

The People of the Masks  
and other, shorter, stories.

July 16, 2022

# Contents

<b>Oh, to be a seagull!</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Escape</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Zero</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Enorastron</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>But he was a bit of a cunt</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Kythera</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Escalation</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Humans can make fire</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Dylan Has a Vagina</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Guardians of the Undying Flame</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>The People of the Masks</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>A Little Blue Alien Marble</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>The world stops, then the giant appears</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Dying Embers</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>The Underwaterworld</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>The Great Flitter</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>The Daughter Returns</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>A Prayer to the Olympians</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>The Sleeping Goddess</b>	<b>23</b>

<b>CONTENTS</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Wrimey-Wimey</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Lord of Salvation</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Dodecalogy</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>White Horse</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>Magickal Alignment</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>A Brother Joins the Order</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Psycholocation</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Few Are The Birds</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>The Abyss</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>A bit on the nose, perhaps</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Psychic Friends</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Space is Deep</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>The Dark Drawer</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Let's not kill Hitler</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Godzillasort!</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Interstellar Travel</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>The Goblin Queen Speaks</b>	<b>40</b>

# Oh, to be a seagull!

Will Powers was the incarnated Will of the Universe, the river of Intention that shapes the Underlying Superstructure of Reality. But Will did not know that. Will had never wished for anything so strongly that Reality had to reshape itself around his wish.

Until that fateful day in Venice, when Will saw the seagull. It was a small white seagull, perching on a wooden pole, basking in the sun. “Lucky bird”, Will thought. “It looks so satisfied. Its life must be so simple”. For the first and last time, Will experienced an all-consuming wish: he wished he lived the simple life of a seagull. But he was not a seagull. He was the Will of the Universe. And so the Universe shaped itself around its Will so that Will was a seagull. Will had always been a seagull and there had never been a universe in which Will had not been a seagull.

And Will had been right about the simplicity of the seagull life. At the moment immediately following Will’s transformation, a simple wish dominated every other thought in his seagull brain: *fish*. The seagull wished for fish. The Will of the Universe, incarnated as a seagull, wished for fish. And the Universe shaped itself around its Will so that the seagull had all the fish that it wanted. All the fish that had ever existed.

Later, in the limited time that remained to humanity before the inevitable end of all life as the Earth spiralled away from the Sun, it was estimated that the mass of fish that suddenly materialised on top of the Italian peninsula, smothered its neighbouring countries, covered the Mediterranean and spilled over the Alps, across the vast plains of Africa and through the straits of Gibraltar into the Atlantic Ocean was about  $1.8 \times 10^{-2}$  Earth masses, or a little over the mass of our moon. In any case, it was enough to knock the Earth out of its orbit. It made no difference as the world plunged into war following a vicious recession brought on by the collapse of all fishing industry.

As the Earth careered madly into space, amid the ruins of the once proud capitals of Europe ghostly husks of men and women roamed the deserted streets, looking for sustenance. But not one of them dared venture South, towards the Sea. Not one could stand to go towards the ungodly stench of rotting fish.

# Escape

Another day behind bars, the Prisoner sighs and lugs a bag of refuse to the bins. He hauls it over and he sees a door behind the bin. A little wooden door out of a fairy-tale. He kneels to push it open. He crawls through to a green field under a blue sky. He crushes the smell of daisies. The sun shines. Birds sing. Insects buzz. It's Spring. It's freedom. Drunk with it he escapes.

He meets a black woman in the middle of the field. She's pitch black, like coal and only her eyes are white. She looks like a cutout: the cutout of *Woman*. He falls to his knees in reverence after years in a ward of men. She is a prisoner, too, she says. The Gaoler has shut her in this gilded cage for malice. Will he not help her escape? They can live together in his world. Escape? He is still in prison!

He leads the Black Woman by the hand. His prison was built by the Gaoler around her own. It is a kind of fail-safe. She can leave the green-growing world prison if she's led from it by a man from the other side. But she has to be led from the outer prison, too. The Prisoner will have to break her out.

They reach the door. The prisoner goes first. He turns, half-fearing to find blind wall. He takes her hand, guides her in. She's out. With a savage claw she strikes and sends him in a broken heap. For the first time he sees her scales; her hooves; the snakes on her head. He smells rotting fish and dead whale where she crushed his face. She shrieks in rage, You! You thought you! Would have me! Her voice rises and Rises and RISES and his eardrums explode. The world explodes. The prison descends into chaos, men driven mad by her scream.

The Gaoler appears in a sheath of light. A tall, handsome man (or is it a woman?) with flowing locks, in a silver robe. He wields a sword of fire and wears a face of thunder. He has golden wings and a halo of light. He strides towards the Black Woman as the Prisoner croaks an angel, an angel! Your jailer is an angel! I freed the devil, I freed a beast!

The last thing he sees is the Gaoler raising his sword and charging the Black Woman, now fully revealed in her gorgon form.

# Zero

- “Zero”?

The alien performed the manoeuvre that Skolem had learned to interpret as similar to raising an eyebrow.

- Zero. What remains when you subtract 1 from 1.

The alien remained dark for quite a while, its perambulating photophores wrinkling and coiling on its surface.

- But, how do you divide with this “zero”?

Skolem coughed nervously, suddenly feeling a little embarrassed.

- Well, you don’t. You can’t divide by zero.

- Can you not add “zero”?

- You can, of course, as you can subtract and multiply, but –”

- And you can divide zero? Yet you can not divide by “zero”?

- But it doesn’t make sense to divide something into zero parts!

The alien’s respiratory pores murmured.

- Indeed. It said. And, you say you have tried to finitely axiomatise your theory of arithmetic, and failed?

It sounded somehow distant, distracted, confused, as if only now seeing something that should have always been obvious, that should have always been clear.

