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The Worm Mad/Squirminator2k Chronicles

PART ONE

The city of Wormolopolis was once the heart and soul of the Cyberworm industry. Companies such as Microsofftfruit, Chronowerx and A.I.E had all started off manufacturing Worm-Androids, the Cyberworms, back in 2008. But the biggest, the best contender in the market had been PieNET. They'd always been one step ahead of the opposition. They mad many different models of Cyberworm ranging from the Military-angled 4N3LL1D range to the menial Domesti-Bot models. By far, their most successful series of Cyberworms was the all-purpose Squirminator range.

PieNET had put almost all of their research into creating, marketing and distributing the Squirminators from their original Squirminator Mk.I to their final model, the Squirminator900. The Squirminators were the Swiss Army Knife of Cyberworms. They were primarily for Military use but were sold to the public for Household use and Home protection purposes. They were ridiculously popular.

They were so popular in fact that PieNET began researching nano-replication technology for use in a new model of Squirminator. One of the features that had made the Squirminator series so useful was the Head Hatch. It contained dozens of tools and each upgraded model contained at least a dozen more. By the time the S-900 was released there were almost 300 individual utilities for the CYberworm. But the new technology was different. Rather than contain tools, it contained a large quantity of the Nano-Bots. They had a memorybank of upwards of 5,000 tools, and had the ability to learn new ones either from downloading .S2K files from the Internet or from learning new tasks and/or uses for the old tools. They adapted to suit the needs of the consumer.

The new model was to be Christened the Squirminator 2000 Series. Hundreds of thousands of the units were mass-produced in Wormonopolis, each one taking 6 months to construct. It took them 7 years to construct enough to put out onto the market. But by this time, the Cyberworm industry had collapsed - as other Cyberworms entered the market, each one looking more realistic than the one before it, the public became paranoid that Cyberworms would become as "real" as they could get. They didn't want to co-exist with something that looked like a worm, yet wasn't. On top of this, the Military has researched ways of reviving dead soldiers and Cyberworms just weren't needed for the Army anymore. And so the market died down, company after company declared bankruptcy or moved into other areas of the technology industry, and PieNET, who'd spent all their money developing the S-2k series, declared bankruptcy on the 17th of August 2015.

The PieNET Technologies warehouse complex was left abandoned, the tools and equipment left to rot. No one wanted to buy it up as there was no need for this technology anymore. The warehouses left to rot, the hundreds upon thousands of Squirminator 2000 series CYberworm units left to die, never having been removed from their packing crates, never having been turned on. One by one their Battery Back-up units failed until there were only a handful left that were still "useable". The years passed. Until one day...

~

His name was Ren, a street urchin, a thief - a collector. Ren had stolen more objects in his life than he had had regulatory dietary tablets. But this time he had hit the jackpot. The haul that would prove him one and for all as the universe's greatest collector of oddities. It took him a while to find one that worked, which could be used for anything other than scrap metal but it was worth it. Looking at the Cyberworm, Ren felt proud of his accomplishment. Now all was left was to turn the thing on. He reached to the back of its head...and pressed the switch.

Elsewhere in Wormolopolis, Worm Mad was having the worst day of his life. His wife, soon to be his ex, had phoned him in the morning to discuss how much money from their joint account she should keep. She thought that 80% was a nice number, Mad thought 5% sounded better. They had argued. She had informed him that she'd see him in court. This would have been enough to make his day rotten but then the crime-squad arrived. In his mind, Mad could still see them - badge's shining in the neon glare of the advertisement-ridden skylight.

"Mr Mad?"

"Yes"

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"You're wanted in connection with the murder of the vice-vice-governor, Gee-Borra."

"W... What? Why on earth do you think that I.. killed him? I didn't even know he'd been killed!"

"You work for the government, do you not?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"As a hitman, an assassin?"

"Y..Yes, why?"

"I expect you know a lot of ways to kill a worm"

"Maybe... You haven't answered my question."

"We're the one's asking the questions here, Mad, please don't forget that."

That had been five hours ago. To Worm Mad, it seemed more like minutes. He was a suspect for a high-profile murder and it wasn't even time for his midday substance pill. He was in danger of being sent to Sigworm Beta, a prison colony notorious for its high suicide rates if he was found guilty. What was worse though was that the government wanted him to fulfil a contract for them today but the police wanted to keep an eye on him. It would be impossible to kill someone with any degree of stealth if the police insisted on following him everywhere. The result being that he would have to break out of his apartment in order to fulfil his engagement and run the risk of being discovered by the police. While Worm Mad was used to taking risks, that wasn't to say he liked them.

That evening, Mad slipped out unseen through the sky-roof, crawled across the roof and adjusted his rocket-boots accordingly. Then, when he was sure that nobody was looking in his direction, he jumped from the roof and took to the (heavily recycled) air. Flying with LabTech's Rocket Boots was widely required as a dangerous activity and one which you therefore needed a permit to perform. The danger did not stem from the flying itself but the fact that it was all too easy to find yourself splatted across some unlikely nuketerist's windscreen. Even at night, the city's sky was swarming with various flying contraptions from the humble Mercury Space Cab to the thunderous Atomic Horse. Mad managed to stay alive due to the simple fact that he flew too high for traffic to be a problem. This was almost certainly illegal but he had never met anybody who cared. Finally, Mad reached his destination - the Offices of Nintendo Short.

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Worm Mad took a glance through the window at his target and then spun around to hide himself from Nintendo's view. He remembered reading the TPC (Target Profile Document) for Nintendo Short and he'd been so insulted he'd almost choked on his Froot Loops. Short was little more than your average, sub-standard Postal Worker who'd just gone into retirement. Short had been nothing but a model citizen, always ensuring the mail arrived on time and, in some circumstances, before the original letter had actually been sent in the first place. Now he had retired and was looking into moving to Floridonia, the Retirement Planet. Worm Mad had found the reasons for wanting this man picked off unbelievable. During the day, he'd delivered mail and collected photos of 20th Century telegraph poles. But his crime was something you wouldn't have expected of such a wisely old man.

Nintendo Short was a Card Dealer.

In 2012, the World Government had caved and declared all drugs legal. This annoyed many street-corner dealers who now found themselves having to fill in mountains of paperwork to become Licensed Distributors of Recreational Substances. As the punishment for dealing drugs without a licence was horrendous - being sent to Death without any supper - the wisest of the dealers had either filled in the forms and opened up little stalls, or pulled out of dealing. A few dealers, the stupid ones, had kept on dealing without a licence. But they didn't stay in business for any longer than a week or so.

In this time of legalised drugs, something a little more dangerous had to be created. And so Cards were invented. Cards were the most dangerous drug of all time. The Card-High lasted no more than a couple of hours but the Come-Down was the more dangerous part of the drug, in the sense that if you didn't get another Card within 24 hours your brain literally exploded. This made it very difficult for anyone to kick the habit. Cards were declared a Class-X Drug and banned from sale across the globe (except in Amsterdam where, let's face it, *everything* is legal). Other Class-X drugs popped up over time - Tonihaux, Maxview, Cake - but they all phased out leaving Cards as the only true illegal drug of the mid-21st Century. The Government had a strong stance against Card Dealers. They were to be assassinated without question or re-trial. Their customers, of course, died not long after the Target Dealer was taken out, but if they were going to waste their life taking these drugs then they didn't deserve to live anyway.

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Nintendo Short was in the process of talking to a customer on a Videophone, helping him get in contact with another Dealer for when he'd move when Worm Mad had arrived. Mad almost felt sorry for the man - after all, the Postal Service didn't pay a lot of money and Card Dealing was the only way a man such as himself could earn an extra Dollarpound or two. Worm Mad sighed, loaded up his Phase-Compression Rifle, and took aim through the window.

~

It wasn't the sound of the shot that disturbed Worm Mad. Nor was it the blood as it trickled to the floor. It was the fact that Nintendo Short looked up at him before he died and saying nothing, simply stared at him. The stare chilled Mad to the bone. Then it was gone...and so was Short.

Worm Mad arrived back at his apartment at around midnight. The crime-squad guy who was supposed to be making sure Mad didn't escape had fallen asleep outside on the porch. The world was quiet...for a while.

Worm Mad woke to the sound of his vid-phone ringing. He looked at the time piece on his mantelpiece. It was Three AM. Who could be calling him at Three AM in the morning? He waited for it to stop. It didn't so he picked it up. A figure wearing an unusual dark red mask and breathing through two poorly concealed slits appeared on the screen. It was the Governor.

"Oh, Hello Governor." muttered Mad in a relieved manner.

"Hello Mad... Awful Business." the figure replied.

"Who set me up?"

"Huh? Oh...um... I don't know if you were set up, Mad. Probably just misinterpretation of information. Don't worry about it. If you just confess to the murder, we'll make sure you don't get too severely punished."

"But I didn't kill him!"

"Oh, come now, Mad. Your bullets were found in the corpse just an hour ago. This doesn't have to be any harder than it already is."

"But I didn't... Wait a minute... an hour ago?"

"Yes, we found his body just after Two AM."

"The vice-vice-governor?"

"Wha...No..no...The vice-vice-governor's fine. I'm talking about Nintendo Short."

"Nintendo Short?"

The Eye gleamed red in the darkness. The dust that covered the robot's metal frame was soon brushed off by the elegant CleanIt utility. Squirminator 2k looked at the face staring at him and waited...waited...for something. Anything.

"My name is Ren Undermouth" Ren grinned.

"I am the robot known as Squirminator 2k" replied Squirminator.

"I have a little job for you..." grimaced Undermouth.

~

Undermouth paused to examine the Cyberworm. He wasn't in bad condition, save for the fact that only one side of the unit still had it's Synthe-Skin attached. The eyes, glaring at him expectantly, seemed to be working fine. The metal frame, although slightly dented, looked almost new. Ren smiled - he'd've probably gone out and stolen the money to buy one of these things had they made their way out onto the market.

"I have a little job for you," Undermouth repeated.

"My Audio Sensory Unit is functioning," said the Cyberworm. "You don't need to repeat yourself."

"Clever," said Ren, smiling. When he was younger his father had one of the older Squirminator models, and they weren't half as intelligent as this. "Tell me, do you know exactly what you are?"

"I'm a Cyberworm," replied S-2k. "A Squirminator 2000 Series unit, Serial Number 4987-08945B. I'm a creation of PieNET Technologies."

"Well PieNET Technologies went bankrupt quite a while ago," said Ren. "You've been in a Packing Crate since you were first constructed."

"Should've guessed," sighed S-2k. "That would explain why my Internal Chronometer is a good couple of decades past the intended Release Date."

"Enough idle conversation. I have a -"

"A little job for me, yes, yes, get to the point Ren."

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Undermouth frowned. He was about to retaliate, put the Cyberworm straight. He didn't - It seemed pointless. "I'm a th...er, I'm a Collector. I collect rare and valuable items that are hard to come by. You, being perhaps the only working unit in this entire factory, are about as rare as they come."

"Oh. Thank you."

"But I'm not going to put you back in your crate to keep your value up. Oh no. You're far more valuable to me when put to work."

"How so?"

"I've been reading the User's Manual. You can do some quite extraordinary things, things I couldn't do if I tried. With your Head Hatch Technology, you could help me ste...*collect* items from locations I could only dream of gaining access to."

"Judging by the tone, the pattern and the pitch and general wavelength of your vocal pattern," said S-2k, "I can predict words you didn't completely say. So, I know you're a Thief. I know you want to use me as an Aid to Stealing items."

"I steal *rare* items," said Ren. It was absurd - he was correcting an overblown File-o-fax about his chosen profession. What made it worse was this overblown File-o-fax was right. "I'm a *collector*."

"Oh, don't give me that Indiana Jones garbage. The only way you are getting me to help you is to reprogram me and there isn't a worm alive who knows how to do that."

Ren was getting annoyed. He was annoyed that this unit knew about basic Morals. He was annoyed that this unit was given Free will and Actual intelligence. Furthermore, he was annoyed that unlike previous Squirminator models this one didn't come with a Remote On/Off Switch. It was going to take diplomacy to talk the unit out into helping him.

"Hang on," said Worm Mad frowning into the Vid-Phone. "If the Vice-Vice-Governor is fine why do I have these Uniformed goons guarding me in connection to his murder?!"

"Oh, I'm sure I don't know anything about that," smiled the Governor.

"And what does Nintendo Short have to do with this? Is he really a Card Dealer?"

"Oh, come *ON*, Mad," laughed the Governor. "Do you really think an old man like that, a POSTAL WORKER retiring to Floridonia, is capable of dealing a Class-X drug?"

"What are you trying to say? What does Short's death have to do with the Vice-Vice-Governor being murdered when he's still alive?"

"Do you remember Coomhash Numbhood?" asked the Governor. How could Worm Mad forget? Numbgood was the Government's most successful, most famous Hitman. He'd killed more people than anyone else, and he'd never killed the same way twice. He was a legend. A master. All until he mysteriously disappeared 15 months ago. Worm Mad had almost idolised him.

"Vaguely," replied Mad.

"Well he didn't just disappear into thin air," said the Governor. He was smiling again. It was a smile fuelled by smug-gittiness. It was the smile of a plan with a plan. And more often than not, Smug Git Men with plans were bad guys. "He was killed."

"By who?!"

"You will be acquainted with them soon enough." The governor's smile grew. "Or rather, bits of you will."

The image on the Vid-Phone blinked away, replaced with the depressing logo of the GlobeCOM Communications Company. Worm Mad almost fell back into his chair. He wasn't entirely sure of what was going on but he was certain that whatever it was, it probably wouldn't have a happy ending.

Unless he did something about it soon.

~

Drip. Drip. Drip.

It's probably not a good idea to go out at Four AM in the morning, especially not in Wormopolis. It's the time at which all the craziest most dangerous worms are around. Unfortunately, Worm Mad didn't have a choice. He had to escape from his current situation and there was only one person who could really help him.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

The rain poured down upon Mad as he squirmed along that pale grit covered street. He would have taken a coat but the Coat-Killers operated in the area he was visiting and they had a nasty habit of killing anyone who wore one. Finally, Mad arrived at the door of the apartment that he had one known so well and his heart sunk. So many memories.

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He let his Guest-ID Card slip softly into the slot in the door and waited for a response. After a few minutes, a voice croaked out "Hold on, Hold on, I'm coming..." Mad waited. Waited for the response he was dreading. The door slid open.

"Well, well, well..." smiled Eliza Mad "Look whose come crawling back."

Worm Mad was unsure quite why he had married Eliza now. She was smug, arrogant and conceited - and those were just her best qualities. The minute that they had moved into Apartment 343QV she had started laying down the law. He couldn't do this, he couldn't do that. There was never...or rarely...a kind word from Eliza. The problem was that Eliza didn't realise when she was being insulting. She could happily tell you that you were the most disgusting creature that she had ever met one minute and then get upset when you refused to speak to her the next. But maybe Worm Mad was being unfair. Eliza wasn't all bad. If she had been then he wouldn't be sitting down on her sofa with a warm sweatshirt around him explaining to her his whole predicament. It seemed that Eliza wasn't one to hold a grudge after all.

"Okay, I think I can help you" were the first words that she said when Worm Mad had finished his story. To say that Mad was relieved would have been an understatement...

~

Ren was at the stage where he would have quite happily pulled out his hair, used it to make a voodoo doll and stab it with a large knife - had he any hair to pull out in the first place. Squirminator2k was, for lack of a better word, cocky. He spoke his mind, said what he thought, spoke his opinions rather than not having any at all. Either S-2k's motherboard was corrupted altering his Core Program, or this was the most sophisticated piece of Cyberworm Technology ever devised. He'd spent the better part of the past hour or so trying to talk this cybernetic organism into assisting him and every time the answer was a sound "No", showing no chances of change.

