body?”

“What difference does that make? You don’t have a—never mind, Angie-girl. How’s about a Bezzie, neat?”

“Yeah, sure, my cheating charm-snake. And you had better bite your tongue.”

Caffrey smiled to himself as he thought about Typura Moora, the gorgeous high priestess of the Shimmishake Palace located in the center of Middle City’s only stretch of heart—the always-busy

Harmony Road. The paragon of interstellar brothels, it could serve bliss-fulfillment to more than sixty-five very diverse species.

Caffrey made it a point to pay her a visit after each year's Meat Convention. He never grew tired of her wonderful fragrance, her soft lavender skin and almost luminescent hair. Being she was a Finishian, Typura's locks were formed of wide bands of silky fibers that fell from her scalp like long strips of gossamer crepe-de-Chine rather than the fine strands characteristic of most humanoids. Its color was ever-changing, like oil in a sunny puddle. It was unforgettable. Then again, her twin tongues, four breasts, triple-jointed legs and thirty-two fingers set her aside from most of the humanoids Caffrey had clashed physiques with.

Finding himself wanting to be back at the Shimmyshake, he decided to distract his raging fantasies by tinkering with the jukebox. It took him a few hours before he began to understand the device's primitive mechanics. It took further experimentation to bypass the coin-operated mechanisms to finally get the inner turntable to spin. After five hours, with Angie manning the helm and guiding the *Moby Dick* across the ocean of the Byro System, Caffrey was ready to test the machine.

There were ten or so discs in what he considered to be playable condition. As to which one would have the honor of first play—that was simple. Caffrey had to bow to the synchronicity of the Cosmos—it had to be “Stairway to Heaven.”

The titles of the songs, while all colorful, were not what piqued his interest. The fact that these were songs written and performed by humans completely intrigued him. A team of people formed under names like “Led Zeppelin.” “The Rolling Stones,” “The Beatles,” etc., for the sole purpose of creating music was unheard-of on Earth V—perhaps even silly. Ludicrous. Caffrey loved the concept!

He gently lifted the disc from the storage drawer and laid it atop the felt-covered platform. He turned on the power, flipped a switch and sat back. The music began as a series of melodic tones that put a soft smile on his face. He sipped the glass of Bezzie and listened.

For the next eight minutes he was transfixed. Silent. It was simply like nothing he had ever heard. Music in Caffrey's world was categorized as neo-pleasantry and produced by music generators that composed using a combination of pre-tested pleasing chord arrangements snagged from a huge database, along with a dash of originality created by random-tone sequencers.

While some of it was, in its own soulless way, inoffensive to the ears—other than Caffrey’s—this was different. Very different. The music was simple. Pure. The voice was perfectly human with a subtle passion infusing each word in ways Caffrey had never experienced. The lyrics were mysterious. Mystical. He wasn’t certain he understood what the song was about but felt as though he were witness to the reading of the secret tome of some ancient order.

Then the vocals stopped, and some sort of electrical string instrument began a solo that screamed with a gentle and confident power. The instrument continued the tale, in its own dialect of vibrating strings, of the woman who believed “all that glittered was gold” and “forests that echoed with laughter.” Caffrey was lifted up the enigmatic stairway to heaven by the magical notes.

The singer rejoined the piece but this time with a gut-wrenching power, sending chills up and down Caffrey’s spine. No one ever screamed during a song. It was simply never done!

Caffrey found himself wondering Why the hell not?

Deep into the night, as the *Moby Dick* cruised across the heavens, he listened to the discs. Over and over. He wanted more. He needed more examples of this musical form that was called Rock in days of old. He wanted to live in a world where this music was created. He wanted to meet the people who created it.

Oddly, like a fly trapped in a bottle and buzzing beneath the surface of the loosened cork, there was a memory trying to surface in his mind. The music seemed to be poking at his psyche and soul. It would take a few hours before it popped the cork of his consciousness.

“Uncle Greppledick,” Caffrey whispered to himself.

“He speaks,” Angie commented with a dash of sarcasm.

Caffrey wandered to the bow window and gazed out at the infinity before him.

“Angie-girl, I know where we’re going.”

“Where?”

“Well, I don’t know where exactly. But I know what for. We’re going to collect as many samples of this music as are scattered about this galaxy. We’ll start with the titles from these broken discs. I need to hear more.”

“And you are confident we’ll run across more Groovy Tunes Jukeboxes just floating about the Cosmos?”

“No, I’m not. Do I need to adjust the wise-ass variable of a certain computer system?”