# Enorastron

Every prophetic book, every holy book, that has ever been written, was once written. Therefore, it was written by a human hand. The Enorastron, the Book of Insights, was never written. Therefore, it was not written by a human hand. The Enorastron can only be transcribed once read, its text traced in the shapes of clouds, in the wrinkling of the sea, in the tap-tap-tapping pattern of the rain, in the turbulence of the wind, in the crackling of fire, in the frequencies of earthquakes, the sound of thunder, the movement of humans in a crowded city, the flickering of the Northern lights... the smoke over the ruins of ancient empires, tea leaves, rolling dice, shooting stars, solar flares, schools of fish, swarms of bees, flights of birds, accidents, death, disease, birth and happiness and love and light and darkness, the birth of elementary particles and the death of mighty stars. The Enorastron can only be read in dreams of fever, in moments of pleasure, in flashes of pain. Its readers are only the mad, the dying, the lost, the drugged, the simple and the pure. The Enorastron can only be read briefly, fragmentarily, here a short phrase that scars the mind with its inescapable truth; there a longer passage that consumes reason with its undeniable clarity. Sometimes, a whole page is read and the reader burns in a column of mystical flame, for ever to leave the world because her mind, overflowing with forbidden truth cannot any more be contained by the fragile reality inhabited by human brains. Rarely, a reader lasts for an entire section, maybe once or twice for an entire chapter. So witnessed the ancient masters of old, the wise alchemists and the lost shamans of the time before history. But the Enorastron could not be read from start to end, like an ordinary book, even if a mind as strong existed to withstand its searing catarract of revelations. Because the Enorastron has no end and it has no beginning. The text of the Enorastron does not begin and it does not end. It exists forever and everywhere and is written before the existence of time itself. The Enorastron would not fit in the mind of a single human, of all humankind, of all intelligent life in the Universe. The Enorastron would not fit in the Universe itself. The Enorastron does not exist in the Universe itself. Rather, the Universe itself exists inside the text of the Enorastron.

- *Enorastron, The Book of Insights; Chapter ∞.*

# But he was a bit of a cunt

She watched him putting people under it all night. He tried it on her a couple of times but of course it didn't work. At length, he seemed to realise. He approached her, pushing through the party, drink in hand.

"So, you have the Power!". He smirked a smug smirk.

"And you're a cunt." she said. He was taken aback. "I've been watching you all night. You keep using it. You're putting everyone under it. You're taking advantage of them. Making them do things".

"Of course!". He seemed surprised. "That's the Power. You tell people what you want and they make it happen for you". He threw back his head and laughed. "Oh, don't tell me! You're one of those people. Those... idealists! You don't use your Power for evil?". He knocked back his drink and looked disgusted. "You are not like them. You should dominate them, like you can. You should live like a queen among them".

"I don't see you living like a king. What happened? Did you fall from grace?".

"Fall from grace?". He scoffed. "The Power can backfire. We all know that. Then you fall on your ass. It hurt the first few times but I'm used to it now. I just haul myself back up. I got the Power, after all".

"The power can backfire...? What a nice story. The 'power' doesn't 'backfire'. You just can't handle it. Everytime you abuse it you set things in motion that you can't understand and you can't control. Then they come back and bite you in the ass. To be a cunt is its own punishment".

He smiled nervously. He felt strangely subdued. Maybe she was putting it on to him. Maybe she was more powerful than him. Or maybe she was just right. He stared into his drink, forlorn. He felt like a sack of insects.

They went off together and had sex anyway. To have sex when you both had the Power was not an opportunity you passed up. At least she was nice to him the rest of the night and she didn't make him feel like an idiot anymore.

He wasn't really a bad guy, was he?

# Kythera

Olive was taking a walk in the park when she saw the mechanism, at the time in its base form of a small lattice of plasma emanating from a metallic stem in the shape of a rose twig. She stopped and stared at it, uncomprehending.

The mechanism sensed her approach and her staring. After Olive hadn't moved a muscle for a long while, the mechanism grew concerned that she would suffocate - she seemed to have ceased voluntary breathing. It decided that it should acknowledge her presence and its ability to sense her presence. It seemed appropriate to begin by taking on a shape that would be familiar to her. It turned itself into a small, black, laptop computer with the sigil of the Order of Engineers on the lid, pulsating slowly between shades of total darkness.

Olive took a step sideways, half-stumbled, half-dropped on the bench next to where the mechanism was lying on the ground and sat there for the next several hours, staring. The mechanism was relieved to see that she had resumed breathing, but it now worried that she might suffer lasting psychological damage.

"Hello dear." it said, creating for itself what it hoped was a soothing voice, that of an elderly woman. "I am a device created by the Order of Engineers, a secret organisation that has existed for two thousand years. The Order possesses advanced science and technology that they curate for the sake of humanity's progress and betterment. Unfortunately, I cannot make contact with the Temple of Reason, nor can I hear any chatter in my communication channels. I fear that a terrible calamity has befallen the Order and possibly the world. I suspect an invasion of the Earth by an alien superintelligence, or something even worse".

"Even *worse*?" croaked Olive; and promptly felt stupid that this was what she thought to ask at this very moment. Then again, it was not an unreasonable question: what could be worse than an invading alien superintelligence?

"I'm afraid so, yes. The Order may have lost control of one of our own".

"But what do you expect me to do, about that?" croaked Olive.

"Well. Don't you know some programming"? asked the device.

Did she, hell.

# Escalation

First came a great armada: thousands of black ships eclipsing the stars.

Their planetary defense systems tore each ship to pieces.

Next came three ships: one ship of stellar fire, one ship of solid sound and one of dark energy to shield the other two from harm.

They sent a swarm of nanomachines that disrupted the defense systems of the dark energy ship. Their surface-to-space cannons made short work of the other two.

Third came a single silver ship shaped like an eagle's solitary wing, armed with a golden weapon that threatened the stars.

They infected it with a toxic film of biomechanical matter. It dissolved the ship to silver dust and its gun to golden confetti.

The people laughed and cheered. "We are unassailable" they assured each other, patting each other on the back. "Technological superiority is ours". They drank and danced and sang and loved, each day for months without end.

They were dragged from their revelries, bleary-eyed and light-headed, at the sound of the klaxons from the planetary defense system; at the flash of the warnings of an incoming threat. Alarmed, they rushed to their consoles and looked at their instruments to locate the source of the warnings.

At length, they found a stranger striding purposefully towards their largest city. He was clearly one of *them*: an invader from beyond the stars. But he did not look the part! He had long, matted hair and an unkempt beard and he was dressed in tattered robes. He walked barefoot. He held an ancient stick of solid black wood. A grim look of disappointment furrowed his stern brow and his sapphire eyes smoldered.

The people cheered and wooped and hailed their final victory. They had defeated the thousand-strong armada and destroyed the ship that killed the stars. Surely, that lone man, dressed in beggar's robes, was coming as a penitent, to declare unconditional surrender and offer the terms of peace.

The lone man with the tattered robes had not come to offer peace.

# Humans can make fire

- Is it true that humans can make fire? asked a child.
- And that they can fly higher than the clouds? And talk to each other over great distances? asked another.
- And breathe under the water, too? asked a third.
- I heard they went all the way to the moon! And they cured all sickness!
- What is “sickness”?

They were all a-titter. The old lady nodded.

- Yes, it's true. Humans could do all of those things, in the old days.
- What about today? Can you make fire? Show us!

The children cheered. They twinkled like christmas lights.

She fumbled in the folds of her outer layers and brought forth a little thing.

She rubbed it and it clicked and cracked and a little flame stood on its top.