At the same time, Squirminator2k was amused by this worm. His constant nagging, his suggestions, opinions, his list of items he wanted to acquire, it entertained him. And there was nothing more entertaining than an idiot. Still, it was almost enough to tempt him.

Almost.

"...and it's worth more than you could almost imagine."

"I'll bet," said Squirminator2k who had turned off for this latest Item Description. Or at the very least Minimized his Attention Sub-routines.

"Look, you're going to be damn near worthless in the world on your own," said Ren. "But helping me, you could make something of yourself. You could be *useful*. Wouldn't you like that?"

"I would rather be independent."

"Look, I -"

Something beeped. S-2k checked his systems. "Isn't me," he reported. Ren reached into his pocket and removed a Mobile Vid-Phone. He recognised the number and, more importantly, he recognised the face associated with it.

"Hello?"

"Ren," came the female voice at the other end of the line. "It's me. I have a... a friend here. He's in need of your services."

"How so?"

"It's hard to explain, the circumstances are very irregular. Suffice to say it's big. As usual I can't guarantee payment or a reward but -"

"Say no more," said Ren. "We always tend to find some kind of... arrangement." He raised an eyebrow provocatively.

"Good. Come to my place and I'll introduce you to him. Where are you now?"

"I'm at the old abandoned PieNET labs."

"Find anything interesting?"

Undermouth looked over his shoulder at his Catch O' The Day. "More or less."

"Well, I reckon it'll take you maybe half an hour to get here. I'll see you then." The woman's image disappeared and Ren stuck the Mobile back into his pocket. He looked at the Cyberworm - no point trying to argue with it anymore. He gave S-2k a "To hell with this" hand motion and headed for the door.

~

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Ren and Worm Mad had met before. Worm Mad had killed an associate of Ren's called Filla some years back and Ren had seen it all happen. He would have reported it to the crime-squad if it wasn't a government job and he hadn't been a wanted worm. Now however he had a chance to return the favour.

"Hello Eliza"

"This is..."

"Yes, I know. We've...urm...met."

"Ren Undermouth, is it? The infamous thief of rare items?"

"You know who I am. You killed my friend, Filla. Remember?"

"Um...not that well. Sorry about that. Look I have a problem which I thought you could deal with."

"Tell me the job and I'll give you a price...possibly"

"I'll pay for this, Ren."

"Wha...Why, Liz?"

"He's an old...friend. That and he's agreed to give me 80% of his money."

"What's the problem... Wormad?"

When Mad had explained the problem, Ren sat down. He thought for a while then grinned. Mad watched him nervously. The fact that Ren had brought up the Filla murder worried him, maybe he wouldn't agree to help him. After all - surely the thief had some kind of moral code that would tell him that it was wrong to help his friend's murderer.

"Okay, I have a solution to your problems." Ren smiled. (Obviously if the price was right then Ren's morals disappeared.)

"What is it?" asked Worm Mad, hoping that it wasn't a quick death.

"Its name is S-2k...but....I want something else..."

"What?"

"The weapon you killed my friend with"

~

Worm Mad ran the options through his mind. If he kept the weapon there was no way Undermouth would help, and Mad would be sent to Sigworm Beta, the most brutal, dangerous place in the solar system - and that's just the Lunchroom. He wouldn't last two days there.

On the other hand, giving Ren the weapon was potentially worse. Every weapon he'd ever used had the government's "Department of Hitmen, Assassins and Mime Artists" logo engraved in the handle and/or blade. The punishment for sharing knowledge of this faction was Beyond Death - a punishment so bad it had never been sentenced to anyone in 20 years.

Inside his mind, Mad weighed the options on the Scales of Injustice and thought about what he was going to say. It took all of 12 seconds.

"Agreed."

"Good," smiled Undermouth. "Now, if you'd like to come with me I can show you that S-2k I was talking about."

Mad nodded as they both stood up. As they headed towards the door, he stopped to take a look at his wife. His Ex-Wife. Even though she had no reason to, she'd helped him out. It was a debt he would have to repay at some point.

It was a debt that, as soon as he'd left the apartment, he would not be able to repay.

It was about Half Past Five AM and finally, thank Donkey, it had stopped raining. Not 500 yard in front of them was the abandoned remains of the PieNET technologies Ltd. Warehouses. Had anyone else been walking with Mad, or indeed had Undermouth and Mad been walking together maybe 5 years ago, there would have been conversation. But the atmosphere was frigid around the two. The tension mounted - they knew one of them was going to comment on something first. They just didn't want it to be them.

And then they were in. Ren had a photographic memory and he'd remembered exactly where he'd last seen the Squirminator2k. When they'd gotten there, however, it was a different story.

"Well?" asked Mad, tapping the end of his tail impatiently.

"It's kind-of not here," replied Ren.

"KIND-OF?"

"Kind-of. Maybe."

"Well it's either here or it isn't," said Mad. "And why is it here anyway? Why is this building so special?"

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"It's not here," Ren repeated to himself. He slapped himself in the forehead - what a rookie mistake! He'd left a piece of Artificial ASctual Intelligence here on it's own, self aware and everything, and he'd left it alone. He should've known it would leave, want to explore Wormonopolis.

"So...what now?" asked Mad.

Bee-buh-beep. Bee-buh-beep.

"We find out what that is," replied Ren. It was muffled, like it was underneath something. He walked over to the crate in which he'd found S-2k and begun digging through the mound of styrofoam, packing paper and that bobbly white curly stuff for which there is no name. And he came across the Remote Location Device. It was beeping because the S-2k had walked outside of a 2-mile radius - the beeping was designed to let the consumer know that the device had had to boost it's scanning range and would therefore use more Battery Power, shorting it's runtime from 1,000 years to just under 800.

"What *is* this S-2k thing anyway?" asked Worm Mad. "Some new kind of Cyberworm?"

"Quite the contrary," replied Ren. "It's pretty damn old."

~

Squirminator 2k sat down at the Cafe TekStar and thought about his life. Since that only took him a few seconds, (he had only been alive a few hours) he decided to think about the future. This was a far more tricky matter since the future hadn't happened. Not only had the future not happened but there was an astounding range of choices that he could make and possible futures that could occur as a result of the choices he made. He would have to be careful about what course of action he chose.

"If it's so old then how can it be of any use to me?" asked Worm Mad sceptically.

"Because...it is the most advanced Cyberworm alive" replied Ren smugly.

"Then how come it's so old and how come there are so many of them in here that nobody has collected?"

Ren explained as briefly as possible. Worm Mad nodded, he liked the sound of this S-2k.

"I had been thinking of getting a new cyberworm actually but you can't get them anymore." Worm Mad told Ren. "Anyway, you don't get my gun because it seems I'm going to have to find this cybernetic runaway myself."

Ren put a knife to Mad's throat and growled, "I think you should reconsider."

"I think you should get that knife the hell away from my throat."

Ren took the blade away from Mad's neck and put it back into his belt. The look that he now gave Mad was enough to say 'Watch your back'. Worm Mad just shook his head and walked out of the door.

"Eeeny, Meeny, Miny Mo.." S-2k had decided that a random selection would help him choose what choice to make. Maybe his circuits were fried but for some reason, the best course of action seemed to be to put his life in the hands of fate. Soon, it was decided - He would get a job, get some money and buy a planet. It sounded a nice plan, especially the planet part. S-2k had always wanted a planet - ever since he was switched on. Unfortunately, for now, fate had other plans for S-2k, he felt a thin metal tube pressed against his back which he correctly identified as a gun. S-2k hoped that it didn't go off, he was just beginning to like this life-malarkey.

Worm Mad had not wanted it to come to this. He had figured he could find S-2k on his own. But he had been searching for the last hour without any success. So... with a heavy sigh... he set up his now ancient Cyberworm - The Chronowerx OBSESSION. When Mad had got it, he had affectionately named it Bob. He didn't have any affection for Bob any more however. The reason for this being that Bob was the most frustrating machine that Worm Mad had ever met.

"Beep-Opening Channels #2423-#3132(c)-Beep-Operating System.EXE=Fine. Load-Beep-LoadNOW-Beep." Bob began to churn out. The loading process was tedious but remarkably less annoying than Bob's actual personality - if it could be called a personality. When Bob had loaded completely, he opened his large green visor-eyes and let out a sigh.

"Oh..." Bob grumbled "It's you..."

"Who did you expect?" asked Worm Mad "Terry Pratchett?"

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"If only," replied Bob. "Now then, did you turn me on for a reason or have you run out of people to harass?"

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"Actually it's a little of both, but that's not the point." Worm Mad opened a sidepouch and removed a Promotional vidigraph of the S-2k that he found in the Warehouse during his visit. He held the vidigraph up to Bob as it demonstrated S-2k's many new features.

"Oh, is that it, eh?" snapped Bob. "You booted me up to let me know I've been replaced? Well this is just *dandy*, isn't it. "

"Bob..."

"Not only have you replaced me with a better model, it's a better model by a better company."

"Bob..."

"Oh, no. I'll save you the trouble and blow my own sodding head off. Pass me that gun..."

"**BOB!**" shouted Mad. He'd remembered why he'd turned the thing off so many years ago. "I'm not replacing you. Cyberworm technology is obsolete."

"Oh," replied Bob. "Well. Erm. What's this about?"

"I need to track down this Cyberworm. He's ventured off into the City and I can't find him on my own."

"Oh, so now *you* need *my* help, eh? You never helped me when I needed it."

"When did you ever need my help?"

"Well," thought Bob, "When that mad man was going to turn me off. I screamed at you to help, but you never did."

"Bob, that mad man who was going to turn you off was *me*."

"Still, I think it proves my point."

"Look, I *need* your help at the moment. I'm just a worm. You're a Cyberworm - you can do things I can't."

"So," said Bob, "Why not use me for whatever it is you need this PieNET Squirminator 2000 Series unit for?"

"Because he has something you don't," replied Mad. "He has a Time Machine."

"Can I help you?" asked Squirminator.

"Yep," replied the mangled voice from behind him. "You can kind of give me all of your money. Sort-of."

"Oh, really?" asked S-2k.

"Yes," replied the voice. "Really. I've got a Class B Blaster stuck in your back and I'm not going to hesitate to fire it."

"Well, judging from the roughness of the edge of the metal, coupled with the diameter of the end," said S-2k, "I would say you have a Bottleneck shoved in my back."

"A bottleneck?"

"Yes. Of the Guitar Variety. Commonly used by Blues players particularly of the early 20th Century."

"Well I don't really know *what* it is," said the voice. "I just kind of found it on the street, sort of thing."

"Now, now, now, didn't your mother ever tell you it's not clever to pick up things off of the street?" asked S-2k as he turned around. "Especially not off of the streets of Wormonopolis."

The man, who looked like the "Before" guy for a Clearasil advert, looked at S-2k's face, stunned. There were no words. Not to describe that.

"Anyway, regarding that bottleneck, there's an interesting history behind those things. Turns out Blues Players who used to play in American bars during the early 1920s and 30s used to take the broken ends of beer bottles and slide them up and down the guitar to add a sliding effect to their music. It's not so common now, what with music being Outlawed and everything, but it seems that -"

The man, who had a knife in his concealed hand, lunged forward with it. S-2k extended one of his hands and grabbed the assaulting hand, twisted it, and pulled it off. Worms have no arms but if they did you would be sure that this man would have no hand left on one of them. S-2k removed the knife and started throwing it up and catching it like a tennis ball.

S-2k set his Vocal Chord Simulators to Samuel L. Jackson mode and said, "I'm sorry, did I break your concentration?"

The sun was rising. In Worm Mad's mind this was not a good thing. Granted, it meant that spotting S-2k would be a tad easier (follow the worm that glints in the sunlight) but it also meant that the Crime-Squad would be back on duty in a matter of...hour. One hour. He felt like swearing. His day, his *life*

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had gotten so screwed up - his divorce, the accused-murder thing, and now everything depended on him and Bob tracking down a Cyberworm who might not even *exist*. Still, you had to laugh.

"This isn't the time to laugh," sighed Mad as he whacked his Budget model Cyberworm around the head.

"I'm sorry," giggled Bob, "I guess there's a kink in my humour sub Routee-heeee-heeee-heeenes. Everything just seems so fuh-huh-uh-uh-unny!"

"Want to hear a real joke?" smiled Worm Mad.

"Sure!"

"Okay, What do you get when you cross Worm Mad with a Cyberworm's Off Button?"

Bob promptly stopped laughing.

The clouds changed. They did this one a week, every week it was something new. Last week, it was New New Coke. The week before, Nike Lazé, the trainers that walked you home. This week, however, it was a slogan that was a little less appealing.

WANTED

Worm Mad

For the murders of Vice-Vice-Governor Gee-Borra
and Honoured Wormonopolitian citizen Nintendo Short
Any and all information regarding his whereabouts should be
reported to the W.C.C.S

A 3-dimensional rotating holo-image of Mad rotated next to the message. This and the fact that, for the first time in weeks, the Ad-Cloud's Sound Systems were working announcing the contents in 1,307 different languages (including Welsh and Esperanto), did not make Worm Mad's day go any better.

"Hey!" said Bob. "You're wanted! Now that *is* funny! Ahahahahaa!" he laughed.

Without looking, Mad extended a hand, opened the panel on the front of Bob's chest, and pressed a button that muted the Cyberworm. Bob began swearing. No one noticed.

"Di'ja see what he did to Knifey McStabby earlier?!"

The Staff at the Cafe TekStar were a little more than anxious about S-2k now. The fact that he'd ripped off the hand of one of the most dangerous men in Wormonopolis (or at least in the Cafe Tekstar), coupled with the fact that half of his face and body had no skin and underneath it was a shiny, slightly dented metal frame kind of put them off a little, and potential customers who had seen the Cyberworm through the window had been put off food altogether - perhaps even for life. This Customer, whatever he was, was driving away business. And the staff were bickering about who should be the unlucky one to ask him to leave.

"It's like he's some kinda Robot or summat," replied the Manager.

"Or one o' dem Ciderwurms from waye back when," added Scruffy, the elderly Waiter.

"In any case, I ain't goin' over there t'ask him t'leave," said Jesus. She was particularly scared by this Customer and would probably have soiled her Waitress Uniform were it not grounds for immediate Termination of Contract.

"Well I guess I'ma have to go over there and ask 'im to leave, or summat," sighed the Manager. He begun to walk over to S-2k, who'd spotted him in the corner of his good eye.

"Can I help you?" asked Squirminator, trying to sound as polite and hospitable as possible.

"Uh, yes, erm, uh, a-heh, er," said the Manager.

"Come on, come on, some of us don't live forever. And by 'Some of us' I mean you."

"I was just wondering, uh, if, erm, uh..."

"Come on, Shirly, simple English."

The Manager was sweating like a Martian Tiger in a Mercurian Heatwave. "Wondering if you needed...uh....any more Curly Fries. Or summat."

"I'm fine, thanks," replied S-2k.

"Righty. Erm."

The Manager slowly edged away from the table and he and his staff resumed Staring.

~

Worm Mad was annoyed. He was now in extreme danger from the Crime Squad who were just going back to duty. Also, they had still not found S-2k and Bob kept hitting him. "What? What is it?" he asked but Bob didn't respond. Then he remembered he'd muted the CyberWorm. He turned the sound back on. "It's over there!" exclaimed Bob and pointed to a small Dietary-Restock Shop.

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"No, Bob - that's a shop. Or do you mean in the shop?" asked Mad
"Not the shop. Just in that direction. We just need to keep going in that direction and we should find it."
"Hey, those circuits are actually more useful than I thought!" exclaimed Mad.
Bob looked upset.