Angie chuckled.

“So, how do you expect to find more music discs, my wishful thinking wonder boy?”

“It’s the law of crap disbursement.”

“Is that the textbook name for the theory?”

“The area of disbursement of a civilization’s baggage is directly proportionate to the length of time they have been under the delusion that they are, in fact, civilized. Once a species steps off their birth world the baggage grows more and more cluttered with each subsequent trip. Rock music is from the original Earth. Although it seems to have vanished from post-prime Earth worlds—”

“Understood,” Angie interrupted, acknowledging the theorem without further proof. “Can I help?”

“Of course. No one helps on collection missions like you, Angie-girl.”

“Is that all I do?”

Caffrey noted the disappointment in her voice. He often had to remind himself that systems programmed for unconditional love needed a certain amount of stroking.

“I need your beautiful voice to keep the fire of purpose burning in my soul,” he said, pumping up his own tickle.

“Will you be searching any dens of iniquity for the aforementioned discs?”

“Of course not,” he swore with crossed fingers. “Will you help?”

“Absolutely, my peach puppet with a purpose!” asserted Angie with a childlike excitement that made him smile. “Just one question?”

“Yes, Angie?”

“Who is Uncle Greppledick?”

Caffrey pondered that a moment as he filled his mouth with the last slug of Bezzie, swishing it around like mouthwash before swallowing. He’d been thinking about his uncle since his meeting with Quigmo Digmo, yet he’d been unaware of the subconscious engine cranking away until the music brought it to the surface.

He sat back in the chair and clasped his hands behind his head, trying to piece together the fragments that were mysteriously filling his mind. After allowing the song to finish, he turned off the jukebox and began telling Angie the history of his peculiar and infamous Uncle Greppledick Quark. She would record the story and file it away in the growing database of the exploits, adventures and continuing education of Caffrey Trinesmart Quark II.



Greppledick Quark was born on the dusty world of Truplimore (home of the orange-snotted Truplimouse) in the Yangling System. Born without kneecaps, he spent his childhood alone, wandering his township on his wheeled leg extensions and collecting bits of diamond that littered the glittering landscape. A voracious learner, he taught himself Bing Ding, the once-popular programming language for android lifeforms, as well as elemental reconstruction, artificial psychology and electro-mechanical extremities engineering. By the age of ten he'd built his first robot, a small doglike critter he named, enigmatically, Poe.

Within five years Greppledick had built a family of twenty artificial lifeforms. Poe 18 (the first android to be a victim of panic attacks) won the young man a scholarship to the exclusive Pennifore University, an institution orbiting the lavender ocean world of Bulkslands One.

Greppledick's big break appeared to illustrate that synchronicity was perhaps an integral element of the Quark bloodline. He learned, quite unexpectedly, that the diamonds he'd collected as a child were worth a major fortune on many of the worlds outside of his dusty home planet³. Selling the fifty kilos of diamonds stored in an old steamer trunk in his parent's basement, he set up the famed Quarkworks Android Plant in the orbit of Earth III.

Throughout the following sixty years he built androids of every shape, size, type and personality. The androids of Greppledick Quark worked from one end of the Plethorian Sector to the other, performing tasks as diverse as acting as court juggler in the castle of Rampi in the Yoonk System to serving as a highly decorated general of an invading force of philosopher soldiers who confounded their enemies with a bombardment of wise sayings.

Greppledick's notoriety made him the target of the most powerful, grand-of-ego and glitzy posers the galaxy contained, all of whom wanted to brag of having met and socialized with the powerful and eccentric kneeless wonder. Never being one to turn down a chance to get the latest interstellar fashion model or prime minister into his bed, he used his celebrity without apology. His life was rich, color-

³ Soon after Greppledick's rise to fame and fortune, the gathering of diamonds by Truplimorians was made illegal. Thus, once again, the old Earth saying, "If feces found a value it would be illegal for the poor to have bumholes" was proven prophetically true.

ful; and he held little in the way of regret and disappointment in his heart.

But on his ninety-ninth birthday Greppledick felt a depression descend upon his soul like a wet burlap blanket. There was a little hole floating somewhere in his being that needed to be filled by a more spiritual accomplishment. On that cool and misty anniversary of his birth, he stepped out onto his kilometer-long wraparound deck and cried out to the spirits of the thick, landscaped jungle surrounding his home. Assuming his actions were nothing but a futile rhetorical scream, he was stunned when an impossibly thin old woman stepped out and smiled.