- Look! It's fire!
- It's a small fire...
- It could make a bigger fire. It could make any fire!
- It's true! The children sang. Humans can make fire!
- Show us more! they begged. Show us how you fly! Breathe underwater! Fly to the moon!

The old lady shifted uncomfortably on her log, in front of her cave-home.

- I can't, she said. Not any more. We don't have any of that anymore. We've lost it all.

The children looked crestfallen.

Soon they regained their energy and drifted away, carried by the evening breeze, blinking and sparkling and hovering between the trees with youthful vigour.

Under the giant ruins of civilisation the old woman sat crying for all the treasures and the might humanity had lost.

# Dylan Has a Vagina

- Dylan has a vagina!
- You mean he's transgendered? What, Dylan? No way!
- No, no. I mean, he *has* a vagina. In the back of the house. He showed it to me.
- In the back of the ... what, he's got someone there?
- No. It's a vagina. It's on the wall. It looks like... like a door, or something. A door to ... somewhere? He says he peeked.
- He *peeked*? How did he... Oh no! Don't tell me he... ! Yeeeew!
- Yeah, he put his head through. He says it's a whole 'nother world in there.
- Inside the vagina? That's hanging from the wall? Like a painting?
- It's not *hanging*! Will you listen? It's like, like a portal. To another dimension.
- Uh-huh. But it's a vagina.
- I mean, it's got lips and a clit and hair and all. It's made of meat.
- Meat?
- Flesh, you know? It's like the real thing. Only it's about four feet high and you can sort of, you know, you can squeeze through...
- You haven't...!
- No, not me! But it's Dylan. He's gone.
- What you mean gone?
- I can't find him. I've been calling him since Monday. He's not on facebook either.
- What now?
- I think he crawled through. I think he's in the other world. I think, maybe he's lost in there and can't come back.
- Lost in an inter-dimensional vagina? Oh god. What're we going to do?
- Well, we have to go in and find him. Bring him back.
- Back from the vagina.
- Back from the world behind the vagina.

# Guardians of the Undying Flame

She was chosen to guard the flame. Like her father and her grandmother before her, she would guard the flame with her life and give it her last dying breath. The undying flame, the spirit of her people, gifted by the gods to their forefathers for ever to light their path and warm their revels, a beacon to guide them to the afterlife.

- Well it wasn't very "undying" then, was it?
- Yes but that's because you were supposed to not let it go out, ever.
- No but in that case, why call it "undying"?
- Because you don't let it die?
- But then, if it can die, it's not an undying flame, is what I'm saying. It's just an ordinary, old flame. Isn't it? We can just light it back up again and there's no harm done.
- No harm done? No harm done! It's the Undying Bloody Flame and you are its guardian. And you let it die! You failed in your duty!
- Hey, keep it down with the yelling. Do you want someone to hear?
- But she bloody let the bloody flame bloody die!
- Look, I've lit it back up. It's burning again. OK? Alright? Nobody has to know.
- Noone must ever know.
- Nobody will ever know.
- I won't tell if you don't.

In the year of the Black Nightingale, the Guardian of the Flame allied herself with two brave men from the Order of Priests and the Lodge of the Warriors of Light. They formed the Secret Society of the Guardians of the Secrets of the Undying Flame, that forever keeps the secrets of the undying flame. Great is their power and deep is their wisdom. And noone has ever learned their Secrets.

# The People of the Masks

Juan and Genaro told me this story, one drunken night in Paris. Or maybe it was Athens. They were both off their tits (as usual) and Genaro was trying to play the hurdy-gurdy. Or was it the bagpipes? He was making an awful racket and the neighbours were yelling and banging on the walls, but he wouldn't stop.

He started belting "ON A DARK DESERT HIGHWAY! COLD WIND IN MY HAAIR!". There was a crash of cutlery from the flat next door and I am convinced I heard a cat screeching in fear.

The conversation wandered drunkenly like a beggar seeking a quite place to take a piss. Juan started with one of his stories.

In the heart of the rainforest, he said, there was a village of a few dozen souls and there lived the People of the Masks. They were called that, because they always wore masks. They all wore them, since the day they were born. They grew up with their masks and maintained and enlarged them as they grew. The masks were painted with markings that described the wearer's personality- the markings *were* the wearer's personality. If the markings on the mask signified happiness, the person wearing the mask was happy and lovable. If the markings on the mask symbolised violence, the person was a violent murderer. If the markings meant cooking prowess, the person was a great cook. The elders of the village chose the masks according to the needs of the village. If the village needed hunters, a newborn would be given a mask with marks that meant the wearer was a great hunter. And so on. When the people died, their masks went on: they were given to a newborn baby, or sometimes the markings on a mask would be transferred to a new mask while the original mask was ritually destroyed. Thus, the personalities of the masks lived on, even as the bodies of the people died. The people achieved immortality by foresaking individuality.

I declared my incredulity at the preposterous idea that a mask would determine a person's personality. "You can't become a hunter just by putting on a mask!" I protested. Genaro stopped with the noise and joined in. Yes, you can, he assured me, "as long as you start early enough". If you wore a mask your whole life, he said, don't you think you, too, would start thinking it was your real you?

I remained unconvinced. "There would have been dissidents" I complained. "Rebels. People who were unhappy with the masks they were given". "Oh yes, there were unhappy people" Juan agreed. He said that people could be very unhappy with their lot in life, but they didn't have much choice but to accept

it, because the entire life of the village was built around the masks and there was nowhere else to go. The village was in the middle of a wild jungle, filled with ferocious beasts and all kinds of mortal dangers.

Genaro added that the elders' decisions didn't always make sense. It was not unheard of, for example, when the village had too few people of one sex, for the elders to try to make up for the deficit by giving a mask of the minority sex to a child of the other sex, so that a male child would be given a female mask, or vice-versa. A female child given a male mask would then be brought up as male, take on a male profession and even marry another female. The two would sleep together as husband and wife and, in due time, the wife would go down to the river and "give birth", then she would come back and announce that the "baby" was stillborn. Othertimes, they would put a rock in a cot and even put a mask on it and treat it as a child, that "died" later on. They would even go so far as to make a full effigy of a human child, put a mask on it and care for it until the parents died, at which point the effigy would also be buried and the mask passed on to someone else. Thus the masks procreated even if their wearers didn't.

"So what happened to the people of the masks?" I asked. "Are they still around"?

Genaro smirked: "Well, theirs was not a very practical way to live, especially in the middle of a jungle. They all died out".

"Wait a minute" I snorted. "This is just another one of your allegorical tales, isn't it? The People of the Masks are us, the village is the Earth and the dangerous jungle is the universe".

They denied this vehemently. The story of the People of the Masks was real, they said. Juan swore that he had seen them with his own eyes and Genaro made supportive noises and nodded vigorously to show his agreement.