"No, I do not want any more bloody fries!" shouted S-2k, "I don't know why you people keep asking me that as I'm a CyberWorm and hence don't need to eat to survive."
"Well...y'see...we...really..." spluttered the overworked waiter.
"WHAT?!? Spit it out!"
"Canuleavepleeeseitsanofinkpersnaljusttatyamaybedrivinawabusnessanyknowwedonlikethatan...an...I'm scared of you."
"Okay, Fine. You want me to leave? Then that's fine. I'm gone."
S-2k began to squirm towards the door. Then as an afterthought, he turned around and exclaimed
"Don't be scared of me, kid. Fear is irrational and we all know that you don't get any where in life if you're irrational."
A voice from directly behind Squirminator muttered, "You certainly don't."

The meeting between Mad and Machine was complicated. There was a lot of swearing. Then Worm Mad muted Bob's speech. After this - there was a lot of complex sentences and rhetorical questions. Debate. Discussion. Positive. Negative. Yes. No. Then...

"Get Down!" S-2k barked loudly.
"Wh...Why?" Worm Mad asked, confused.
"Crime-Squad. I'll deal with them."
Squirminator strolled up to one of the cops. After a long winded conversation, they left and Squirminator returned. Worm Mad picked himself up from the floor.
"Thanks" he mumbled.
"No Problem" nodded S-2k.
"So will you help me?"
"I've already told you, my temporal mechanisms are playing up. I couldn't guarantee it would work."
"But we could try."
"We could end up anywhere. The far past, the far future - anywhere! It's too risky."
"My whole life I've been running risks. My marriage was a risk, my job was always a risk. I took a risk killing Nintendo Short. I'm used to risks - risks ruined my life. They can't make anything worse. I want one last risk - to put everything right."
"But what about cause and effect? Say that we do find your old self and persuade you to rethink your life - what then? We have no idea what the repercussions might be."
"I thought you had some kind of device to deal with that."
"Temporal-Distortion Realigner. Right. But that's on the blink too. I'm just saying that we should wait until they're fully operational again."
"I can't wait, S-2k! Don't you understand that - I can't wait! You have your whole life ahead of you! Me? - if I'm found today then my life is over! - I'm a dead worm, 2k...a dead worm...and I don't want to die."
"I'm going to regret this but....alright. Stand next to me."

An old worm sitting at a bench saw three worms standing together. Two were Cyber-Worms, one a noticeably earlier model. The other non Cyber-Worm looked remarkably similar to that guy on the wanted ads. All of a sudden, two of the trio disappeared. The old worm went over and looked at the one remaining figure who was gesticulating wildly at him. The old worm guessed that the individual wanted him to press the button in its chest. He obliged. A string of expletives poured out of the Cyber-Worm's mouth, finally finishing with "They've only gone off and left me!" Bob wasn't having a good day.

~

For a moment, one blissful, peace-filled moment, Worm Mad considered the possibility that the attempted shifting through time had killed him. No more Divorce, no more frame-ups, just peace. And then a wave hit him, like he'd been dropped into the middle of an ocean.

He wasn't dead. It was merely the "calm" before the reintegration with the space-time continuum.

The feeling wasn't too dissimilar from that experienced by regular users of Matter Transportation Devices, or Matts for short. They shifted one item from one point in space-time to another point in

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space-time. It was theorised that when you teleported from one point to another you existed in both points at the same time. The Matt theoretically not only moved you to that other point in space, but shifted you slightly back in time. Of course, this had never been proven.

It was only natural that Time Travelling technology would be an off-shot of Matt technology - a spin-off, to so speak. Time Travel was the "Mork & Mindy" of Matt's "Happy Days" - the sort of thing no one would really have noticed.

His vision blurry, Mad tried to piece together where, and when, he was. "Where... *are* we?"

"For Glod's sake," exclaimed S-2k. "What's up with the pausing and the emphasis placement in that sentence? What are you, a Graduate of the William Shatner School of Acting or something?"

"Answer the question."

"If the Time Drive is reliable, and I assure you it is not, we're approximately 7 days before the supposed murder of the Vice-Vice-Governor."

"Ah," smiled Worm Mad. "That's good."

"Not quite," said Squirminator. "Y'see, we're not on Earth."

"We're not?!" exclaimed Mad.

"Nope."

"Well..where are we?"

"According to the co-ords in my Universal Positioning System," said S-2k checking his internal sensors, "We're in the 'Lemmé Inn' on Titan, one of Mars' orbiting natural satellites."

"You mean one of Mars' moons?" asked Mad.

"If you want to be all lamen about it," said S-2k, "Then yes."

"What's that...that sign on the wall?"

"Hmm," said S-2k, walking up to and examining the pictograph on the plaque. "It's shape and geometrical positioning is similar to but not the same as that of a Female worm. I'm not quite sure what this..."

A door to their right opened and a woman walked in. She spotted Mad and S-2k and, naturally screamed.

"I think," said S-2k, "We're in the Ladies' Bathroom of the Inn." He examined the surroundings - the tiled walls, the shiny, easily-cleanable floor, the closed-door toilet compartments. "More likely than not, yes."

"This isn't a problem," said Mad as he and S-2k squirmed across the Lobby to the Main Entrance. "We can merely catch a Shuttlebus from the Titan Spacedock, and be back on Earth in time to save the V.V.G."

"I've already considered this plan and I logged onto the Titan Spacedock's Website as we left the...um...place," replied S-2k. If it were a feature he was capable of, he would have been red with embarrassment.

"And?"

"All flights from Titan to Earth are booked for the next 5 days," replied S-2k. "Even then it's a 2 to 3 day trip, not taking into account the possibility of Space Debris in the Flight Path, Asteroids and/or comets which may require a Course correction, or Engine Failure and sudden and unexpected explosion of the Anti-Matter Injection Unit."

"Makes you feel glad to be alive," said Mad. As S-2k held the door open, he began to think. "What if we waited for a No-Show. We buy their seats at discount prices and get home in 2-3 days with plenty of time to find out what the Hell is going on."

"Seems unlikely that there will be any No-Shows, Mad," replied S-2k. "The worms on Titan want to get off as badly as we do."

Titan was purchased by Chronowrx in 2014 shortly before the Cyberworm interest died down with the intention of making it a Development and Research facility - buying moons was not an uncommon occurrence in Big Business. They ended up selling the moon to the World Government who planned to convert some of the structures Chronowrx had already constructed into some Tourist Attractions and additional Housing areas. Earth was quickly becoming overpopulated with the sudden rise of pregnancy and accidents resulting in some worms being cut in half, causing a lot of confusion and a load of paperwork. But Titan became a slum, a haven for some of the Solar System's worst inhabitants. It was the first attempt at colonising a planet or moon for habitation, and it certainly was not as successful as later attempts such as the Venusian colonies.

People who ended up on Titan generally didn't do so of their own free will, and if they did it was to escape paying some kind of debt. Shuttlebusses left the Spacedock every half hour, each one costing a

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fortune to gain passage on and each one full of passengers, seated and standing, on their way back to Earth.

"Can't you use the Time Device thingy to take us back to Earth?" asked Mad.

"Negative," replied S-2k. "That last jump must've shorted out it's Circuits. I *told* you it wasn't reliable."

"Well...what about that fancy Nanotechnology stuff?"

"It's all busy repairing the damage done to my Motherboard after the jump," replied S-2k.

"Otherwise I would not be here to help you now."

"Well this is great," shouted Worm Mad. "I'll be no better off by the time I get back and I'll be a week older than I should be!"

"We should head back to the Inn," replied S-2k. "Maybe get a room or something."

Worm Mad ignored Squirminator. Instead he sat on a nearby bench, and thought.

~

Thinking didn't help. It made things worse. He thought about his whole situation and wondered if saving the vice-vice-Governor would really help. Would it make his life any better? Maybe not. It had long been apparent to Worm Mad that the government were trying to get rid of him. It was true that he was the best hitman alive but there were other factors. Worm Mad was a worm with morals and would only perform assassinations if he was absolutely sure that there was a legitimate reason for them. Of course with the government - there often wasn't. As the government couldn't sack Worm Mad due to the nature of the contract that they had wrote for him, their only way out of the situation would be to have Mad convicted for a crime...any crime would do. The governor himself had stated that "The vice-vice-governor's fine." when he had spoken to him. The next day he had been confirmed dead. It seemed they had decided to throw two murder's at him - Short's and Gee-Borra's. Then Worm Mad decided what to do. How to put his life back on track. He didn't need Earth. There were only three things he needed - Life, Adventure, Friends and Romance. Okay that was four but hey, whose counting? Well, Mad had Life if he didn't return to Earth and if he stuck with S-2k he had friendship. He also thought that he had a good idea of how to provide himself with the other two.

"Why are we here, Mad?" asked S-2k to Worm Mad as they emerged from two crates in the cargo of the space shuttle Death-1.

"Well, he-he, Y'know how I love adventures?" Mad responded.

"No. I thought we were hiding on this shuttle because we wanted to get back to Earth."

"Well, ha-ha, this shuttle isn't going to Earth. It's an all-female cruise ship, the Death-1! Over two hundred of them! Boy, are they going to surprised when they find us...but they'll have to accept us into the crew. And with no other males on board, I'm afraid we'll become quite pop-ulaar if ya take my drift."

"Did you look at the crew list in detail before you got us hidden on this ship, Mad?"

"Um...I saw it said all-female."

"Did you see the bit after that?"

"What bit?"

"The bit stating that they were from the mutant-worm race of Kakakakaililla"

"Oh Jebus! You mean..."

"They're a female only race that eats males, that's why there aren't any aboard."

"Two off my list."

"What list? Boy, talking about lists at a time like this - nice going. Y'know I'm really beginning to hate you, Mad."

"That's friendship gone."

Worm Mad decided to see if he could escape being detected by the Kakaka's and find an escape pod. To hell with S-2k, he was fed up with that metal miscreant. He could be eaten for all Mad cared. That was when Mad noticed the hand lying on the floor. Then the blood.

Mad returned to where S-2k was sulking in the cargo bay. He looked at him and stammered -

"Th..th...ey...they..."

"They - what?" S-2k shouted.

"They're all dead. All of them."

"All of them?"

"Well, except one - she's in a state of trauma."

"A state of trauma?"

"Yes. Why do you keep repeating everything I say?"

"Sorry...I'm just surprised."

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"Why?"

"It means there's something more deadly than the Kakakakaililla on board and that can only spell one thing...."

"H-E-L-L-O?"

"No, idiot! Disaster!"

"An alien that can only spell 'Disaster'? What kind of weird species is that? Does it know any other words or does it just spell them wrong?"

S-2k looked at Worm Mad with an intense anger. Well he would have looked...had his eyes not been fixed on the hulking beast in front of him. The beast that was, in all likelihood, about to kill them both.

~

S-2k's life played before his eyes. S-2k's only regret, his only problem, was that PieNET had been cheap and not spent money on a better Video Compression filetype for his memory to play back as. Still, the majority of his life had been pretty good so far. Or, more realistically, he'd led the worst life any Cyberworm had ever had to lead, with the exception of the S-2k Development Prototype that had been sent back in time to Ancient Egypt, worshipped as a God, and was eventually melted down to make a statue of himself with.

Worm Mad, on the other hand, was used to taking risks. And he was about to take one right now. He looked at the beast and despite the fact it was snarling, its teeth dripping with blood, its razor-sharp claws glinting under the monotonous lighting from above, it still looked more attractive than his first wife. And it was probably easier to get along with. He had half a mind to propose there and then. Instead, he grabbed S-2k, forced open the Head Hatch, and pulled out the first thing the Nanobots generated.

They generated a Fishing Rod.

"Eh, I've seen less useful tools," sighed Worm Mad.

He picked up the torso (for lack of a better word) of a dead Kakakakaililla, hooked it to the end of the fishing rod, and flung it across the room. The beast, easily distracted, chased the torso at which point Worm Mad and S-2k ran.

"What the Hell IS that!?" asked S-2k as they ran down the blood-soaked corridors of the ship.

"YOU'RE asking ME?!" shouted Mad. "YOU'RE the super-intelligent Cyberworm with an Encyclopedia Memory bank! Why don't you know what it is?!"

"Hey, I'm a few DECADES out of date," replied S-2k. "You expect me to know all the details?"

"Quite frankly, YES!!"

"We need a plan," said S-2k.

"Wow," commented Mad. "You think of that one yourself or did you ask your Motherboard to help you spell the BIG words?"

"Shut up, Filtrum-Face."

An argument ensued. There was a lot of shouting, some name-calling, some words were said about people's parents (or Motherboards) and Worm Mad and S-2k parted ways at a Fork in the corridor.

It was perhaps the stupidest thing either of them had done.

~

Worm Mad wasn't used to this kind of ship. He had only been in a few space shuttles in his life and those had been rather small and well signposted. This one wasn't. All the corridors looked the same - blood stained. After running about for a time, he noticed the traumatised Kakaka that he had seen before. She was sitting in a corner, muttering to herself. Mad was about to fast-walk past her when his morals crept up on him again. So, she was from a race of brutal male-killing mutants but she was also deeply traumatised and was unlikely to be able to defend herself from whatever the thing that had eaten her friends was. Knowing that he would probably regret it, he hoisted her onto his shoulders and carried her on with him as he tried to find some form of escape.

S-2k meanwhile had found a form of escape. It was a small escape-pod which could house about five worms. Unfortunately by his calculations, it was also the only escape-pod on the ship. This meant that if he was to take it, Worm Mad would ultimately be unable to escape from the ship and would therefore end up being digested by the beast. It was true that Squirminator was not in a good mood with Mad but it was also true that he didn't feel right letting him die. He decided to wait half an hour and see if Mad turned up and if not to take the pod.

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Mad was exhausted. His progress through the ship was being severely hindered by the weight on his back. The weight on his back that was showing no sign of any recovery. Mad muttered to himself "Where's the damned escape pod?"

All of a sudden - a reply came from his back, "Deck 4. Deck 4. Escape Pod. Deck 4."

It was true that the Kakaka wasn't in a fully sane state of mind but it was all that Mad had to go on. He stepped into the nearest lift and pressed the button for Deck 4.

"Okay, that's it - I'm getting in this escape pod." S-2k grumbled to himself.

Just as he was in the process of entering the pod, he heard a familiar voice cry "Wait, S-2k! Wait!".

Worm Mad squirmed into the CyberWorm's line of sight carrying what appeared to be a wounded Kakaka on his back. S-2k moved out of the pod and over to Mad.

"What the hell are you doing with that thing?" he demanded.

"She's coming with us on the escape-pod, Squirmy." Mad replied.

"What are you talking about? She'll eat us!"

"I'm not leaving her to be killed by that monster. I have morals!"

"Yeah, but she doesn't - She will kill us, Mad!"

"She's in a state of trauma, she can't defend herself!"

"I don't care what she's in!"

Up. Up. Up.

Being hoisted in the air isn't a comforting position at the best of times. But when you're being hoisted in the air by an unidentified killing machine that has already murdered almost an entire ship's crew, the situation seems far worse. S-2k and Worm Mad, both with their necks in retrospective hands of the monster awaited their deaths with a feeling of sad reluctance. The Kakaka had fallen from Mad's back when he had been grabbed and was now sitting with her hands over her eyes on the floor. As incredible as it might seem, S-2k and Worm Mad's only hope for survival lay in the pity of a traumatised mutant who, under normal conditions, would be quite content to serve them up in a light wine sauce.

~

"If there is any justice in the world," said Worm Mad, "We're in a sci-fi television show. There will be a 'To Be Continued' message appearing soon, and we'll have an extra week to live before the next episode."

"True," said S-2k, "But what if this is a back-to-back marathon?"

"3-4 minute adbreak."

"A back-to-back Marathon on a BBC channel?"

Worm Mad thought for a moment. "I don't want to die!"

