

Chapter the Seventh – Not a Leg on which to Stand

“Roger, tower, flight 131 for Angkor Wat ready for take-off from runway Oh-Seven-Niner.”

<static on headphones>

“What’s that, tower? It sounded like you were asking about sumo wrestling, but we’re headed for Cambodia, not Japan; I don’t think they have sumo in Cambodia.”

Well, that was close – it was cogito ergo sumo again: I think, therefore I am a fat wrestler in a diaper.

The flight to Cambodia was quiet, almost too quiet. After a brief interval of several hours, Bonnie began to notice that no one was watching the in-flight movie, *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* (a classic). She made the bold assumption that no one had watched the earlier showing of *Day of the Triffids*, either.

“Fools! Don’t you know this is research material? Some special program in the SBU mainframe kicked out a list of the resources most likely to aid in our prevention of the conquest of the Earth, and you are all ignoring it.”

“That’s putting it a bit bluntly, don’t you think, Bonnie? I mean, it’s only the second film in the series, and we’re all tired, cranky, and surprised by the sudden announcement that it’s up to us to save the world.

“Nonetheless, you’re probably right, and if people don’t start paying attention soon, I’m going to rewind to the beginning of the first reel and let them have it again, full blast.”

“Thanks, Irv. I knew I could count on you to take the situation in stride.”

Skillfully maneuvering his paunch to great advantage, Irv managed to ingratiate himself between the projector and

the screen. A few deft moves of his experienced hands later

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“Look, everyone, it’s Abraham Lincoln! Oh, now it’s a tree-eating tookie-tookie bird! Oh wait, it’s a wolf!”

“Down in front!” “Hey, I can’t see the picture!” “Get out of the way, you retard!” “Can you do an owl?”

His intended audience’s attention once more focused on the screen, Irv felt compelled to head cockpit-ward for no other reason than that he could.

“Hi, guys. How’s it flying?”

“Straight and true, Dr. Knurlmann, straight and true.”

“Glad to hear it, fellows. Anything I can get you? A drink? A sandwich? Anything?”

“No thanks, we’re fine for now.”

“Ok, but when we get to Cambodia, I know this little restaurant where the food is great and the service is even better, if you catch my meaning....”

“Uh, yeah, I think we get your drift. Maybe when we land, we can bend a couple in the doodah room, but for now, we need you to go back and make sure the movies are running properly, ok?”

“Sure thing, fellows, sure thing. Just don’t forget about the doodah room like you usually do.”

Two pairs of uneasy, troubled eyes watched the departing backside of our plucky astrophysicist: “I hope he doesn’t plan to wear that sumo getup the rest of the trip. Kind of makes you wonder about saving the world, you know?”

“You said a mouthful there, brother, a big mouthful.”

Truculently munching on the crusts of Polly’s MLT leavings, Steve seemed to the untrained observer to be deep in thought. In fact, that untrained observer was right on the money. “Penny for your thoughts, Steve?”

“It would take a lot more than that for me to spill all the beans I’ve got on this trip, doll-face. Anything less than \$7.13,

and I'll spit in your face – make it a cool \$100 and we've got a deal.”

Pete's consternation showed more than he imagined – a bright crimson blush of immense proportions washed back and forth across his face as he considered his response. “Ha ha ha. That's a good one, Steve.”

Jarred into an unaccustomed awareness of his surroundings, Mal shifted his attention to the movie screen, just in case something of import might be happening on the plane.

“Thanks, Pete. I was afraid you'd take it the wrong way, but these days a fellow's got to give it a shot, you know? Anyway, I wouldn't charge you anything for my thoughts these days – they're not even my own to begin with.”

“What, are you possessed by an alien intelligence or something?”

“Not at all. I'm merely trying to recall as much information as I can from the series of memo's we used to get in that office building I was talking about before – back in the meeting room. Seems like there must be more information from them that would be useful.”

“Oh. Then I'll leave you alone to remember. Good luck.”

“Thanks. *hmm, there were a couple about snow removal and keying cars and stuff, then the bovine e. coli scares and the fortune cookies and MSG, but what were the other ones ...?*”

The debriefing was going smoothly – far too smoothly for Irv's old-fashioned sense of fair play. “What do you mean the solution is sea water? These are cetaceans for goodness sake!”

Hilbert was defiant, “Then why in God's name did you show us the Triffid movie? I was paying close attention through the entire series of films, and it seems to me that the only common thread is that no matter what the extra-terrestrial threat, the basic defense is one of the simplest, most basic aspects of the Earth. In the case of the Martians, it's just some basic bacteria and too darned much solar radiation, for Triffids it's sea water. We're certainly not going to be able to

infect these dolphins with any diseases any time soon, so I figure a bit of the old NaCl H₂O might just do the trick.” In fact, Hilbert wasn’t just defiant, he was a mathematician – and a pure one at that. Over his desk back in the SBU Mathematics department he had a beautiful illuminated document (which he had received as a gift from his colleague Sir Perceval Riemann) which said *‘My strength is as 1010 because my mathematics are pure.’* “Surely you weren’t simply wasting our time on this flight with fantasy films – oeuvres both dark and wonderful in their imagining, but empty in their application to our immediate needs – surely not that.”

Making some effort to avoid sighing in Bert’s face (although an altogether inadequate effort, truth be told), Irv explained helpfully, “Shut up, Hilbert. This was an effort to entertain you all in a way that would lead to a stepping outside of your normal thought patterns. A way that might lead you to make a paradigm shift from one weltanschauung to a completely new gestaltic zeitgeist. A way that might actually get you to think outside the box. Apparently it was a failure. We may, in fact, be doomed – doomed beyond redemption – doomed in the extremis – doomed, simply doomed.”

“Irv, stop trying to cheer us up and give us the straight skinny on this one – where are we going now and why?” Pete’s clearly phrased, beautifully articulated line seemed to please everyone present; everyone, that is, except the lovely and talented Bonnie Voluntatis.

“Pete,” she purred dangerously, “have you no idea what’s going on around you? Are you completely out of tune with this ensemble? We are about to land in Cambodia where SBU has an ichthyological annex studying vestigial appendages in fish. We’re here to investigate the hypothesis that this invasion is motivated nearly solely by envy – the envy of legless mammals for leggy ones.

“I must say that as a leggy mammal, I can tell you that there is a lot of leg envy out there.”

“I have no doubt of that, Bonnie, none whatsoever, but how did those films help?”

Just then, the pilot’s voice was heard scratchily breaking out of its electronic lethargy. “Folks, this is the captain. We’re about to land, so I’ve turned on the ‘No Arguing’ light. Please return your tray tables to their pre-flight positions, and unvent your individual spleens.”

“Rats” “Darn” “Heck” “Poop” “What am I supposed to do now? I had a splenectomy a few years ago.”

“Tower, this is flight A440 requesting landing instructions.”

“Proceed to runway 66 and enjoy your stay.”

“Roger that tower, roger that.”