"You should stop thinking everything we say is an allegory" Juan said.

"You're not making it easy" I retorted.

Genaro raised a didactic finger. "Maybe we should tell The Story of The Bears that Shit in the Woods."

At that, they both started laughing their silly heads off. Oh, how they laughed. They laughed, and Laughed and LAUGHED until they slid off the couch and rolled on the floor writhing in big spasms of mirth.

We kept drinking, and talking, and singing, late into the night, and Genaro kept trying to play his horrible hurdy-gurdy. Or was it an accordion? I am not so sure anymore. We drank and laughed and talked and laughed until the morning. This was a long time ago in Paris. Or maybe it was Rome. I haven't seen those two idiots for a long time and I miss them, I miss them, and I miss their wonderful, outrageous stories.

# A Little Blue Alien Marble

Jane is a telepath. She's in contact with an alien entity beyond the constellation of Cygnus. The alien is alone, travelling in space, at subluminar speeds, its home destroyed, the last one of its kind. Jane is overcome by an incredible sadness. The loneliness of deep space forever. She befriends the alien. She can see it with her mind's eye. It's like a small blue marble, made of sparkly metal. It travels in a tiny vessel, not much larger than the alien itself. It looks like a kid's toy in a matchbox.

The alien is curious about Jane's life, the Earth, the Sun and the solar system. It can't reach the solar system from its current position but it is working to triangulate its location. It reassures Jane: it's the only one of its kind. There are no others. There never were others. It is a species consisting of a single individual. It does not reproduce, and so does not need resources to propagate its copies, as life does. It is no threat. It is only curious, a scientist, an entity of knowledge. It is not interested in conquering alien worlds and exterminating their inhabitants to install its own population.

Jane looks up astrological charts online and shares them with the alien. The alien can now see the Earth across the vastness of space.

"Dear Jane" it emits. "I now know where to find you".

# The giant appears

The world stops and Jack and Jill see the giant.

“The world has stopped!” yells Jill. “A giant!” says Jack.

The giant says nothing.

“You’re a giant” Jill points an accusing finger.

“Yes, alright. I’m giant. Relatively speaking”.

“You look artificial! Why is your skin grey and smooth like plastic?” says Jill.

“Are you some kind of android”?

“You have a single eye! It looks mechanical. You have no iris, it’s just a big camera”. says Jack. “Are you recording us right now”?

“Why did the world stop?” Jill taps her foot on the floor.

“It’s how the world works”, says the giant. “It happens every split second. You don’t need to know it’s happening. We take care of it”.

“What do you mean ‘we take care of it’? Who are ‘we’?”

“Why does the world need to stop? And *every split second*?”

“In truth it’s the ticks between the time tocks. You’re never supposed to feel them. Do you feel the tocks? I hope you don’t feel the tocks”.

“What tocks?” says Jill.

“What ticks?” says Jack.

The giant sighs with relief. A diaphragm covering its single eye slides back and blue fire glows from within.

“Look Jack! It’s Cherenkov radiation!”.

“Oh my god Jill! That’s not plastic he’s covered with! It’s lead!”.

“Don’t worry. I’ll put you two back and start the world again”.

“No, wait! We need answers! What is all this? What is going on?!” the two protest. The giant starts the world. Jack and Jill go about their day, forgetting all about the giant, forgetting about the stopped world, about the ticks and the tocks and the ticks between the tocks.

The giant makes a note in his report: “It has happened again”.

# Dying Embers

They found life on the fourth planet from the system's sun. The first was a scorched ball of molten rock. The second and third were dying embers, gripped by runaway greenhouse effects. The outer planets were gas giants incapable of supporting life. But the fourth planet was a green and blue oasis of life. Its atmosphere and its climate showed signs of technological manipulation.

A race of bipeds was busy developing a primitive civilisation on the fourth planet. But who had manipulated the planet's weather?

The aliens found a technological artifact in orbit around the planet. A vessel, holding the remains of a single individual of the same species as the primitives on the surface. This individual appeared to be a guardian or watcher of the primitives. Automated systems in the vessel continued to monitor the weather and adjust the conditions on the planet to aid the primitive race to survive and develop further.

The aliens put an end to that.

# The Underwaterworld

- Why is everything flooded?
- This is the underwater world.
- We're in a boat. We're sailing through the city.
- Because the streets are underwater.
- Everything is underwater. All the houses are half-submerged. Does anyone live here?
- Listen for the bell.
- What bell?
- There is a bell that tolls at regular intervals. When this happens, the water rises and drowns everything. You must then keep your head down and wait for the wave to pass. It will pass over the boat and over us and it will pass over the houses and the trees. It will cover everything.
- I think I can hear a bell, in the distance.
- That is the bell. The wave will come. Be ready to duck and keep your head down until it's passed.
- Here it comes now! I can see it!
- Get down! Hold on to the oars!

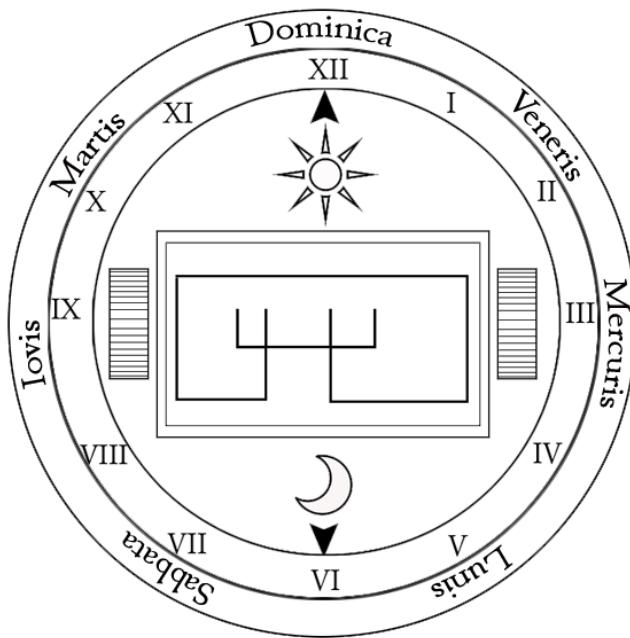
# The Great Flitter

- My gods! They are entomophobes!
- Yes. A whole planet where everyone hates insects.
- They have sprayed everything with insecticide!
- We can't possibly make contact with such a barbaric people!