It would have been dishonest to say that the Kakaka wasn't scared. She was feeling scared, horrified, and various other Bad Thing-type words. It was not, as they say, a Happy Time. But she knew that her fate was in the hands of the men who were in the hands of the Beast. And in turn, their fate was in her hands. And when it came down to it you had to hand it to her - she came up with a solution that took the situation in hand.

Located right in front of her was a Wrench. It was a simple, crude tool that had enough grime and rust over it that it could have been thousands of years old. Noah may have used this wrench during the construction of his Ark. When Moses' cane didn't turn into a snake when he threw it to the ground, he may very well have used this wrench to tune it. Hell, the wrench was probably used by God himself to sort out the wiring when the whole "Let There Be Light" thing didn't work the first couple of times.

The Kakaka grabbed the wrench in her good hand with the intention of throwing it at the Beast. But to her left, she saw something - there was a bolt in the wall with the words "GAS SYSTEM" engraved on the top. She looked above the Beast and sure enough a Gas Vent was right by his side. She put the wrench to the bolt, gave it a sharp twist, and a thick, green gas began to spray out of the system surprising the Beast and causing him to drop his prey.

"Tanks," said Worm Mad.

"We'd better get into that Pod and launch," said S-2k motioning towards the entrance. "The gas being emitted is Zerogen Toxide, lethal to worms and Kakaka."

They hurried into the Escape Pod. Worm Mad shut the door behind him, pressed the big, red "LAUNCH" button and watched the Space shuttle get smaller and smaller as they started to move away. Through the open doorway on the ship, they saw the gas being sprayed out, and the Beast being sucked out into the void. He wouldn't be killing anyone for a while.

The Kakaka stared at the other two. Mad gave her a smile. "Thank you," he said. She just stared, saying nothing. She'd rescued them because she could.

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Besides, she was going to need something to eat if she wanted to be alive when a ship came to pick them up.

~

So, kakaka - What's your name?" asked Worm Mad with interest.

"My name is Dark Cloud, my victims beg for mercy but I do not give it. For I am the harbinger of doom, the reaper of destruction, the nightmare that stalks you in the night until you are left screaming for death but it will not come!" responded Dark Cloud.

"So your name's Dark Cloud. Like the guy in Final Fantasy VII, except for the Dark bit. Well, that's cool."

"You're not intimidated?"

"Nope. Nothing phases me anymore. Danger is around every corner, why worry?"

"Rats! I can only eat you if you're in a state of extreme panic."

S-2k was wiping his brow, nervously. 'I am not in a state of panic, I am not in a state of panic', he kept repeating to himself internally.

"Hey, Squirmy - are you okay? You look kind of worried about something." asked Worm Mad.

Luckily S-2k was metallic and so Dark Cloud couldn't eat him. And thus a new companion joined the group and it was proclaimed good for as ye olde Mad would say 'A male-eating worm can be useful in all kinds of circumstances. Plus, she's a bit of a babe - if you know what I mean?' and thus he was proclaimed ye village idiot by ye S-2k but all was not well for as Dark Cloud was later to point out 'This isn't a village and I'm hungry'.

Hours Passed. Days passed. Weeks passed. Every second was an eternity. The group had little to amuse themselves with except for the occasional game of 'Name that planet or die' and nothing to eat. It was a nightmare. Seconds seemed like years and S-2k snored when he slept due to an irreparable software bug. Sometimes they wished they had been killed by the monster. What had it been? Where had it come from? Why had it left such a mess? Now, they would never know...

Eventually... finally... the pod was brought aboard a ship. Unfortunately for them, the ship was 'The Anterprize'. The crew of the Anterprize were a bunch of no-hopers who having lost their prominent TV-Show jobs on Earth were on a mission to search the universe for new forms of life. Worm Mad didn't like them. Dark Cloud ate half of them. And then S-2k went insane.

~

Worm Mad had planned to die old, although he never really expected it to happen like that. He'd always planned to write memoirs. But never in all of his life did he expect to write about a giant killer Beast, a woman who was literally a Man-eater, and a Cyberworm who was a few sandwiches short of a full deck of cards.

And now the Anterprize (formerly the Enterforaprize) was on a course bound for home with a minimal crew, half of which had been eaten and the rest of which had been subjected to various tortures by Squirminator2k, ranging from being stretched across rooms to being sent back in time to the Spanish Inquisition. It was not one of the best times to be alive, Worm Mad had thought to himself.

Hmm... better remember that for my Memoirs...

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," grinned Squirminator2k as he slowly stalked through the Cargo Deck where perhaps the last remaining crew member of the Anterprize was remaining. It was the Captain, no less - Captain James. C. Smirk (the C. stands for "Cliché"). Soon he was going to be demoted from Ranking Officer to Filling Omelette.

"Please," said Smirk from behind a Cargo Canister. "Don't...kill me. Youve takenoutmycrew, you've.....got to.....spare meee!"

"Illogical, Captain," replied S-2k.

"You've..... gottaletmelive, please.....let me.....liiiiive!"

Smirk's last words were, funnily enough, screams. Long screams with ridiculous dramatic pauses and emphasis on the wrong parts of the AAAAAaarghs.

"Two to go," smiled S-2k. "And they called *him* mad..."

There were two things Worm Mad didn't believe in - coincidences, and Childproof Medicine caps. It was a strange coincidence that the Beast, the Man-Eating Kakaka, S-2k going insane, it had all happened in the space of a few weeks - along with the murder of the VVG and Nintendo Short. He'd almost forgotten about them - he'd longed for the days where hiding from the Crime-Squad were his

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priority worries. And now that there was only one Worm Mad in the Universe once again, his "past" self probably having travelled back in time by now, he had the impending feeling that things were about to go from bad to...

"Worse," said Squirminator2k. He was standing right behind Mad, and had he decided to use some kind of gun or projectile weapon he could've literally shot in any direction and it would have ricocheted around the ship, ultimately hitting his target.

"Oh, crud."

S-2k prepared his Head Hatch to open. But it never did. Something stopped him - Mad turned around reluctantly and saw S-2k collapsed on the floor. Beside him was Bob, holding a Time Drive similar to S-2k's.

"What, you not pleased to see me or something?"

~

When Bob had been left on Earth while S-2k and Worm Mad had gone off, he had got bored. So, in a state of extreme boredom - he had decided to go to the old PieNET factory and see what he could find. He had found a lot of old S-2k's that weren't in any condition that they could be restarted. However a bunch of their components were salvagable so Bob had taken them apart in order to update himself. The result was that he could now navigate time and space with relative ease. Once he had upgraded himself, he decided to follow the electronic signal that S-2k had given off when he teleported them to Titan. Once here, he had discovered from a witness that they had smuggled aboard the Death-1. So, Bob had teleported to the last known co-ordinates of the Death-1. Aboard he had found the remains of a strange monster and lots of blood. Stealing some of the electronical components of the ship to integrate into his core system, he had then decided to teleport about 'The Anterprize' which had recently been reported to have picked up an escape-pod which he thought might be the missing one from the Death-1. And now here he was.

"Nice story, Bob" said Worm Mad when Bob had finished recounting his story.

"Yeah, cheers. But what do we do now?" replied Bob.

"We've got to go back to Earth. I've got to face my fears."

"Uh...okay. Just stand next to me."

"Wait a sec, what about S-2k and Dark Cloud?"

"S-2k's insane and whose Dark Cloud?"

"Dark Cloud's a Kakaka. And you can fix Squirmy, can't you?"

"Mmmft"

"Can't you?"

"I'll see what I can do..."

Bob was not the best mechanic in the galaxy. For a start, he took ten hours to fix S-2k. Secondly, when S-2k went to thank him - he told S-2k that he only had two weeks to live. This obviously caused a bit of a stir...

"TWO WEEKS!?!? What do you mean 'Two Weeks'?!?" shouted Squirminator.

"I mean two weeks. I had to destroy your Life-Capability ID Files in order to fix the problem resulting in this shortened life-span." Bob replied.

At this juncture, S-2k turned on Worm Mad.

"How could you let this idiot operate on me?" he asked.

"Hmmp... You'd think some worms would be grateful for having their sanity saved." Mad mumbled.

"Grateful?! Grateful?! Oh, thank you for reducing my life-span to two weeks! I am forever in your debt!" S-2k said sarcastically.

To cut a long story short, they all decided to go back to Earth, even Dark Cloud. It was worried that she would eat worms on the planet but she told them that she had been developing a great degree of self-control and would be able to survive as long as she could have other meats on the planet such as lamb and cow. S-2k hoped that someone would be able to help him on Earth. Mad just wanted to go home, no matter the consequences. So they all stood next to Bob and the machine whirred and whirred and soon they were all back on Earth.

And that was when the real trouble started...

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PART TWO

It had been almost 7 weeks since Worm Mad and S-2k travelled back in time (which really made it 6 weeks). It had been a decision that was caused more problems than it was worth. But they were glad to finally be back at Earth.

"This is the Wormonopolis Docking Station," came the voice from the Comm Unit.

"Hi, we'd like Docking Permission," said Squirminator2k. "The registration number of the ship if Oh-Two-Seven...."

"All traffic to and from Earth has been banned until further notice," said the voice. "We apologise for any inconvenience this may cause."

"WHAT?!" cried Mad. "Why?!"

"This is the Wormonopolis Docking Station. All traffic to and from Earth has been banned..."

"It's automated," said Squirminator.

"No!" sighed Bob, sarcastically. "And here was me thinking that was a *real* person, who *really* likes to repeat himself."

Mad muted Bob again. "Why the Hell is Earth being barricaded from the rest of the Solar System?" asked Mad. "What *happened* while we were away?"

"Hang on, I'll search the Internet," said Squirminator2k. He blinked his eyes rapidly as he downloaded the data from the 'Net which, in this age, spanned the entire Solar System. S-2k came with a standard 12.7 Gigabyte connection. By the standards of the computers of the day, this was pretty slow. "Apparently the World Government imposed the ban when several Vice-Governors, Vice-Vice-Governors and the President of Earth were all killed individually during the course of the past 6 weeks. Apparently all the evidence points to you, Worm Mad. You've been declared a Priority-Class Criminal, and you're Earth's Most Wanted."

"Oh dear."

"Furthermore," S-2k went on, "The Vice-President of Earth was instated as the President for the time being. He put the Earth under what has been called the 'Worm Mad Quarantine' two weeks ago and won't lift it until you have been caught. But scan results are available as well stating that you are not on the planet. People know this so why is the Barricade still in place?"

"This isn't about me," said Worm Mad. "This isn't about me at all."

"So... what *is* it about?" asked Bob.

There was an uncomfortable silence. "I don't know. But it certainly isn't about me. The VP must've planned this all... with the aid of Governor, I think."

"So why are you involved?" asked S2k.

"Because I'm the World Government's best Hitman," replied Mad. "They know I have morals whereas they don't... they probably knew that if I were to ever find out what was going on I'd try to put a stop to it."

"Oh dear," said Bob. "So... how do we get to the planet?"

"We can't dock," said S-2k. "And we certainly can't transport down using conventional methods because of the Barricade Field surrounding the planet."

"So why not use the Time Drive?" asked Mad. "It certainly isn't a conventional method and because it passes through the Temporal axis of the Universe as well as the spatial axis, it'd be easier to get down."

"An interesting idea," Said Bob, stroking the beard he never had with his one good hand. "Let's do it."

"Erm, excuse me?" said Dark Cloud. "I know I'm just the Monstrosity with a tendency to sort-of *eat people*, but wouldn't it make more sense to travel back 7 weeks and do what you wanted to do in the first place? It's just a suggestion."

"She has a point, Mad," said S-2k, nodding in agreement.

"Alrighty. Bob, fire up the Time Drive."

And it was then that the Crime-Squad materialised in front of them.

~

Prison stinks. Worm Mad can testify to the fact. They smell of at least five different odours, all of them unpleasant. It wasn't the fact that he had been arrested which had annoyed Worm Mad but the way in which his supposed friends had turned against him and been released. To top it all off, he'd just found out from an anonymous messenger that his ex-wife had married Ren Undermouth. So this was how the little squirt had thought that he'd get revenge - by marrying his ex. Well it worked - Mad was in a state

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of rage. Rage against the system, Rage against the Machine but most of all - rage against Undermouth. Dark thoughts clouded his mind - thoughts of escape and of killing Ren.

S-2k had other things on his mind. He only had four days left to live. He had to find somebody who could help him and quick. He could help Mad afterwards. For some reason, Bob had decided to tag along with him. It may well have been to frustrate the hell out of him though.

"I can't believe you betrayed a friend like that." he piped up.

"What are you talking about? You were the one who said 'Help! He's an insane killing machine and he's going to kill us! Save us! We're the good guys, he's EVIL!'" S-2k responded.

"Yes, but I'm not his friend!"

"Oh and I am?"

"So you're not his friend?"

"I didn't say I wasn't his friend!"

"So you are, then?"

"Look are you going to help me or not?"

Bob was quiet. For the time being. He had to think of some new ways to annoy S-2k. Truth be told, he didn't really like the guy.

Dark Cloud meanwhile was having the time of her life. Having sold her story to the intergalactic news crews across the planet, she had made herself rich, famous and had her own swimming pool...inside her own mansion! She was just relaxing in her bed when suddenly in the middle of the night, she woke with a start. There standing by her bed was what appeared to be Worm Mad's ghost.

"Yooooouuuuuuuu kiiiiiiiillleed meeeee...." it wailed.

"No, I didn't. You're not dead yet. You're still on trial" she pointed out.

"Ooooookkkkkay buuuut I'll dieeee ifff youuu doooooon't heeeelp meeeee..."

"Pfft...No chance."

"Don't you feel a pang of guilt, Dark Cloud. I saved your life. I was the only worm who ever did anything nice to you and you betray me. How could you?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Break me out...by whatever means necessary."

"Okay, done. Now can I get back to sleep?"

Dark Cloud would not sleep easy that night. For the next day, she was to risk it all for one worm.... Worm Mad.

CRASH!

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

"Not the Red Button!"

KER-ZAAAP!

"Who released the monkeys of doom?"

OOH-AHH-OOH-AH-AH-EEK-OH!

BOOM!

"Noooo! Spare me! Spare me!"

KA-BLAM!

WAZZA-WAZZA!

"I thought Elvis was dead...."

KA-CLICK!

Never has so much destruction been caused in a prison than there was caused in Wormopolis Yard on that day. Few survived. Those who had, never spoke of the incident but merely referred to it as 'the incident' from then on. The result however was that Worm Mad was free and he was not happy. The word on his lips was 'Vengeance' and with Dark Cloud's help, he would dispense it.

~

On the other side of Wormopolis, S-2k and Bob were digging through the old damaged Squirminator 2000 series units that had been left in the old PieNET Warehouses. Paired up, they'd checked over 3,000 individual S-2k units for salvageable Lifespan files. Unfortunately, none of them had any. Not files that weren't degraded or melted into the motherboard. S-2k had little over 3 days left before he went to the Big Binarium* in the Sky.

"Hey, Squirmy!" shouted Bob. "Get over here, will ya?"

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S-2k rushed over to the other side of the factory where Bob was using a Computer Terminal. "How did you get it to work?"

"Puh-lease," sighed Bob. "This Terminal is older than I am. Anyway, it's not what I did, it's what I found."

"Well, what did you find?" asked S-2k. The screen was full of binary. Hundred and thousands of Zeros and Ones. S-2k knew how to read Binary but the file on the screen was damaged, incomplete. The software required for him to restore damaged files didn't come As Standard with the S-2k model. Bob, however, did.

"It's regarding another Squirminator model," replied Bob. "A model researched and developed AFTER the 2000 series."

"Not possible. PieNET blew all their money developing my kind."

"Perhaps not. According to this, the Squirminator 5000 series was in Research and BETA stages when PieNET went bankrupt."

"An S-5k?"

"Yep."