She explained that his karmic contribution to the universe, married with a serendipitous intersection of his life with a cosmic event, would put him in the most favorable position in an eon.

“You will build the next Portsmouth, the guardian of the great and wise Cube of Wisdom,” she assured him softly.

“Portsmouth?” Greppledick wondered.

“The Guardian to the Wisest One. The android who escorts and protects the Wondrous Substance.” The old woman’s voice sounded like the wind through the trees on a Sunday morning.

Greppledick Quark had heard rumors of such a cube of orange gelatinous star-stuff, fabled as the purest example of the essence that permeated all of reality. His vast travels had shown him the many churches, banks, office towers, cults, wars and charities that had been started in the name of the L’Orange. Greppledick had always written the entire idea off as just another opiate for misguided beings—albeit an opiate that looked a lot like orange marmalade.

With great patience the old woman explained the mystical wonder and the history of the line of androids who served their thousand-year terms guarding and protecting “It.”

“The craftsmanship must be perfect, the subtleties of the Portsmouth’s programming elegant and sensitive. Subservient, yet strong. Patient, yet able to quickly decide courses of action. Wise, yet childlike in its ability to wonder. Charming and sociable, yet comfortable in its own solitude. It must be versed in all existing customs, traditions and pleasantries for the many diplomatic visits to powerful kings, popes or prime ministers. And,” the woman added, raising a finger to stress her point, “he must have powerful and rust-proof knees.”

“May I ask why?” Greppledick requested.

The old woman glanced down at his knees. They were solid, perfect and rustproof.

“The Portsmouth may often stand motionless as it travels impossible distances on the sacred journeys of The Wise One. You designed your own knees?”

“Yes.”

“Have they served you well?” She posed the question as if it were a great riddle advanced by some powerful Sphinx.

“Yes.” Greppledick considered a moment. “Squeak now and again but, all in all, quite well.”

The old woman studied him. She had wiry-looking hairs growing from odd warty bumps on her chin, and Greppledick fought the urge to pluck one.

“You will have to work in isolation. Far from here. Alone. You must study and meditate and learn the history and ways of The Wise One. The history of the previous Portsmouth,” she muttered, pacing the deck. “Five years will pass before construction on the android can begin.”

Greppledick pondered the offer, watching with bated breath as the woman missed stepping on a loose deck board by inches—it would have resulted in her falling through the floor and to her certain death fifty feet below.

He needed to know more.

“This Wise One? Is he a nice substance? He isn’t some self-righteous zealot who secretly likes young Goretians⁴ and collects magazines about bizarre Artenian mating rituals?”

“You cannot address the substance in the sexual terms of biological life. It is pure wisdom. It has no power in Itself. It contains all that has been, is and will ever be known. The secrets of every life-form that has, does and will exist. The histories of every event that happened, can happen, is happening and will happen. The Wise One was born in the fires of the universe’s afterbirth and must be protected from those same zealots of which you inquired. As long as It is safe the universe is as well.”

“Then I see the importance. I accept the offer.” Greppledick’s voice rang out as he stood to his feet with raised chin.

“I knew you would. We must leave now.”

Greppledick’s chin hit the deck.

⁴ A race of Insectoid beings who mature into young, humanoid boys with Dutchboy haircuts and poreless skin.

“I couldn’t possibly. I need to pack. Send out change-of-address notes. Make sure this deck is fixed. How about three days?”

“No. Now. Or never,” she said, putting her foot down frighteningly close to the busted board.

“Can I at least leave a note?”

“No. No one can know.”

Greppledick looked around and sighed deeply. “What the hell. Let’s go.”

The old woman nodded, and they both vanished in a flash of orange light.



“But did you ever actually meet him?” Angie asked, her voice at the edge of its proverbial seat.

“I’m getting to that, Angie-girl,” Caffrey explained, trying to calm the impatient computer. “I was five years old. My parents owned a bed-and-breakfast on Devonshire Four. Run by my mum. One day, early in the morning, there came a knock on the door. I opened it. It was a man, an old man. Old, but his eyes sparked with the fire of a teenager. His smile was like candy.”

“Much like yours,” Angie suggested seductively.

Caffrey blushed and continued.

“My parents were never too crazy about Uncle Grep. Maybe he was nuts. But he had that spark of purpose. People with purpose shine. Those without rust. I want that spark, Angie.”

“Then let’s get on our way.”

“Yes, Angie. Let’s set the controls for the heart of the sun.”