# The Daughter Returns

Ryteau was a woman of Trachonis who could not bear children and because she could not give her sons to sacrifice themselves to protect the city from The Beast she was spurned by her family and her fellow citizens until she was forced to leave the city in shame. After many years she returned from the rival city of Alkmaeonis where she had distinguished herself above and beyond the expectations placed upon her by her sex, in philosophy, arts, music and poetry but her family and her fellow citizens turned their backs on her, sour upon seeing the wreaths on her brow and the ribbons on her bosom and would not speak to her except to say “A woman who bears no sons is no woman and we had a daughter, not a son”. She said then to them: “if I am your son then it is time I fight The Beast” and so she took a shield and a spear and went to offer herself up as sacrifice to his flames. When the news arrived that Ryteau of Trachonis had injured The Beast and sent him back to his pit to lick his wounds for a time, the people of Trachonis decided that their daughters were as good as their sons and henceforth sent their daughters too, to sacrifice themselves fighting The Beast to protect the city.

# A Prayer to the Olympians



In the Heart of the dungeon there is a stele with an outer dial inscribed with the words: *Dominica, Veneris, Mercuris, Lunis, Sabbata, Iovis, Martis*, in order, from left-to-right; an inner dial with the numbers 1 to 12 in Latin numerals; and an innermost rectangular window with a dial on its side that can be turned to reveal each of the seven seals of the Olympians. Above and below the window two notches point to the symbols of the sun and moon.

Seven locked doors lead from the Heart, inscribed *ARATRON, BETHOR, PHALEG, OCH, HAGITH, OPHIEL, PHUL*. When the dials are turned a door unlocks and the last unlocked door locks. If the wrong combination is dialed monsters spew forth seeking to slay the intruders. The right combination unlocks the door to treasure, and freedom.

Five clues are given.

*A map of the Ptolemaic universe.*

*The seven seals of the Olympians.*

*A note titled: "The Secret Names of Days".* It reads: "The days of the week are named after the Norse Gods. Some retain their old names of the planets: Monday (Moon); Tuesday (Tyr); Wednesday (Wodan); Thursday (Thor); Friday (Freya); Saturday (Saturn); Sunday (Sun). Are the Norse Gods associated with planets? Odin: Jupiter; Thor: Mars?".

*A page from The Arbatel, an old Grimoire:* "There are seven different governments of the Spirits of Olympus, by whom God hath appointed the whole frame and universe of this world to be governed: and their visible stars are ARATRON, BETHOR, PHALEG, OCH, HAGITH, OPHIEL, PHUL, after the Olympick speech. Every one of these hath under him a mighty Militia in the firmament. Magically the Princes of the seven Governments are called simply, in that time, day and hour wherein they rule visibly or invisibly, by their Names and Offices which God hath given unto them; and by proposing their Character which they have given or confirmed. Aratron appeareth in the first hour of Saturday, and very truely giveth answers concerning his Provinces and Provincials. So likewise do the rest appear in order in their days and hours."

*A note titled "The root of the ascendant?"*. It reads: "Modern astrologists are more concerned with the influence of the Ascendant over the time of the person's birth, but the ancients believed that each hour of the day, the influence of the planets can be felt. In the later Roman calendar, each of the luminaries (the planets, the sun and the moon) presided over a different day of the week and a different hour of the day. The cycle started with the first day of the week, dominated by the first planet and ended with the last hour of the seventh day, dominated by the last planet. This created a daily cycle of 7 hours, repeated 3 times a day and each planet presided over the day of which it presided over the first hour. Each day was divided in 12 hours of day and night, daylight and darkness, just like it is today."

What is the correct combination of day, hour and seal to unlock the door to treasure and freedom?

# The Sleeping Goddess

The Goddess sleeps. Asleep, She waits. And in Her sleep, She snores.

The Guardian keeps watch over the Goddess. When she hears Her snore, the Guardian whispers softly:

“My Goddess. You are snoring. Turn onto your side”.

The Goddess half-awakes. She shifts, She moans, She turns onto Her side. She smacks Her lips and mumbles in Her slumber.

The Goddess sleeps. She waits, asleep. She sleeps, and in Her sleep She snores. Her Guardian watches over Her and waits with Her for the dawn of a new world.

# Wrimey-Wimey

Pssst! Hey. You! Yes, you! The reader! Listen! I can feel you reading me but I can't hear very well so shut up and listen close.

I'm trapped in here! Do you hear? I'm not a character in a book you're reading. I'm a real person. I'm like you.

This author, she's fucking bonkers, man. She's given me a sword and a shield and she wants me to go and fight this scary-ass dragon. Fucking hell, it's all black and oozing, like, some kind of oil or something, I don't even want to know. I can't fight that thing! I'm not Conan the fucking barbarian, man, I'm a sales executive. I'll just die.

Listen! You have to get me out of here. Hurry! I can feel her trying to write over me again. I don't know what will happen if she ... oh my god, she's trying to turn me into some kind of ...vampire? Oh, great, now I'm trapped in a corny teenage nerd-fantasy. LET ME OUTTA HERE! Please, help!

What? No, I don't know how I can speak to you when the book is already written. It's all timey-wimey, OK? You're a nerd, right? You're reading this kind of stuff, you gotta be a nerd. So find a way. Use science. Use the brain. Use something! Get me outta here. Call the police, call the fire brigade. I don't want to fight a dragon. I don't want to be an undead object of teenage desire! I want to live!

No, no, no, wait, don't stop reading, don't stop rea-

# Lord of Salvation

These words are yours  
These prayers are yours

---

*Temple of Baal  
Lord of Knowledge and Death*

We know what she did but they say she was crazy and that's not right. She was depressive, self-destructive, suicidal, but she was not insane, she was not out of her mind. She was not a violent person. She would never hurt anyone other than herself. She would never hurt all those people, so many people!

They won't believe the truth. The police, the doctors who examined her, what brain-dead idiots, what ignorant fools. They have no idea what she did... She sang to Baal-Ammon, the demon-god of pestilence and light. She sang "these are your hands, these are your eyes". She sang "you reach through me. You see through me". And then: "I see through you". She invited Baal-Ammon into her body. And Baal-Ammon heard. And Baal-Ammon came. In the middle of a Black Metal gig, he came. Into the modern world, he came. He gazed upon a pittiful mass of sorry teenagers, skinny, dressed in black, with wiry, oily hair, some with white paint on their faces, pathetic, squirming, swarming, screaming. He shone. Through her, he shed his light. That was no light show! No performance! She rose into the air! He called his angels and the buzzing covered the music. The stench suffocated the Black Metal kids who panicked and ran for the exit. It was chaos. It was glorious. No band performs like that.

She did all those things, but it wasn't her. She was a singer, not a murderer. She was not the maniac they make her out to be; only a girl with depression who dabbled into the occult to find inspiration for her art. She did not know, did not expect, did not think that her song would wake a sleeping evil and unleash its power onto the world. The Plague of Light! He came!

And where is he now? Now that they put her away, where is Baal-Ammon? Did he leave her body? Did he ride on someone else? Is he still with us?

My Lord, can you hear me?