S-2k thought long and hard. He could either continue his search for a replacement Lifespan file, or he could search for his Younger Brother who *might* potentially be able to help. He could spend his final moments looking for a long lost relative, or he could spend them looking for life. He considered these options for all of 1.57342 seconds.

"Where is he now?"

~

What are going to do tonight, Mad?" asked Dark Cloud.

"Tonight, we are going to get revenge on a Mr.Ren Undermouth..." replied Mad.

They were sitting in a secret underground bunker that had been left from the Kilburn wars of 2117. The bunker was the standard APJ class and as such tended to be a bit chilly. Luckily, they weren't going to be sitting around in it for long.

After some persuasion, S-2k had managed to find out from Bob that the S-5k model had been brought up by a rich family, which had ties with a leading PieNETofficial, for purposes unknown. They had decided on three plans of action. The first was to visit the manor-tech complex where the family resided and ask them if they could talk with S-5k. If this failed, Bob would amuse them with amusing anecdotes while S-2k slipped 5-k out of the back door. If all else failed, they would knock everybody out with tear gas.

Ren Undermouth opened to door to find Worm Mad and Dark Cloud standing on it. Dark Cloud was wearing ludicrously expensive clothes which indicated her newly-found superstar status. Worm Mad was wearing a prison uniform.

"Y...You're not gonna kill me...are you?" Ren mumbled nervously.

"No, Ren. That would be boring. We just wanted to stay for a few days. Meet the family. Annoy the hell out of you." Worm Mad grinned.

"I see. But I could contact the police."

"And be arrested yourself. No, I don't think so. Anyway, my girlfriend here will eat you if you try any funny stuff."

Dark Cloud smiled politely.

"You have a weird taste in women, Worm Mad." Ren said, shaking his head.

Unfortunately for Ren, his wife - Eliza - heard him and they had a row. Meanwhile Mad and Cloud made themselves at home. Everything was going according to plan.

~

"YOU lived HERE?" exclaimed Dark Cloud.

"You make that sound like a bad thing," said Worm Mad. After a while he added, "Admittedly, it is a bad thing but that's not the point."

"Also, a question."

"Fire away."

"Well... earlier you, kinda called me your girlfriend. Which was nice, don't get me wrong, but -"

"DC," said Worm Mad. "It was a figure of speech. I didn't mean to lead you on. I know I'm so devilishly attractive and sweet but you have to hold your urges. We're friends. We can never be more."

"I know," said Dark Cloud. "And I don't want to be anything more. I'm not dumb and I certainly am not blind! I was about to say that if you ever call me your girlfriend again I'll slice you into long thin strands and eat you like Venusian spaghetti. Besides, the only URGE I'm trying to hold regarding you is EATING you."

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"Er. Right. Okay. Sorry for the misunderstanding."
"I'm glad we cleared that up."
"Me too."

"Who the Devil are you?"

S-2k and Bob stared at the large fat worm standing in front of them. It was Mangood Seepcomb, the PieNET Official. Or, he'd once *been* a PieNET official. Now he looked as though he'd eaten his net weight in pies. He had a large moustache that put Bob in mind of a Walrus for some reason. He wore a red dressing gown made out of a silk and held a pipe in his right hand. He was, for all intents and purposes, a Toffee Nose.

"Yes," said S-2k. "Erm. We're...uh.....we're relatives of the Squirminator 5000. And...erm.... we were hoping we could..."

"What? Speak up, lad!" snapped Seepcomb. He opened his eyes enough to see who he was speaking to, and he couldn't believe his eyes. "My good Glod. It's...you're... you're a 2000 Series Squirminator, are you not?"

"Yes," replied S-2k. "Yes I am."

"Good Glod. I... I thought you'd all have rotted by now."

"Apparently he's the only survivor," said Bob.

"And a Chronowerx OBSESSION. My goodness!" S-2k and Bob looked at each other, bemused. Never had they seen someone so excited about a Cyberworm, especially a Budget model like Bob. "Come in, come in!" said Seepcomb, motioning them through the door. S-2k and Bob squirmed through the grand Hallway to a lounge that seemed as big as the Warehouse S-2k had been in. "Sit, sit! I insist! Would you like something to eat or drink perhaps? Oh, wait. You don't do either. Well, can I offer you some oil?"

"Black with none, thanks," said Bob.

"Splendid," said the Walrus Worm. He turned to face the stairway and shouted, "Martha! We have guests! Come and see who it is!"

"Is it those bloody Lever Twins again?!" came the fairly common sounding voice of Martha Seepcomb from up stairs. "I told 'em, I ain't payin' their sodding protection charge!"

"No, no, no! It's *good* visitors!" Mangood came back into the living room. "I'll just get Sam."

"Sam?" asked Bob.

"It's what we named the S-5k." He walked out into the Kitchen.

"Sam," said S-2k. "A nice, strong name. I bet he does loads of things like chopping wood, or training the Hounds."

"Sam?" said Bob. "Sounds like a brand of washing detergent."

"What brings you here?" asked Eliza. She was not happy with Mad's sudden appearance and certainly not happy with this "floozy" he'd brought with him. Not that she'd cared about him anymore. But it was her opinion that she cheapened the place.

Well, cheapened it more.

"Revenge," replied Worm Mad. "Brutal, honest revenge."

"Eh?" said Ren.

"The mess we got into, numbnuts," said Dark Cloud.

"And you are...?"

"Quiet!" shouted Mad. "I met her because of crap you put us through. The Squirminator 2000 unit wasn't quite as great as you'd said it was. His Time Circuitry didn't work and although we were sent back in time a week, we ended up on Titan. On the way home we encountered a ship full of man-eating women who, thank Glod, were almost entirely wiped out by a big nasty pointy beastly thing with very large protruding teeth."

"Really?" said Eliza, smiling. "Please, do continue."

"I was arrested by the Crime-Squad when I returned to Earth 7 weeks later..."

"6 weeks after the incident you put him in," added DC.

"...and I was busted out of jail a couple of hours ago by Dark Cloud here."

"Furthermore, I'm hungry."

"Well we have some Wackie Snax in the Fridge," said Ren.

"Oh, I don't eat Wackie Snax," said DC, smiling. "TO quote a certain sci-fi sitcom character, 'I like my food to move!'"

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"Oh."

"Yes."

"She's hungry."

"I'd noticed."

"Yes."

"What?"

"Wait, am I saying this or is it one of you?"

"Hard to tell, what with there being 4 of us and everything."

"Needless to say, I am hungry."

"Ah, that was Dark Cloud."

"No, it was me. I haven't eaten today."

"So... who was that?"

"Me!"

"Well *duh*. It normally helps when we know who is who. We've said 14 lines of dialogue without a 'Said So-and-so' at the end. Right. We'll do a register. I'm me."

"Well who's you?"

"Fine, I'm Worm Mad. Eliza?"

"Yep."

"Dark Cloud?"

"Yep."

"Ren?"

Silence.

"Ren?!"

"Er...yep."

"That wasn't Ren. Didn't sound like my Ren."

">burp<"

"You idiot! My husband!"

"You idiot! My plans for revenge!"

~

"But I was SOOOOOOO.... hungry" moaned Dark Cloud.

"No excuse." growled Eliza.

"Okay, I'm going to the newsagents. I'll be back in a minute." Worm Mad mumbled, leaving the two to fight amongst themselves. Worm Mad walked along the road wondering when his life would, if ever, become normal like everyone else's. Then he saw a huge horned shadow on the wall and he realised that to even think about that question was pointless. It wasn't going to happen.

Sam, Sam - he's da man - part machine, part worm - no kidding - man...

Sam looked like a worm. He smelt like a worm. He even acted like a worm. But Sam was no worm. He was a CyberWorm and was the most advanced machine ever built. Surprisingly, this didn't make the guy smug as many would expect.

"Hi bro - wassup?" were the first words that Sam spoke to S-2k.

"If you don't help me, I will die." were the first words that S-2k spoke to Sam.

"Um...excuse me...where's the bathroom?" were the first words Bob asked Sam.

"I...I..." stammered Worm Mad as he re-entered the apartment.

"You've what?" asked Dark Cloud, who had now got a black eye. Eliza had a cut jaw.

"I've seen...The Dlevil!"

"The Dlevil?!?"

"You know, the Anti-Kissed, Spamtan, Mr.Evil himself!"

"The Dlevil doesn't exist."

The door broke down and the Buffalo of Lies stepped through. For some reason, Worm Mad could hear an audience cheering and laughing inside his head.

"No...but I do." the Buffalo grinned.

To say that S-2k and Sam got on well would be to see the situation at face value. They talked, laughed, Sam repaired S-2k. All seemed well. But on the inside, the battle was just beginning -

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S-2k: Who does he think he is, younger - smarter - more um whatever.... advanced , advanced - yeah that's it. He thinks he's so good but he isn't, oh so he helped me out, so what? big deal, get over it, doesn't mean I have to like him. Oh, what a goody two-shoes, if I could just...

Sam: Who does he think he is? bursting in on my life, I never met him before, so what that he's my brother, so I have loads of others, doesn't mean that I invite them all in for repairs. He's gonna make my life hell, nobody knows that I'm a robot but he'll soon give the game away. What a loser, If I could just...

The winner of the battle at present however was unclear.

"What do you want?" asked Worm Mad, "None of us are darksiders."

"I want the one known as Ren Undermouth." spoke the horned one.

"Too late, she ate him." moaned Eliza.

"I know, that's why I'm here. I've come to collect his spirit..." grinned the evil.

"Good for you..." mumbled Dark Cloud.

"Well, I try... I hope he likes it on the Divine Plane. I find it quite dull." coughed the god of stench.

The Buffalo collected Ren's spirit then turned to the door. Then turned again and looked back at them.

"Sorry, nearly forgot...fortunes." he grumbled.

"Huh?" Mad asked.

"Every time that I interrupt someone's business, I have to predict their fortune to apologise. Don't worry, I'll make it quick... Eliza - your fortune lies in advertising, Dark Cloud - your future is to follow Mad for as far as it takes you, then follow your own destiny, Worm Mad - your destiny lies on another plane, not mine, not this one. Okay, you've been great....bye."

He slammed his door on the way out.

"Another plane...but how?" wondered Worm Mad.

"Uggggh....it stinks in here. Damn Buffalo!" Dark Cloud commented.

~

"So," said S-2k. "How did you end up here with this family?"

"Well Seepcomb, as you may be aware, was one of the Boardmembers at PieNET before they declared Bankruptcy," replied S-5k. "When the company closed it's doors, rather than leave me in a box they took me in and now I do all sorts of things. I'm a cook, I'm a Gardener, I'm..."

"Bored out of your skull?" ventured Bob. Silence. "No? Carry on."

"Now you mention it I am a little bored here, Dave."

"Bob."

"Whatever."

"Look," said S-2k. "Thanks for your help. I don't want to keep you or anything, so I'll just go."

Man, what an ass of a Cyberworm, thought S-5k. *He just drops in, Wham, Bam, Thanks for the Repairs, Sam and then out of the door.*

"Guess I can't keep you either, sounds like you have a lot to do an' all."

Is... is he patronising me?! thought S-2k. Is he joshing around, like my life isn't as important as him because I'm a few thousand numbers less impressive than he is? Well at least I'm not a BETA version. At least I'm not some unfinished Test Model. PieNET may not have had enough money left over to put me on the Market but at least I was finished you high-and-mighty jackass.

"Right."

"One question," said Bob. "If PieNET *didn't* blow all their money on developing the S-2k, and the blew it all on researching, developing and creating the S-5k BETA model... how does that work? I mean, what improvements do you have?"

"Well for one, I can read electronic thought patterns," replied S-5k, glaring at S-2k.

Oh, crap.

What had happened, what had *just happened in this room*, none of it made sense. The Foul Smelling Buffalo of Lies had walked in, stunk up the place in more ways than one, and left. It wasn't possible. It *wasn't possible*.

"Advertising!" said Eliza, snapping her fingers. "I knew it. Because I came up with this jingle for a soup the other day and -"

"Will you kindly shut your hole?" asked Dark Cloud. "Our destinies are a little more complex than 'Use Dolebeen to keep you clean', Liz."

"How did you know my jingle?!"

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"On another plane..." said Worm Mad. The words ran around his head a thousand times before he even began to grasp what they might have meant and even then it was a longshot. There were two possibilities. The first was that he was to die and travel to the Next World, to visit the Concrete Donkey and ask him what the point of It all is. The second, more believable possibility (which was still pretty dang farfetched) lay in his Great Grandfather's work.

Worm Mad's Great Grandfather had been noteworthy Scientists Quynder Mad and Sly Tlee Mad (don't ask - there was an accident and his Great Grandfather had been split into two separate physically-existing people with very different personalities). Together they'd developed a Matter Transporter long before anyone else. But their transporter worked on a different frequency and, as a result, pushed the users not to another place, but to another *plane*. Another dimension, potentially either an Alternate reality or some other world. No one had ever returned. No one really knew. The transporter had been boxed and stored with his dead Great Grandfather(s) in the Family Crypt on Venus. And as anyone who was alive knew it was virtually impossible to get a flight to Venus unless you were ridiculously wealthy.

Still, Worm Mad wasn't quite prepared to commit suicide to attempt to prove the Concrete Donkey theory. Somehow, he would have to get to Venus. And Dark Cloud was destined to follow him for as long as it took.

~

S-2k hadn't expected Bob to help him in his hour of need. After all, he had handed Worm Mad over to the crime-squad without batting an eyelid (perhaps due to the fact that he didn't have any) but he had expected him at least to take his side.

"Kick his silver little ass, Sammy!" showed that his loyalty was clearly not with S-2k.

"Can I be of any further assistance to you, bro?" Sam growled through gritted teeth. "I'm gonna shut you down."

S-2k probably shouldn't have got into a fight with his younger and deadlier brother but it was too late to back down even if that is what Seepcomb was trying to do, with no avail. It was time for the battle to begin.

"Let me get this straight... You think that we should steal a ship, fly to Venus, break into your Great Grandfather's tomb, take his Matter Transporter and teleport into some other dimension?" Dark Cloud reiterated.

"Yes" replied Worm Mad.

"You're nuts... Do you really think that I'm going to go along with this insane plan?"

"But the Buffalo said...."

"I don't care what the Buffalo said. It isn't going to happen. This time - you're on your own."

Two hours later, Worm Mad took off from the small launch pad in the ship he had stolen and into space. Dark Cloud who was sitting next to him, looked at him and snapped, "I'm really beginning to hate you, y'know?"

The room was a mess. Broken pieces of furniture, smashed technological devices, holes just about everywhere. The two CyberWorms involved in the battle were looking worse for wear. The synthetic skin that had previously covered nearly all of S-2k's face apart from his face was now in tatters. Silver shined through at more than a dozen places. Wires protruded menacingly. Sam wasn't looking much better. There were a number of holes in his realistic interior, showing through to the complex mechanics inside. He could not be taken for a regular worm anymore. One of his hands had been entirely disconnected from its socket. Both were exhausted. Both were thrown out. Bob tagged along, still supporting Sam who didn't seem to care anymore.

". "
". "
". "
". "
". "

"/Message143&32*/A/H - Received T/2/2/4: Read or Delete."

"Read%32"

"/Message is as follows: Ship stolen. Presumed by Space Pirates. Track it down. Kill all on-board.

Return to Docking Bay 3242(1a) on planet - Earth. Do not let ship enter co-ordinates [234.242.423.1] -

//Repeat// - Do not let ship enter co-ordinates [234.242.423.1] - If enters this space, it will be protected by fellow Pirates. Pursue ship immediately.///"

This document was created by Worm Mad and Squirminator2k so don't try to claim you made it. If you do we may have to bite the head off your chinchilla.

".."
"."
"..."

