The Meadow

Or, a Tale of Life and Death

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Moonset.

The light flows thin through the midnight air from a misty milky lamp
As blinking stars weave through the sky: a blanket of cool and damp.
The humble mushrooms raise their heads to worship the silver light
And bathe in beams and rays of gold, cutting the fabric of night.
"T-woo" says an owl who silently swoops through the tops of the dew-dropped trees
The anonymous call rolls round the folds of hills, carried by the hands of the breeze.
The dim glow of morning fills whispy clouds, interrupted by the flash of a lark
The silhouettes of the trees now mark the horizon, standing proud as the sky fades from dark.
Back to the burrow for the sleepy mole, as the nights ebbs gently away
His whiskers, thin glints in the waning light, brush softly on his bed of hay.
"Farewell" to the light, which, to the new day, yields;

The restful moon sinks gracefully down in front of the dawn-drenched fields.

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Chapter 1

Cosmos

To understand the origin of understanding, we must first understand the origin of chaos.

This story begins a long time ago, at the very beginning of everything. I do not know how long ago this was, for time itself had not yet gained the meaning it has now. For time to have meaning, there must be change: change in position, in state, in form: for things which are to stop, and things which are not to begin. But at the beginning, nothing was not: everything was in a state of undifferentiated unity.

An endless soup: matter and energy in a formless gloop, swirling, coalescing, inter-exchanging and transforming from one to the other. A cauldron of stuff, extending across the entirety of the baby κόσμος; a fine balance of creation and destruction so violently dynamic that its only prevailing feature is its absence of features. This formless state is the χάος. Though without form, it is not nothing: it is everything. Everything that will ever be,

could ever be (or *would* ever be, as we shall come to see), was in this χάος. I shall refer to this collection of matter, energy, space and time, being "everything that is the case", as *the universe*.

What came before the universe would be of great importance if it were not for the fact that it had not a single ounce of meaning. Time may feel to you like an ever-moving arrow, pointing straight from past to future; nothing can speed it up, slow it down, or change its direction, and so there is always a *before* and an *after*. The unfolding of events lets us track the movement of this arrow of time: something happens, entropy increases, and time moves forward. But at the beginning, when the entropy was at its lowest, there is nowhere left to follow.

At the North Pole, every arrow points South. At the beginning of time, amongst the undifferentiated χάος, every arrow points to the future, and so it is towards the future we must go.

Over time, as structure began to crystallise from the formless soup, patterns began to emerge. Regions of higher and lower density formed, and the higher-density regions began to attract more matter, more energy, and thus grew denser still.

Over time, a hierarchy of structures formed. First, great filaments of matter, forming a cosmic web, with vast voids in between. These are the back-bone of the universe, a scaffolding upon which all else shall be built.

These filaments coalesced into clusters of matter, which in turn split up into galaxies. Spirals, ellipses or irregular shapes emerged, each galaxy a swirling dance of gas, bound together by gravity.

Within galaxies, regions of gas and dust collapsed to form stars. The stars were born, lived out their lives, and died in spectacular displays of explosive energy. These explosions seeded the universe with heavy matter, which coalesced into new stars, which themselves lived and died.

Some of these stars were surrounded by excess gas, and from this gas, planets might have been born. Spheres of rock, metal or gas, orbiting their stars in an endless dance. Initially, all of these planets were hostile places, bombarded by radiation from their stars, or crushed by their own gravity, or submerged in oceans of acid.

This state of affairs persisted for billions of years. But one day, on one such a rocky planet in a quiet corner of a fairly nondescript galaxy, something quite remarkable happened.