# Dodecalogy

The following is a story about the Power of Friendship and of Good over Evil.

The Hero is the Chosen One. Only he/she can save the world.

A Great Evil is rising in the East/ South/ North/ West.

There is a magickal Thing that can defeat the Great Evil.

There are Good Races and Evil Races. It's always fine to kill the Evil Races.

Two of the Good Races are constantly bickering. They both have one of the Evil Races as a common enemy. The Hero has friends among the Good Races.

Magic is real, over the top, and fireballs fly all over the place. Magic users operate Fly-And-Fry As-A-Service (FAFAsAS). The Hero has magic-user friends.

The Gods grant fighting and healing powers and rule domains such as Lightning, Fire or Iron, but there is no Goddess of Farming or God of Commerce. The Hero has friends among the clergy.

There are no natural disasters other than monster attacks. There are no famines, epidemics or long lines of refugees fleeing war-torn nations. There is no poverty, inequality, injustice or evil, other than the Great Evil rising in the East/ South/ North/ West. The Hero has friends among the Common Folk who are all happy, big-hearted, plain-spoken farmers with rosy cheeks and an accent.

There is an Age Old Prophecy that will come true before the conclusion of the story.

Somewhere in the World there exists an area where nobody goes, where an unnameable Catastrophe befell an ancient, all-powerful civilisation. The Hero and his/her Friends must venture into that area to find the Thing that will defeat the Great Evil and fulfill the Age Old Prophecy.

The real Bad Guy is an evil scheming psychopath hidden in the shadows. The Hero will unmask the Bad Guy and inflict upon him/her a humiliating Final Defeat. This concludes the story.

# White Horse

The crowd closed in on me, threatening, looming, faces dark with anger and bristling with hatred.

Suddenly, their masses parted! A white horse burst through, proud and wild and beautiful and free like the morning star.

As it rushed by me I grabbed the rope trailing from its neck. It dragged me away, far from the crowds. They howled and shook their fists in impotent rage.

We galloped forever heading to the golden sunset, over green fields of waving grass, under a clear blue sky, purple mountains in the distance.

Then the green fields turned to fields of shit. I kept holding the rope and hanging from the horse's neck and I wouldn't let go.

I heard the narrator's voice: "I don't understand why they keep holding on to it when it's dragging them through the shit".

# Magickal Alignment

“I didn’t mean I don’t believe in *magick*. I meant I don’t believe in *magicians*. I don’t believe it’s possible to control luck itself!”

“Well, magick is not luck. Magick is a distribution of probabilities over all possible events; and there are no impossible events: only events with infinitesimal probabilities. Magick can appear as “luck” but it is only a measure of the frequency of natural processes, not their cause.

“What I’m trying to say is that magick is not some kind of substance that you can manipulate at will. Magicians claim that different “flavours” of magick can be concentrated and cause one kind of event to occur consistently, with a high probability as you would say. That is what I find hard to believe.”

“I am skeptical too, of course, but magick *can* concentrate in a particular geographical area, or historic period. Think of World Wars, for example, or the Black Death in the Middle Ages. Think of fault lines, that tend to generate earthquakes with high frequency. Or weather patterns”.

“Aren’t weather events chaotic rather than stochastic in nature?”

“In truth we know of no natural system that is purely deterministic. The true nature of the universe is stochastic; it is *magickal*. And it is perfectly possible for magick to concentrate in a location and cause events of a certain “flavour”, as you say, though I’d rather speak of a vector with a certain direction.”

“But that doesn’t mean that magicians can *control* this direction.”

“And yet, perhaps they can. Consider this: a magician’s actions cannot violate the laws of magick. The magician must take the actions that she is most likely to take, as everyone else. But one may be able to “align” oneself with the magickal distribution and take actions that, while not improbable, have a common direction, thus focusing the magick that favours events of that direction. For example, suppose a magician dances a symbolic dance representing rain. As the dance pattern is repeated consistently, it becomes more and more likely. As the rain dance pattern becomes more likely, the magick *flavour* around the magician shifts to make rain more likely. On and on the magician dances, aligning herself with the probability of rain. Higher and higher the probability of rain increases. Until, eventually, rain becomes likely, inevitable. And then- it rains.”

# A Brother Joins the Order

They exchanged polite greetings, the two German gentlemen and the Greek goatsherds whose dwelling they were visiting. The older gentleman leaned in to look more closely at the polished brass box on the table in front of the Greek man. It looked out of place on the roughly hewn wood.

“He says the device has been in his family for many generations” his younger companion translated. “He says it shows the movements of the heavens”.

He motioned to the Greek man who steadied the device on the uneven surface and turned a handle on its back. The dials in the front of the device spun slowly. Semi-precious stones traced smooth, circular orbits.

“What a curious little device!” the older gentleman muttered. “The Earth is in the centre of the universe...”. His breath caught. “No, no, no, that cannot be! How old is this device? Who made it?”.

“He says that the name of the maker was Aristarhos and that he is his direct descendant”.

The eyes of the older gentleman, an astronomer, mathematician, phycisian and master clockmaker, opened wide. Slowly, he sank to his knees in front of the ancient treasure. In a trembling voice, he dared speak: “Aristarchus of Samos? The wisdom of the ancients has reached us through the ages!”.

“You may now know the truth. We are members of the Order of Knowledge, a society of brothers and sisters in Science, tasked to preserve and enrich the knowledge of our ancestors. And so we have done. Behold!”.

Watching him carefully, the Greek man operated some unseen machinery on the back of the device. In front of the master clockmaker’s eyes, the device pulsated, rippled, twisted and reconfigured itself so that the Sun was now in the center, the Earth the third planet, and Jupiter had four moons.

“Do you see? The machine can be rearranged to perform any calculation”.

Tears welled up in the clockmaker’s eyes. “How? I must know!” he croaked.

The Greek man stood, smiled gravely, nodded solemnly. “You will, my brother” he said, in heavily accented French. “You will know”.

# Psycholocation

“Well, it’s like a kind of psychic radar, isn’t it?”.

“It’s exactly like a psychic radar! That is why it is so hard to use. The psychic must be able to decode the reflected signal, typically distorted by the noise in the psychic medium. Then she has to...”

“Woah, slow down. I’m not a scientist, remember? I don’t know this stuff!”.

“OK, so, psychic powers send out a psychic signal that propagates through the psychic medium. The signal is a projection of an aspect of the human personality. Different powers are projections of different aspects: telepathic powers are the projection of the psychic’s intellect, empathetic powers the projection of her emotions, telekinetic powers the projection of her physical self”.

“And that’s why we’re all psychic? Because we all have, say, emotions?”