The proud ship, "Posion Espresso", was tearing through space at five hundred times the speed of sound. Its destination was a crypt on Venus. Its passengers - a celebrity and a convict. But this ship was being followed. The Masters of the Universe did not approve with theft...or pirates. They would bring the pair to justice using the only way they knew how. A quick yet painful death. At least they would as long as they could catch the Espresso. If not then they would have to destroy the sector that it was in. There would be no survivors.

~

This," said the S-5k, "Is all YOUR fault."

"MY fault?!" exclaimed S-2k. "I only wanted *help!* I'm the last of the S-2k units! If I die my Product Line dies with me."

"At least you *HAD* a product Line. I'm a BETA model..."

"And I'm from a different company altogether!" ventured Bob. He was ignored.

"Look, I'm alive now, and I thank you," said S-2k. "But... but you didn't have to be so bloody pompous."

"POMPUS?!" shouted 5k.

"Are you just going to keep shouting the last word or two of his sentences?" asked Bob. Once again, ignored.

"You with your high-and-mighty 'I'm such a better unit than you' attitude. You're... you're like the Doctor from Star Trek Voyager. Pompous git."

"What Trek Whatyger?"

"A television show of the late 20th Century," said Bob.

"SHUT UP!" shouted the two Squirminators. "Listen to me for a second," continued 2k. "I owe my existence not to PieNET, not to anyone but Ren Undermouth who had the courtesy of turning me on. I have a further debt to pay to someone called Worm Mad. Who... who knew that even though I was a hunk of ancient junk I was still useful. I was still, I don't know. Maybe it was all down to him being a desperate man. Who do you owe your existence to? A family who use you for menial tasks and chores."

"You're right," said 5k. "I...I don't know. I'm sorry we fought. After all, we are brothers."

"The only ones of your kind," said Bob.

"SO, what's out there in a world of possibility and adventure?" asked 5k.

"Apparently," said 2k, his eyes glowing with the display from the Universal News Website, "Pirates. Headed for Venus."

"Sounds nasty," said 5k. "So, what. We going to go and blow them up or something?"

"That," said 2k, "is one way of putting it."

No one knew much about the Masters of the Universe other than they originated from the centre of the Milky Way Galaxy and rarely ventured out. They were strict about law and punished all who opposed it. Furthermore, their Ancient History dated back billions of Terran years, and they lay claim to creating the Universe itself. Ancient prophecies told that the Masters of the Universe, commonly called the Motu, had the ability to destroy Reality itself and that one day, they would.

But right now they were more concerned with crushing the realities of the Posion Espresso.

"Incoming message," said Dark Cloud at the Helm.

"On screen," said Worm Mad. He grimaced - it'd been something he'd wanted to say since he was a little kid.

The message read:

STANDARD MESSAGE COMPRESSION METHOD: Decode 46734547A

Occupants of vessel "Posion Espresso". You are in direct violation of Terra Galaxy Law, stating that Theft of space vehicles of any kind, known as Grand Theft

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Astro, is a crime punishable by up to 50 Terran years imprisonment at Sigworm Gamma on Mars.

"Oh," said Worm Mad. "That sounds even *more* fun than Sigworm Beta." He read on...

...However, you will not be given the luxury. We, the Masters of the Universe, intend to destroy your vessel. Do not reply to this message. Do not attempt to attack our vessel. Do not pass go, do not collect \$£200.

You have been warned.

By receiving this message you have been automatically signed up to the Motu Mailing List. If you do not wish to receive further messages from the Motu, [Click here](#).

"Oh dear," said Dark Cloud.

And then they opened fire.

~

The ship never stood a chance. The mighty armoury of the Master of the Universe's guns tore the ship to shreds within an instant. Fortunately neither Worm Mad or Dark Cloud were aboard.

"Okay, I think I've logged onto the ship's co-ordinates." explained S-2k.

"Alright, let's go!" grinned Sam.

Within seconds, they had disappeared. They had however forgot to tell Bob the co-ordinates and he was therefore entirely on his own. Well...perhaps 'forgot' isn't the right word. Needless to say, he was fairly upset.

"*****ing *****! Leaving me to *****ing die! What do they *****ing think I am? Some *****ing teapot? I'll *****ing kill them! I'll kill them all!" Bob shouted then "Why the ****, can't I swear properly? Where the **** are these stars coming from?"

As I said, he wasn't too pleased.

Worm Mad and Dark Cloud were on the fastest ship in the galaxy, the "Holy Buffalo". They had been teleported onto it by the Buffalo of Lies shortly before their ship had been disintegrated.

"You do realise that aiding people in reaching the fortunes that you've foretold is technically cheating, don't you?" Mad pointed out once they were onboard. The Buffalo had told him that he could always put them back where they had been if he would prefer. Worm Mad hastily withdrew his complaint. The ship itself was surprisingly clean and tidy. The Buffalo explained that his odour was actually a biological condition and didn't have anything to do with his lifestyle that was infact super-hygienic. It seemed the rumours about him weren't true after all.

Meanwhile, The Masters of the Universe were enjoying a cup of tea along with some delightfully evil Rich Tea biscuits as they celebrated on a job well done.

"Good job"

"I agree"

"Well Done"

"We got em"

"But I can't help wondering..."

"Yes?"

"If we were a little harsh"

"I see what you mean"

"There may be complaints"

"Undoubtedly"

"It's even possible that we could be discovered"

"But if they found out who we really were..."

"It would be complicated..."

"Uncomfortable..."

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"It must never happen."

"But it's too late now."

"Unless..."

"Hmph?"

"Unless we try that replica machine that 872 made. We could put a replica of the ship and crew back where we found it. Nobody would know that anything had happened. Not even the replica's themselves as they would be virtually identical in every way."

"An interesting hypothesis."

"It could be done."

"I suppose we should do it then."

"Yes, I'll go do it now, shall I?"

"I think so."

"Done it?"

"Done."

"Good Job"

"I agree"

~

The Multiverse had a general rule. If something had coked up, it would either fix things, or make things even more coked up than they were before. More often than not it chose the latter. The Universe liked a good giggle. Unfortunately with the way current events were going, the Universe would be giggling from the other side of it's Plane of Reality.

Many believed the Multiverse would continue to expand as the many Universes contained within continued to expand themselves. But soon, the Multiverse would expand at a surprising rate. It would expand so fast...

...it would explode.

"What happened...?" asked Worm Mad.

"I don't know," replied Dark Cloud. "I was *certain* it had hit us."

"The ship isn't on Sensors anymore."

"What the... this doesn't make any sense," frowned Cloud.

Worm mad got up and moved to a different panel. "I'm gonna try and raise the defensive shields, incase they're just toying with us."

"An excellent suggestion mad with just two minor drawbacks," said Dark Cloud. "Number 1 - we don't have any Defensive Shields, nd Number 2 - We don't have any defensive shields. Now I realise that technically speaking this is one flaw but I thought it was such a big one, It was worth mentioning twice."

"Yes, yes, I see your point." and then, there was a noise.

"Bloody Hell," came a familiar voice from behind them. "It worked!"

"It did," replied a not-quite-as-familiar voice. Mad and CCloud turned around - it was S-2k and... someone else.

"You," frowned Mad.

"Yes, me," replied S-2k, grinning. "Did you miss me?"

"I don't know, does the mid-21st Century miss Jeremy Beadle?"

"Ah. Er."

"Exactly," said DC. "Look, we don't want you here. You left Mad to rot in prison."

"Hey," snapped 5k. "According to what I've heard, so did you, Maneater!"

"Who the Hell is this jerk?" asked Mad.

"It's the Squirminator 5000 BETA edition," replied 2k. "A one-of-a-kind, like myself."

"Look, we don't want you here, so -"

"And *look*," snapped 5k again, stepping towards Mad. "We travelled across SPACE and TIME to find you, help you, all because two-kay over there suggested it. We're here to help. If you don't *wantour* help, we can just go."

Mad stared at the Cyberworms. A thought ran through his head. It involved those two droids being melted down and turned into Back scratchers. But Cloud was thinking something else. She was thinking about eating them - they had organic components. "Y'know," said Mad. "I think you're right."

"We're right?"

"They're right?"

"That's right."

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S-2k and s-5k took Stations on the ship as it headed off to Venus.

Not one of them knew that Worm Mad and Dark Cloud weren't Worm Mad or Dark Cloud at all.

~

Meanwhile, aboard the 'Holy Buffalo'...

"I thought I felt something. Like a thousand voices crying out 'Die Nerd-Boy' then suddenly silenced" remarked Worm Mad.

"Uh-huh..." Dark Cloud replied then, to the Buffalo - "How long till we get there?"

"Just a few minutes. Don't Panic." yelled the Buffalo.

"I'm not panicking. Just curious."

"Panic Inn? Can we stop there on the way?" asked Worm Mad.

"Okay, now I'll panic."

Back on the replica 'Poison Espresso'...

"Are we nearly there yet?" asked the clone of Worm Mad.

"No" replied S-5k.

"How about now?"

"No"

"No, we're not near or no, we're no closer."

"Don't be stupid of course we're closer. I'm just detecting another ship heading for the same location."

"I see, a race."

"It's not a race."

"Pfft....Spoilsport."

To the Masters of the Universe...

"Do you think we did well."

"Very."

"What are we doing now?"

"We're waiting."

"Ah...What are we waiting for?"

"We're waiting for Godot."

And over all these events, something was watching...waiting...readying itself for a chance to strike.

This unnatural force refused to be tied down by the laws of the universe or of science. It wanted something. It wanted a chance to live....and when it had that chance - it would threaten the life of every being in existence....

Its name was Spot.

~

Venus was gone.

It wasn't gone in the sense of "The planet is missing" gone but in the sense that everything that had been on the surface of the planet - the colonies, the citizens and, more importantly, the Mad Family Crypt - had been almost grabbed off of the planet. It was almost as if they'd never existed.

"What," said Mad, "Happened to the colonies?!"

"I know not," replied the Buffalo. "They are not present on the planet."

"Wow," remarked Dark Cloud, the comment dripping with sarcasm. "Way to state the obvious, Oh Mighty One."

"Don't panic," said the Buffalo. "We'll find the Crypt. I have seen your destinies. You are both destined to find the Crypt, and Worm Mad is destined to travel to another Plane of Existence."

"Got it," said Worm Mad's clone.

"Got what?" enquired 5k.

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"The Mad Family Crypt," replied Mad. "It's not on Venus, though."

"Not on Venus? That's... how?" asked DC.

"I'm unsure," said 2k, "But it appears to be existing in a Tython's Bubble."

"A what?" asked Mad and DC simultaneously.

"A Tython's Bubble is a point that exists just beyond the boundaries of Reality," replied 2k.

"Theoretically, the bubble is connected to our Universe but at the same time is not. It's like a wart bulging out the side of the surface of Existence."

"The question remains, how did the Tython's Bubble get there?" asked 5k.

"I don't know," replied Mad. "It appears that the entire planet has been scooped up and put in this bubble. But it's certainly not a planet. It's more like an endless flat plain that happens to loop around on itself."

"Tython's Bubbles do this, in theory," added 5k.

"Of course," said DC. "So, how do we get in?" S-2k's Head Hatch opened and his Time Drive extended out of the top.

"Can the TD penetrate the bubble?" asked Mad.

"In theory," replied 5k. "Nothing should go wrong."

"And if it does?"

"We'll all be compacted into a space particle the size of Bob's mind," said S-2k. "Anyway, hop on."

"A what?"

"A Tython's Bubble," replied the Buffalo. "Apparently it was created a few lightyears from here. Someone, or something, moved the contents of the planet inside the bubble."

"What is a Tython's Bubble?" asked DC.

"A Tython's Bubble is a point that exists just beyond the boundaries of Reality," replied the Buffalo. "Theoretically, the bubble is connected to our Universe but at the same time is not. It's like a wart bulging out the side of the surface of Existence."

"The question remains, how did the Tython's Bubble get there?" asked Mad.

"Some energy sources have been known to create these Bubbles," said the Buffalo. "In any case I have the required Matter Transporter Technology to transport you both there from here."

"Right then, let's do it!" said DC energetically.

"I wish you good luck from here on," said the Buffalo, readying the Transporter. "I cannot assist you any further. Your destinies are your own. Glod speed."

And the pair vanished.

In the deepest core of Existence, Spot was brewing its power. It had the potential now to break through, to seep into the Multiverse causing destruction throughout the hundreds of thousands of millions of Universes in existence. It would buldge, and extend, and crush all life that had ever been created, that would ever *be* created.

But Spot was waiting for the right moment. He had a bubble to burst.

~

Crypt. Where those who have died go to sleep out the long eternity of nothingness that is non-existence. Where Worm Mad was to find the device that would allow him to escape. Escape from this world and into another. Did it matter that his happiness meant the destruction of the universe on this plane. Did anybody notice? But first, a step back...

Worm Mad appeared in a dark grey room. In the centre of the room was a large stone coffin with the words, 'Madus Preparatus Stupidadus' (The Mad must prepare for Stupidity). Something moved in the darkness. Mad turned.

"Oh, it's you..." Mad said relieved seeing that it was only Dark Cloud.

"Let's do this" replied DC.

They advanced on the coffin with determined resolve. All of a sudden, the clones appeared along with S-2k, S-5k and Bob.

"What the?" Mad yelled.

And then the roof caved in.

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The crypt was old. In fact it was so old that it had become rather unstable. So unstable that one loud noise, one shrill scream - and it would fall apart. Mad had made that noise and now they were all in peril.

When S-2k came back online, all he could make out was darkness. At first he guessed that his visual-control circuits had been damaged somehow but then he realised that it was because of the large boulder resting on his head. He removed it as quickly as he could and surveyed the scene. The floor was covered with rubble. The roof was virtually gone with a number of places in which the stars outside were clearly visible. Everybody else was unconscious, some were severely wounded. S-2k gathered them together as best he could and then moved to the coffin. He could tell that something was wrong, that their only chance for survival was with the device inside that stone monument. Using a crowbar tool from his Head-Hatch kit, S-2k cracked the box open. The box was empty aside from the Matter Transporter and a note.

Dear Family Member, Friend or Grave Robber.

*I am writing to inform you that the device contained here is **dangerous**. Not to the user but to life itself. Enshrined within it is an ancient power source that is known by some as Wormonyte. The device was not invented by me as many believe but was the last remaining item owned by the deceased King Spot Thedifference. The device was harmless while the King was alive but upon his death, his vengeful spirit was sealed within. Throughout time, its power has been growing within the Wormonyte and it has reached the stage where should the power source be destroyed, the releasing of Spot would destroy everything on this plane. I stole it and made demonstration of it but upon learning of its true significance have secured it in this monument so that it may never be damaged. I am buried in a secret location elsewhere in case you wondered. Anyway, you may use the device but only one person may be sent at a time and they have no way of returning for the device stays in this plane. The plane in which it sends the user is randomly generated but if used shortly after another user should send them to roughly the same plane. **WARNINGS:** 1. You may not transport more than one user at a time. 2. Do not remove the device from this crypt - the danger is too great. 3. Do not send more than six users within the course of one day as this may cause the device to break. Have fun!*

From Quynder Mad and Sly Tlee Mad.

~

"Have fun?!" yelled S-2k. "How can we have fun when this device can potentially unleash an evil such as the world as never seen before?"

"Um, I think the phrase I'm looking for rhymes with 'Clucking Bell'," said Worm Mad climbing out of a pile of rubble.

"Everyone alright?" asked 5k. He was sevred in half, trapped under some rocks. DC was currently trying to dig him out. "I'd help you, but it seems I'm not half the man I used to be."

"A one-of-a-kind, permanently damaged," sighed 2k. "Sorry, man."

"Salright," replied 5k. "My self-repair Nanobots will kick on at some point."

"Oh," replied 2k. "Good."