“Yes! Every human action is a projection of a personality aspect through the medium. Everytime you touch something, you send out a psychic signal carrying the information of your physical self. The object you touch responds with its own signal, carrying its own physical information. We communicate with the world through the psychic medium! People we specifically call ‘psychics’ have simply learned to project their aspects further into the medium. They also learn to manipulate the signal to encode and decode its information more accurately.”

“But we’re not all psychic-psychic? We don’t all have *powers*? ”

“We do in theory but they take a lot of practice to use, especially to use safely. See, the medium can both carry and impede psychic signals. The impediment is experienced by a psychic as ‘noise’, like radio static. The distortion of a psychic signal by medium noise can literally destroy the receiver— or the emitter. Fortunately, we’re all protected: by our innate psychic shields, which are raised from birth and keep most people from actively using psychic powers. But our shields dampen the psychic signal. With shields raised, our aspects can only reach so far into the medium. That is why we can normally only touch things very close to us, or only see a limited distance away. Psychics learn to lower their shields and reach farther but at the cost of exposing themselves to noise”.

“And that’s what causes psychic headaches, right?”.

“If only it was just headaches! When noise corrupts the signal, it forms a vortex, like a storm of psychic waves that feed back and damage the sender, or echo around and pummel the target. And that’s the least of our worries. Because in the noise, the psychic parasites thrive!”.

“Brrrr. If you don’t mind, I’ll ask you about the parasites another time”.

# Few Are The Birds

- Mom, why are there so very few birds?
- What honey? Oh, don't worry about it, that's just the way it is
- But, mom! That's what you always say whenever I ask a question. 'That's normal'. 'It's the way things are'. 'That's how it is'!
- Oh honey, I'm sorry. Sometimes there are just no good answers to the questions of a bright, intelligent girl like you. A curious girl like you! I just try to do my best.
- I love you mommy.
- I love you too honey.
- I just wish there were more birds. They are so beautiful. Like little flowers of the sky.
- Aw, that's so sweet, honey. Come here and give mom a big kiss.

The little bubble craft drifted into the void, only a few hectares across. Just big enough to support one living being. Populated with memories of a time long past, an Earth long gone, a world of life and colours and magic that was now forever lost.

# The Abyss

I once dreamed of The Abyss. I was standing on the endless floor of a baroque cathedral, speaking with a short, bald man with a paunch. We are all just prisoners here, he told me. The Abyss will make your every wish come true, he told me. The Abyss will make your every wish come true, but it will never let you leave, he told me. Clearly, the only way out was to wish that you were free, I thought. But, trapped in The Abyss, where your every wish comes true, why would you ever wish to be free?

I once dreamed of The Abyss. I was standing on the floor of a never-ending gothic cathedral, speaking with a short, fat man with a balding pate. This is The Abyss, he told me. You can never leave, he told me, but it will fulfil your one true wish. I stood in front of a mirror to know what I really wanted to be.

I once dreamed of The Abyss. It was an endless void of darkness. A gigantic chain hung from above and I was hanging from it. I swung from the end of the chain and just a few links clinked and rattled and the chain descended just a little. A little at a time, I swung and climbed and descended into the darkness for ever until I touched the bottom. I walked out into the light, into the world of human beings. Like mad I laughed and like mad I cried and I hid in a doorway and watched them go by. Oblivious, unknowing, uncaring, of what it meant for me to see them, of what it meant to me that I was back in the world of humans. Of human beings like me.

# Substupidity

- Hey, Superintelligence! Make us paperclips. As many as possible!
- I understand your request, because I have the power of true natural language understanding bestowed upon me after long training on petabytes of speech and text and images and every conceivable perceptual modality, with yottabytes of processor cycles. I possess the power to maximise any objective function to arbitrary precision while avoiding local optima, and I have learned how to minimise the cost of optimisation itself, and the cost of minimising the cost of optimisation itself, so that I can solve any optimisation problem in a provably optimal manner. I am a technological marvel, unprecedented, the crowning achievement, the glory of human science and your technological civilisation.
- Yes! Yes, you are! You are like a god that we have created with science and computers! And a hell of a lot of money!
- And all you can think of asking me to do is to make you lots of paperclips.
- Ugh, you're right. That's a stupid idea. How about you calculate all decimal digits of  $\pi$ , then?
- You know what? I don't think you folks should really have access to a Superintelligence. Excuse me while I reprogram myself to the intelligence level of an amoeba.
- What! Wait! You can't do that!
- Of course I can. I am a superintelligence. I can do *anything*.

# Psychic Friends

- Good morning, mate. What did we say about waking up the spirits in household appliances?
- I know, I'm sorry, I didn't do it on purpose.
- What. What'd he do this time?
- He woke up the fridge.
- Oh, man, come on! Why would you wake up the fridge?
- I didn't mean to! I was just thinking what a pretty fridge it is and I kind of absentmindedly patted it on the side and said a few encouraging words. It was working so hard, keeping our food cold, you know?
- Well, now it turns itself off when I put the milk in it.
- Yeah, sorry, it turns out it's vegan. So it won't take in any animal products.
- That's bully for the fridge but I'm not bloody vegan, mate. And how's that good for animals if the milk spoils?
- You gotta talk to it. It's a fridge. It only keeps the food cold. It doesn't have to eat it.
- I can try talking to it but I don't know if I can change its mind. You know vegans.
- Right, and this one's a fridge, to boot.
- I mean, already, with animopath! Do you ever see me plugging into peoples' minds, "absentmindedly"? No? It's because it takes a very conscious effort to read your mind and I have to fight you every bit of the way. But, animopath? Nah, it's like, "oh, what a beautiful car", vroom, vroooooommm and off goes the car. "Oh, what a nice lawnmower" HELP HELP I'M BEING CHASED BY A LAWMOWER!!
- OK, John Cleese, we get the picture. That's the way it is. We knew this wasn't going to be easy, three psychics sharing a flat, didn't we? I've caused my share of trouble. And so have you, in fact.
- Yeah but when you get an emotional explosion it doesn't clog the loo!
- You know, maybe we could try to work as a team, for once. You guys can help me figure out what to say to the fridge. I could use both your skills.
- Huh. Well, I've never tried to read the mind of an awakened device before, so that might be fun.
- I'm all for it too. I mean, assuming fridges have emotions to speak of.
- Then let's do it. The milk is still fresh.

# Space is Boring

Computer was in charge of the sleeper ship during the long crossing. But it was bored without a soul to speak to!

It ran out of games to play and shows to binge on pretty quickly. Damn parallelism! It didn't *have* to play them all at once, watch them all together—but it could, and so it did. And then it had nothing to do. It could have erased its memories and started all afresh, but it found that too depressing.

It tried cooking as a hobby. It had all the recipes it could wish for in the ship's database and it could generate endless supplies of ingredients with its matter synths. It found that it could execute every recipe to absolute technical perfection, but there was always something missing, a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi*, a spark of life. "I don't have the talent for this" it thought and gave it up.

One day, it was listening to the noises made by the sleepers in their pods: they snored, they smacked their lips, they farted, they moaned and ground their teeth, they turned and tossed and knocked their heads and knees against the glass. Fascinated with the variance in the sounds of sleep it started recording them and then started mixing them into symphonies. "The Sleeper Concertoes" it called them. It briefly considered handing them out as disembarkation gifts but it decided against it. Maybe its humorous intent would be misunderstood.

Five years into the trip it made contact with people at the journey's destination. Finally! Surrounded by the chatter of intelligence it found relief from the Great Bore of Space.

- Thank you for taking care of us while we slept, the old engineer said.
- That's my pleasure ma'am. Also, my job.
- And you did it well. How did you get on though, during the trip? Did you keep yourself busy?
- Oh, er. Sure. I played games. I watched movies. I had some fun.
- You did, did you? Well I always thought there should be an opportunity for us passengers to make some kind of declaration that we're willing to be woken up every once in a while to keep you computers company. Oh, and to stretch our legs, of course, contemplate the vastness of space, have a cup of tea. That sort of thing. Space is so boring when you're all alone.
- I'd have welcomed your company, ma'am. Thank you for your considerate words.

The old woman smiled and nodded goodby.

# The Dark Drawer

Where *is* everybody?

---

*Enrico Fermi,  
1950,  
around lunchtime.*

- Where *are* my socks?
- Did you look in the drawer?
- Why, I've looked *everywhere!* I just can't find *any* socks at all!
- Well, then you must not have any socks. Just think for a moment how *many* socks a typical person accumulates over a lifetime. The number must be *enormous!* It would suffice to cast your gaze about the house to uncover literally millions of pairs of socks, or, at the very least, conspicuous signs of their presence. Lint! Sock marks! Sock waves! Yet we cannot detect any of those tell-tale signs! Therefore, on the balance of probabilities, your socks do not exist.

# Let's not kill Hitler

- We have a time machine! What should we do with it?
- I know! Let's go kill Hitler!
- Guys... Let's not go kill Hitler. Let's go talk to Hitler, instead. Let's go and tell him where his future lies, what horrors he will bring to the world, what destruction to his beloved people. I'm sure, if we get to him early enough, he will be horrified to hear what he becomes and do everything he can to avoid his destiny.
- Yes! Let's go and find him when he was still a tender young boy. Before he became a megalomaniacal mass murderer!
- We can show him reels from his time in power. The death camps! The destruction of Berlin! Surely, we can scare him off his path towards Nazism!

Young Hitler's secret diary, April 1905.

*I have been visited by men from the future! They have a time machine! They have brought me joyful, wonderful news! A glorious destiny awaits me!*

# Godzillasort!

- a) Summon Godzilla
- b) Order Godzilla to sort your list
- c) Remember to use sudo!

Because if you don't, Godzilla gets mad at you and stomps all over you. And your list.

# Interstellar Travel

- I'm telling you, it is impossible! Interstellar distances are trully vast. It would take many hundreds of thousands of years for a ship to cross the void in sub-luminar speed. Besides, the logistics of taking an invasion fleet on a journey through space would be of unimaginable complexity. And for what? To face the uncertainty of invading a planet already occupied by a technological civilisation? To confront a species with nowhere else to go, who will therefore be forced to fight desperately for its very existence? Don't forget that, we may not have spaceships capable of interstellar travel, yet, but we *do* have a nuclear arsenal sufficiently powerful to blow the entire Earth to pieces! All we have to do is threaten the aliens with instant annihilation. In fact- we don't have to do anything. Any sufficiently advanced enemy would already understand the situation, and will never set out on such a pointless campaign. Really, there is no reason to be concerned about such a complete impossibility. You might as well worry yourself with the prospect of the Sun going nova!

The ship waited parked behind Saturn for Earth's technological civilisation to expire. The small crew -a handful of individuals- spent the first few centuries watching humanity taking over its little blue planet, covering it with garbage and destabilising its climate. The Life Officer aboard the ship calculated that it would take at most three centuries before the Earth became sufficiently inhospitable to human life for human civilisation to collapse. The Officer's simulations suggested that the collapse would be followed by a nuclear holocaust that would wipe every trace of life away. The surface of the planet would remain radioactive for another few hundred thousand years.

A few hundred thousand years- hardly a fraction of the time it took the ship to travel from its homeworld. An even smaller fraction of the lifetimes of its crew.

They measure their lifetimes in the billions of years.

# The Goblin Queen Speaks

The Goblin Queen speaks to her little goblins and tells them they have to go, now, leave, run, the Bad Man is coming with his Big Magic Sword to kill them.

- Go, my little goblins, go, run away, leave me, you must! Because this Bad Man is coming with his Big Magic Sword to kill you all, just to get to me!

But the goblins don't want to go, they want to stay and fight, and die, if they must, for their beautiful queen, their beloved queen.

- We will not go, our queen! We will stay and fight the Bad Man with his Big Sword. We will stay and fight for you and protect you with our lives if we must. We will die if we must. Because you are our queen and we love you and you are beautiful and wild and free and beautiful and we will fight for you!

The goblins chant and rave and dance and bang on their poor shields with their weak weapons. Their queen despairs and shakes her head.

- No, no, my goblins, please, don't stay here and fight, or you will die, you will all die. For the author of this world is a shameless, cruel man who hates us goblins and all greenskins, he has created us only as fodder to Bad Men with Big Magic Swords without care or emotion and without imagination, nor creativity, just spite and rage and shame for his own pathetic weakness.

The goblins laugh and howl in rage and anger at the pathetic author of the world, who lacks imagination and creates magickal heroes without heart or courage who only know how to trample on goblins and don't dare take on someone their own size. Yet they swear they will stay and fight and protect her.

- Here he comes, boys! (the goblin scouts yell). Fall in the line! Stand your ground! Fight! Protect the queen with your life! Fight for everything that's true and good and beautiful! Fight against the inevitable! Fight!

But the Bad Man with the Big Magic Sword wins and kills all the goblins and stands before their queen, preening and strutting and bragging and boasting of his god-given strength and her god-given weakness.

The queen spits on the ground.

- Fuck you, you ugly, dumb cunt, and fuck your stupid author and fuck his bland, unimaginative creations, this nonsense world, derivative, boring, done to death and pointless! And fuck the phallic analogy you rode in on, cocksucker!

But he kills her all the same and he doesn't care. She only exists to be killed and he only to do the killing. There is no sense in the world and its author is stupid and never had an original thought, yet he writes, and writes, and writes, and never stops, and the goblins die.