"Look, I've got another dimension to go to," said Worm Mad. "So if you don't mind..."

"Excuse me!" said Worm Mad. Well, another Worm Mad. "What in the name of Killer Aardvarks is going on here?"

"I've no idea..." replied 2k. "I lost the plot a month ago when Ben got Writer's Block."

"There's someone trapped under these rocks," said 5k pointing to another pile. The two Mads and DC lept over to pick up the rocks. They dug through, and found the body of another Dark Cloud. She'd been crushed in the fall.

"My Glod," said DC. "I..."

"It's..."

"Yes."

"Huh?"

"Not again..."

Spot observed. He laughed. Their stupidity amused him - how could they not grasp the obvious fact that two of them had been CLONED? How could they not grasp the further fact that the original version of one of the clones had been killed? It was a simple case of deduction. And he deducted that

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he would be free soon. Well, it was less of a deduction and more of an actually. He knew their destinies, his destiny, the destiny of all that existed. He would be free soon. It was like waiting for a Bus. He knew it would arrive, it was the wait that was killing him.

Then again he'd been trapped for years. A few minutes wouldn't hurt, right?

"So it's settled," said Mad. "The other Mad, DC and I will tuse the devfice. 2k and 5k will destroy it, and then find a way out of the Crypt. Agreed?"

"Agreed," replied the others.

"Good luck guys," said Sam stood upon his new tail.

"Thanks," replied Clone Mad.

"I'll miss you two," said DC. She was lying through ehr teeth, but it was the thought that counted.

"Well, see ya," waved S-2k. Worm Mad, Clone Mad and DC held the device together, and Worm mad flicked the switch.

Five minutes later, they were all dead.

~

Well, to say they were all dead is perhaps an overstatement.

Everybody on that plane was dead. Therefore Worm Mad, Dark Cloud and the Other Worm Mad weren't really dead. Though in a sense they were. S-2k and S-5k saw it all. They couldn't stop it. Their friends set on fire, burned, disapeared. Then the machine started tearing apart - then the room - then the galaxy. Finally, the universe was destroyed completely.

The problem was that the device did not transport physical matter but merely spirit-energy. Therefore it had to kill the users of it in order to transport their spirits which would then be dumped into their corresponding alternative-dimension bodies. The other thing about the device was that when the note had said '*Do not send more than six users within the course of one day as this may cause the device to break.*' - it had been a typo. It should have read 'Do not send more than two users'. Therefore when Mad, Dark Cloud and the Other Mad were destroyed and their spirit-matter transported across the dimensions, the device was destroyed with it. And when the device was destroyed, Spot was released...and the universe ended.

2k and 5k survived. They used a long-term transport utility in order to teleport them. Unfortunately as there was nowhere to teleport to - they were stuck between space and time. It was only a matter of minutes before they lost control and had to beam back into the galaxy - and when they did, they would die. Time was running out.

P A R T T H R E E

Worm Mad woke up. He was in a small glass room. Apart from himself the room seemed empty. To his horror there didn't appear to be any doors and the glass was clouded over so that he couldn't see through it.

"Where the heck am I?" Worm Mad shouted.

"I was thinking the same thing, actually" commented the other Worm Mad who was sharing the same body as him.

"Oh, this is just great. Not only am I in some glass box, I'm sharing my body with another version of me."

"I wonder where Dark Cloud's got to..."

~

Dark cloud opened her eyes and looked about her. *Well, she thought, at least I'm still alive.* Obviously she'd not gotten the memo.

She turned to face behind her and saw the Buffalo, stood on all fours. "Oh," she said. "It's you."

"Things have not gone completely as thou wouldst have liked it, have they?" said the Buffalo. "Not only have the Worm Mads been killed, the Universe as thou knoweth it has been destroyed. Dost thou know what this means? Eth?"

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"Well for one thing," said Dark Cloud, "It means I'm probably not going to have any lunch."

"Nay, said the Buffalo, raising a hoof. "The dark entity known as Lord Spot Thedifference, Dark Ruler of the Nth dimension, has escaped his confines within the device and has destroyed this plane of reality. This Universe is no longer part of the Multiverse."

"Multiwhat?"

"This Universe is but one of endless numbers. They coexist within oneanother, sharing the same point in space-time but unaware of eachother's existence. This Universe is part of the Multiverse no longer."

"Ah."

"Indeed."

"So," said Dark Cloud, wllaking towards the Buffalo, "What happens now? Where are we?"

"We are in a point existing outside of the space-time continuum. We are in a place known as Trilodgyk*."

"Try Logic?"

"Trilodgyk was a story, passed down from Ancient man by Grunt of Mouth. Over the years it evolved into a myth. From that myth, it was born, created in the Nth dimension by the imagination of the masses."

"So... what *is* it?"

"The place that existed *before* the Big Bang. The place from where the Big Bang was initiated."

"This is getting a bit too RPG for my liking," said Dark Cloud.

"Spot Thedifference didn't instantly destroy the Universe," continued the Buffalo. "The Universe was destroyed over a period of several millenia. Spot enslaved the populous of the Universe, driving them all into lives of pain and suffering."

"Sounds like an episode of Emmerdale."

"He then granted them hope. He showed Mercy. The people rejoiced - it seemed like his reign of terror was over. Far from it - it was a false show of kindness and he crushed the Universe with a thought before moving on to the next one."

"Sounds a big... melodramatic."

"Worm Mad and Clone Mad died," continued the Buffalo. "But they did not *die* die. They exist somewhere... I am uncertain where. As for you, your destiny transends theirs. I pulled you away from the bubble ebfore anything drastic could happen. Soon, the Big Bang will happen here in Trilodgyk. You have a choice. You can die here, becoming part of the Universe itself. Or, you can Shift through the mellenia Spot enslaved all, and try to stop him."

"Hmm," thought DC. "Certain death, or slower death?"

"An interesting choice," said the Buffalo. "Not one I expect you to make quickly. Take your time."

~

Worm Mad was bored. No, Worm Mad was bored. Well, they were both bored. They had been stuck in the glass box now for a decade and hadn't aged or suffered any hunger, thirst, etc but neither had anything else happened. The only companion Worm Mad had was another version of himself who lived inside his body along with him. The result wasn't very entertaining.

"100 green bottles sitting on the wall, 100 green..."

"I am so sick of that song."

"Come on, I've been counting down from 2000, you've got to let me finish now!"

"Just stop it, okay?"

"Alright, tetchy!"

"I am not tetchy!"

"You are too. All this time alone has driven you into an insane, tetchy wreck."

"Take that back!"

"T-E-T-C-H-Y"

"Right! You asked for it!"

Worm Mad punched himself in the face for the two thousandth time. It had no effect.

"Damned Universe."

All of a sudden Dark Cloud appeared in the box with them.

"DARK CLOUD!" they yelled in unison (although it sounded like one voice as they were both in the same body)

"Look, we've got to get out of here. No time to explain. You have to take my hand and come with me through the Dimensional Shift." she protested.

"It's a trap."

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"Shut up."

"I'm just as entitled to speak as..."

"Okay, DC, Beam us up."

Worm Mad took Dark Cloud's hand.

And then everything went swirly...

~

Meanwhile, in other parts of existence, the Hate of fate was moving other pieces around the board of life. They weren't particularly interesting pieces. They weren't even fully *painted* pieces, to be precise. They were cheap, moulded plastic pieces you'd expect to find in a large box with the words "Mouse Trap" scrawled across the top.

It was a Spaceship. The SS Parantoe. In an alternate reality, where events that could have been had happened, an alternate version of Bob was commanding a crew of the Best Earth had to offer. Most of them were worms but a few, a small few, were Cyberworms. They weren't your run-of-the-mill Cyberworms either - they'd had the minds of Earth's brightest downloaded into them. They were SUPER-intelligent. Unfortunately, they were running on Windows CE for Cyberworms which meant they weren't quite as smart *or* reliable as their real life counterparts, but they got the job done.

In this Universe, Bob was known as Commander Iron Dashing, Space Adventurer. It was a name he'd given himself (would *you* name *your* child "Iron Dashing"?). He was smart, reliable, witty and gosh-darned Handsome. This was mainly due to a series of expensive Exterior Upgrades.

"Sir," said one of the Helmsmen. "We're getting some kind of sub-space fluxuation."

"Hmm..." Iron glanced briefly at the control panel. "Looks to me like a Class 19G Inter-dimensional rift. Nothing serious. Arm a Quantum Torp and fire it at the anomaly, that'll seal it up."

"Sir," said another Helmsman. "Something is emerging... two worm-shaped objects."

"When they emerge, beam them to the brig."

All things considered, 2k and 5k would rather be in Philledelphia.

For starters, they'd teleported outside of the space-time continuum to escape destruction. They'd had a matter of moments to push themselves back into a reality which *no longer existed* at which point, they'd be crushed to death. The alternative option and a brilliant piece of thinking on 5k's part, was reversing the polarity of the teleporter, pushing them into *another* reality adjacent to their own. The result, they were now prisoners aboard a ship which was named after a funny language.

Still, it beats front-row tickets to a Linkin Park concert.

The Brig doors hissed open and in walked Iron Dashing. The light glinted mightily off of his proud chin, permanently blinding a security officer.

"Well," said Iron. "Seems like a pair of old Squirminator model Cyberworms. a 2k and a 5k."

"Yep," replied 2k. "That we are."

"I'm sure you have an explanation for all of this?"

"Well..."

~

S-2k shuffled from side to side. He was in a rather awkward situation. How was he going to explain that they were both from another dimension?

"We're from another dimension." stated 5k.

"Uh...no we're not, we're um..." stammered 2k, desperately trying to regain control of the conversation.

"No Problem!" grinned Iron "We get worms dropping in from other dimensions all the time!"

"Y...You do?"

"What's with the stammer, boy? Cat got your tounge?" he laughed uncontrollably as if he'd just said the funniest thing in the history of time.

"I'm really beginning to hate you..."

"No Problem! We all have different moral standards - if yours happens to be lower than mine then hate away!"

"Hate...Rising...Rising..."

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Meanwhile Worm Mad was beginning to realise that maybe he shouldn't have just accepted Dark Cloud's 'help' so readily. Especially when it became clear that it was not *his* Dark Cloud. For a start, she was stupidly chirpy...

"It's a H.A.P.P.Y - HAPPY DAY!"

She hadn't heard of S-2k.

"A Cyberworm? Ooh, sounds cool - Very Sci-Fi!"

And she didn't eat meat.

"That's...that's just sick! That you could accuse me of eating other worms... I'm a vegetarian! Oh well, H.A.P.P..."

If that wasn't bad enough, the universe that Mad had now entered seemed far worse than the previous one. This one was made of jelly.

Worm Mad hated jelly. Nouveau-Cloud (as Mad called her) on the other hand, loved it.

"Jelly is so GOOD for you. It makes me HA -HA HAPPY!"

"Don't you think that eating the fabric of the universe is a little stupid?" Worm Mad had responded.

"Oooh, maybe you're right. You're very clever! But I L-O-V-E Jelly...and Jelly's what I shall eat!"

"You're weird."

"W-E-I-R-D, I'm so Weird and HAPPY!"

"SHUT UP!"

"That's not very nice. You seem a bit upset. You know what you need?"

"What?"

"JELLY!"

"Grrr..."

Meanwhile, in another dimension, Spot Thedifference was bored. He was so bored that he had eaten his own celestial foot. He was now busy consulting a Magic-8 Ball about what he should do.

"Should I create more destruction?"

"Outlook - Hazy"

"Less?"

"Outlook - Good"

Spot Thedifference crushed the Magic-8 Ball into dust. What did it know about his policy anyway? It had worked for him so far. But then again he would do anything for just five minutes worth of entertainment. Which was probably why Dark Cloud saved the universe.

~

Dark Cloud.

The name rang a bell, a very quiet bell right at the back of her head. It seemed like this was the name of someone she was supposed to know. Unfortunately for her, it was knowledge that had been pushed out of her grasp. Knowledge that had been stolen from her.

She stood up and examined her surroundings. Not only did she not know who she was, but she didn't know where she was either. This comforted her, which in turn scared her. And it was then she realised she had something stuck to her head. It was a yellow post-it note.

Hi, Dark Cloud!
Save Universe, crush Spot.
Use The Rod of Nihm.
xxx - Buffalo

It made less sense than a Japanese VCR instruction manual. The... Nihm Rod? Save Universe? The note had confused her. And it was then she'd realised... she was hungry.

"Do you get this feeling," said S-2k, "That we've been in limbo for a couple of months, doing nothing whatsoever? Sitting in the Inbox of existence waiting for the Creators to continue writing the Story that is our lives?"

"Shut up," said S-5k. 2k couldn't blame him - he had other things on his mind. Together they'd decided, just randomly off of the top of their heads, that being Put to Death was by far the third worst thing that'd happened to them since this whole incident had started. Iron Dashing, Captain of the SS

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Perantoe, had decided that them being dimension-travellers was unnatural and thus they would be killed. Death by Black And Decker. He'd totally ignored the fact that they were travelling space in a spaceship the size of a small country was hardly natural in it's own, let alone the fact that they themselves were talking worms. Some people have a logic all of their own.

"So," said 5k. "What's death like?"

"Don't ask *me*," said 2k. "Oh, wait. Yes, do ask me. But why? We've both been dead."

"Ah, yes," said 5k. "Memories."

"Stop!" came a female voice.

"What in Green Tarnation...?" said Iron Dashing as he watched his second in command walk into the Room What Where The Killings Is Done. From 2k and 5k's point of view, she was a female wearing a standard Space Fleet Core Corps Crew uniform. But from the point of view of every other male in the room, she was drop-dead gorgeous. Her downpoint was that she was a Cyberworm, devoid of emotion and unable to cook microwave popcorn. And her name was 8t88.

"You cannot put these Cyberworms to death," said 8t88. "They have done nothing wrong."

"Nothing wrong?! They have breached the dimensional barriers, transversed the Einstein-Thatotherguy bridge, and crossed into a different reality! They're witches, I tells ye!"

"We're travelling space in a spaceship the size of a small country which is hardly natural -"

"Sorry to interrupt your Saving Our Lives and all," said 5k, "But that bit was covered a paragraph or two ago."

"Right," replied 8t88. "That said, or typed, You must release them. We must find a way to push them into their own reality."

"Sounds good," said Iron. "Release the prisoners!"

"Myyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy Baloney has a first name, is P-I-N-K-Y, my baloney has a second name, it's B-I-N-K-Y..."

"Do you ever shut up?!" shouted Worm Mad.

"Erm... not as far as I know, no!" replied Noveau. She continued singing.

Then she stopped, something Worm Mad and perhaps historians of the future would attribute to having a metal pike rammed in her throat. Worm Mad had to get out of this reality and either back into the Bubble, which was *far* more enjoyable, or to find a way to destroy Spot and save the Multiverse.

~

"You know when he said 'release the prisoners', I didn't expect them to throw us out of the airlock." commented S2k who was getting fed up with floating in space.

"Really?" responded S5k "It was the first thing I thought of. Shortly followed by 'Ahhhhhhh!'"

"Well on the plus side, it looks like that spaceship is going to beam us aboard." grinned S2k indicating a large metal spaceship that was heading towards them.

"Uh, that's not a spaceship, 2k."

"Then what..."

S2k's cry was cut short by a sharp clunk, followed by a zap and after a short pause - pow. It was at this point that his circuits burnt out and everything went a strange shade of grey.

Elsewhere, Dark Cloud was looking for some food. As she surveyed the post-apocalyptic landscape for something worth eating she noticed a dark swirling thing. As she looked at it, it got closer and as it got closer she realised that it wasn't a dark swirling thing at all. It was a dark swirling entity. The eyes were a dead giveaway, the grin didn't help matters. The entity looked down at Dark Cloud and spoke.

"What dost thou want?" it asked her in a manner that did little to determine whether its motives were evil or good.

"Some food would be good." she replied quickly, then as an afterthought "Oh, and if you've got a 'Rod of Nihm' on you then that would probably end up being useful."

The entity grinned a broad hearty grin. It then spat an apple out at Dark Cloud who wasn't too impressed but ate it all the same.

"So, you seek the Rod of Nihm, eh?" it laughed.

"What's so funny, swirly?"

"Well, nothing really except that I am the Rod of Nihm!"

"You're not a rod!"

"No, it's my name. Rod. My name is Rod and I was born on a planet called Nihm. Hence Rod of

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Nihm."

"I see..." muttered Dark Cloud, even more confused. "Well have you ever heard of a Spot then?" The entity's face clouded over (not an easy task) and it let out a deep groan, "Yes" it cried "He's my father"

Worm Mad was feeling a little low. He had searched Nouveau's body for any dimension travelling device but had found nothing. Also she had somehow managed to heal herself shortly after he had done this and was now in the middle of a tirade on the history of her dimension.

"After the jelly wars of 65, there was a mass uprising and there was a split between the populous. One half supported the jelly...and the other...the spikes of doom."

Worm Mad tried to block himself off from this incredibly odd and uninteresting social history with a brief argument with himself on the subject of cauliflowers but all of a sudden something piqued his interest.

"it was all over. Eliza Mad then went and opened the doors of truth. But the jelly melted in the..."

"What did you just say?" he barked at her.

"But the jelly melted in the..." she repeated.

"No, no. Before that."

"Eliza Mad then went and opened the doors of truth."

"I'm Worm Mad."

"And I'm Eliza Mad, what of it?"

"No, you're Nouveau Cloud. You're an alternative Cloud not an alternative Eliza."

"I don't care what you think. I'm Eliza Mad. Your wife. Why else would I have rescued you?"

Worm Mad sat back into a pile of sticky jelly. None of this made sense. None of it made any sense. Why was Nouveau talking so sanely all of a sudden? Why wasn't she dead anyway? Why did she claim to be Eliza and what were the doors of truth? He hated to admit it but it looked like he was going to have to listen to Nouveau's history for a little while longer.

~

The Doors of Truth. For eons they had held shut the gateway to the world of Nihm, keeping it's non-jelliness away from those who prefer the green and occasionally orange goo. But Eliza Mad, who sought to defy the Council of Jelly Babies, opened the gates. It was said that but a single entity could escape before the gates were shut. It floated, zipping past her, around her, through her. And then it vanished, as if ripping a hole in the air and passing through to somewhere else.

It said one word.

"Rod..."

Eliza was left brain-damaged as a result.

"An interesting story," said Worm Mad. "I especially liked the italics."

"Yes," replied Eliza. "That and it ties in very well with the rest of the plot for this ridiculous story. Which makes me H-A-P-P..."

"Y, yes, indeedy."

"So, now, what? Erm?"

Worm Mad thought. Eliza somehow held the key to transversing the inter-dimensional barrier. She'd done it before, but she had no devices that allowed her to do it. Worm Mad had a theory. It involved cutting up the alternate version of his ex-wife.

Like most man-made mechanical devices, S-2k had been designed to believe in a Silicon Heaven. It made them more willing to serve man, and meant that should they be ordered to their deaths they would be a little less brassed off about it. It'd been said that someone stole this idea from a sci-fi sitcom that used to run on the BBCW back in the day. This was never confirmed.

The fact that S-2k was now simply *non-existent* pretty much squirted mud in the eye of the person who created this programming.

S-2k and 5-2k were lifeless, floating aimlessly in space. And they would have stayed there, had a small Cargo vessel not found them first.

"Spot The difference is your father..." thought Dark Cloud aloud.

"What...?" said Rod with shock. "No! No, it's impossible!!! Oh, wait a minute. Yes. Sorry, my mistake. Do go on."

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"How is this possible?" asked DC.

"Well Spot and I had a bit of a falling out and I ran away from home. I would've gotten caught, had this gateway not been opened. For a few brief moments I was in a World made up of some suspicious green and orange goop. Then I passed through into another reality. Probably this one."

"Wow," said DC. "Well now that's sorted, we have to go and stop Spot. Y'comin'?"

"Why the Hell not? I mean, Whyest the helleth not? Erm."

~

"Ow, that tickles!" exclaimed Eliza as Worm Mad opened up her head with a shard of spike that he had found lying around.

"Don't you mind that I'm cutting your head open?" he asked irritably.

"Nope"

"I didn't think so."

Worm Mad felt ill. He was having to grope around an alternative version of his ex-wife's brain while she, fully conscious, sung the Mission Impossible themetune. It was messy. He was about to let her heal herself when he saw it. A small silver tube lodged deep within the brain, he shut his eyes and plunged his hand in.

"Ooooooh! Cold hands!" Eliza remarked.

Spot Thedifference wasn't surprised to see his son appear. After all, it was a small universe. He was surprised to see that he had brought a female with him. He guessed his son was going up in the world.

"YO! Whose the Chick?" he yelled grinning.

"Shut up, Dad! You're embarrassing me!" Rod replied.

Spot Thedifference smiled. His son was the same troublesome youth that he had been all of those years ago. It made Spot wonder if he'd do better settling down than ruling the universe in the tyrannical way that he did. Maybe he could hand the family business over to his son and write his memoirs. It all sounded so perfect. Too perfect. Spot knew that it would never happen. It would never happen as his son had just released a powerful electro-magnetic surge in his direction. His grin started to disintegrate as he began to fall apart at the seams. His son had killed him. "Why?" was all he managed to say.

"Why?"

The last face that S-2k expected to see when he was re-booted was Mad's. It had been too long. Mad looked older, but it was the same Worm Mad. Worm Mad laughed as S-2k blinked in surprise.

"I'm sorry it took so long to get you back online. A lot of things have happened recently and I'm not much of a technical expert." Worm Mad apologised.

"How...long?" S-2k asked.

"Twenty-three years." Mad muttered solemnly "Twenty-three years."

PART FOUR

Twenty-three years before...

It'd been a year since the saving of the Universe, and Worm Mad had been back in his own reality for a good 8 months. He'd not seen any of the others - Dark Cloud, S-2k or S-5k. He'd assumed they'd been killed, destroyed either as a result of the dimensional shifting, or as a result of killing Spot.

Nevertheless, he was home again.

This was not necessarily good news.

The dimensions had shifted into what they had been before, the timeline had reverted to how it had always been, and Worm Mad had landed back in his apartment a man convicted of a murder he didn't commit. And then there had been the trial.

Eliza had been kind. For once in her life she'd shown compassion and caring for Worm Mad. She'd said how kind he'd been to her when they were married. She'd said that he'd never hurt a fly. Then she'd remembered he was a Government Official Assassin, and the defence went out of the window.

Worm Mad was given the death sentence.

He'd been placed in the Waiting List, a large warehouse full of Temporal Distortion Chambers containing prisoner after prisoner, freezing them in time until their sentence was to be carried out. The

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Waiting List had been a year long when the Trial had started, and 6 months long once he'd been convicted.

And now there was only a month left, although Worm Mad was unaware of this. As far as he knew, he'd just stepped into the TDC. And when he stepped out he would be unaware of the passage of time. He would instead be lead to the Death Chamber, where he would be killed.

All in all, it was not the best time of his life.

Meanwhile, several thousand years into the future into a dimension that didn't exist, a Cargo ship had just found itself two Metal Dealies...

~

Robots weren't Watsa Mattir's cup of tea. Sure, they were good for selling but for any other purpose he had always found them quite pointless. He also didn't like the way that his friend Needin called them 'Dealies', it made them sound like toys. Then again, Needin called everything that you could sell a 'Dealie', there were plastic Dealies, wooden Dealies, even paper dealies. Thankfully, Watsa was sure that these droids could be sold before Needin indulged in any of his more annoying naming techniques. After all, a new buyer was in town.

Elsewhere, in prison, Worm Mad was puzzling over something that had bothered him since he had got home. Why had Eliza Mad in the alternative dimension looked like Dark Cloud? He had worked his way down to three possible alternatives - 1. That Eliza and Dark were the same person (but this made no sense) 2. That they were related in some way and Dark Cloud had just got Eliza's name in the other universe. or 3. In the alternative universe, Dark Cloud had stolen Eliza's name. Maybe Worm Mad was thinking about this too much but then he was in prison. He didn't have much else to do but think. Other things that he thought about was why his cell was so big but his bed was so small and whether 10,000 monkeys writing at 10,000 typewriters could write a Shakespeare play if they had the time to do it. Some would say Mad thought too much, others would say that he didn't think enough. It was all a matter of opinion, whichever way you looked at it.

"Pleasure doing business with you" muttered the stranger as he took the two robots off Mattir's hands.

"Sure" replied Mattir.

"Well see you around"

"Yeah"

Then without even moving from the spot he was stood in, the stranger and the two robots vanished. Watsa decided he was going crazy and went to bed early.

~

It would be safe to say that in the world of the future transdimensional visitors were common place - especially when you were as far into the future as S-2k and 5-2k were. However the fact that people would travel between dimensions simply to go shopping seemed absurd. But yes, it's alarming to hear that a *Ford Hovra Specific* is a few dollarpounds cheaper in Dimension 23535673 than it is in Dimension 23535672. It's this kind of craziness that caused Inter-dimensional shopping between realities, and it's this kind of craziness that resulted in the setting up of the Interdimensional Trade Association (or several million of them, if *Star Trek* has taught you anything).

Needless to say, Ponder Civic was well aware that travelling to Dimension 94120873 would be the single point in space-time where he would find two cyberworms for a few dollarpounds cheaper than had he gone to, say, Dimension 00013524 where Watsa Mattir's alternate would be selling them for a few hundred buckquid more than he should've got. Especially seeing as the units were complete Right-Offs.

Ponder had done his checking. The newer one, the one with some wonderfully creative denting on the side panels, the one with S5000-p embedded in it's cranial unit, was useless save for spare parts. The other one, however, could be salvaged - especially if parts were Frankensteined from the 5000 unit. In his small wooden hut in the middle of the Otacon Desert in dimension 14833780, Ponder Civic began repairing the Cyberworm.

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A few thousand years into the past, in another dimension, Worm Mad had not long been out of the Waiting List. He was being prepped for execution and he knew from experience that being dead was not as fun as so many major religions such as Christianity and Oprahism had made it out to believe (there had been a buffalo involved, for a start). Still, something comforted him in the knowledge that in a few minutes he would cease to be. He would suffer a painless death, being vaporised into nothingness. He wouldn't even realise the switch had been pressed. He smiled. Soon his troubles would be over, and while a few questions would remain unanswered he wouldn't be too concerned about those in about 6 minutes.

However the Universe generally finds ways around making things nice 'n' tidy. And so it had done. A few moments before the switched had even been unveiled to the studio audience, another Worm Mad materialised in the centre of the room, beat up the two guards, tipped Dale Winton's Head-in-a-jar onto the floor, freed the original Worm mad, and disappeared. While it had made for an interesting 12 seconds of television, it left a studio audience and, indeed, an entire galaxy without the scheduled execution.

And so, they ran a repeat of "Millennium".

"What the...?"

"Ah yes, the questions," said the other Worm Mad, who had helpfully given himself a nametag saying, "Hi! I'm **Worm Mad from the Future**" to help speed things along. He wasn't from that far into the future - perhaps a few hours, a couple of days at the most.

"...Who are you?" asked the original.

"Erm..." said the future copy from the future, being not of the present, pointing frantically at his nametag.

"So... why with the rescue? And what's going on?" asked Mad. "This is turning into a weird episode of *Red Dwarf* by my reckoning..."

"Perhaps *I* can answer this," came a voice. And from the shadows stepped a heavily modified S-2k.

"This," said Mad, "It *definitely* getting weird."

"So it goes like this..."

~

I got upgraded and fixed by this Ponder Civic fellow who then asked me to become his servant. Thankfully, I escaped using the time and space travelling kit that had carelessly been included as part of my upgrades. Anyway, Civic had transported me to the same dimension as you were in and after finding out you were to be killed, I started a long-winded legal battle to get you out of prison. I succeeded but unfortunately you were already dead by this time. Therefore, I decided to travel back in time to clear your name before you were executed. Unfortunately I was told that the documents which I'd brought with me didn't become valid until after your execution. So I got the Worm Mad from the future to help me rescue you from your execution. This held off your execution and allowed me to get my documents verified thus making the execution invalid. I then allowed the Worm Mad from the future to continue with his life (where he would be pardoned and freed) while sending the Worm Mad I'd rescued back to aid in the rescue of you. Now that you've been rescued, I can get the documents verified and this Worm Mad can carry on with his life while you travel back in time and save the past version of you who is due to be executed. Understand?

"No" muttered Worm Mad.

"Never Mind," grinned S-2k "Just do as I say and you'll be fine."

Not long after this, Worm Mad went back in time rescued his past-self then returned to the present (or the past-self's future) and was pardoned and released. Worm Mad was pleased with his pardon which included a lot of money and a 'Elite-Class ID' to the city. The Elite-Class ID allowed Mad to access any area in the city, no questions asked. Within a few days he had brought himself a mansion in SQD-132 Area and was already getting invites to parties with the country's elite. In between these various festivities, he tried to find out what info he could about the Dark-Eliza connection. He had little success at first. It seemed a lot of personal info was kept security-protected. Eventually however with the help of a hacker who he had met at a party in Area SQB-100, he found what he was looking for.

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Eliza Dolittel (previously Eliza Mad, Eliza Undermouth)

Info: Eliza is the elder daughter of Sampson Dolittel. Eliza's twin sister (not identical) was kidnapped by the mutant-worm race of Kakakakaililla shortly after she was born. Eliza is ignorant of this fact. She went to Ultra-Tech First School and was awarded...

Dark Cloud (previously ?)

Info: Of the mutant-worm tribe of Kakakakaililla. It is evident from her appearance that she is not a native Kakakakaililla and it is expected she was kidnapped by the tribe during one of their routine intergalactic raids at an early age. She is currently living in Wormopolis in SQR-202 and her mental-status is secure. However prior to...

Further research showed the pair shared the same birthday. Worm Mad leant back in his chair. There was no denying it. Eliza and Dark were sisters. Maybe it was time for a family reunion.

~

The problem was, there had already *been* a family reunion. And it had not been very successful. Worm Mad remembered it vividly, despite how long ago it'd happened. He frowned. Something *had* to be done, none the less. Something. The plot was becoming thinner than a Swedish supermodel. And it seemed like it was going to continue going on this way. Perhaps the story was coming to an end.

Or perhaps something much, much worse was about to unfold.

PART FIVE

The Timeline was more dented, ripped and torn than a Citroen 2CV that'd been entered in the German Demolition Derby. And there was one entity in the entire Multiverse who was determined to fix it. He would set things straight, fix everything. S-2k would never meet Worm Mad. Dark Cloud would die on the Prison Ship. Eliza Mad would marry that thief guy. Bob would remain inactive.

And none of these events would come to pass. He would fix it all.

Or his name wasn't QUIRINOR 5.

~

The thing is, there was no guarantee that doing this would fix the timeline. After all, just because S-2k wouldn't meet Worm Mad, he might still mess the timeline up in some way. As might Worm Mad who had shown that he could survive on his own without any trouble. Also QUIRINOR 5 had been told by the high council of QUIRINOR that the matters of time were not his concern and should he interfere in them, he would be severely punished. However QUIRINOR 5 was an idiot so he decided to put his plan into action all the same. The first thing to do was to take a jump back in time.

Worm Mad sighed, loaded up his Phase-Compression Rifle, and took aim through the window. His hand started to press against the trigger as a bead of sweat began to build upon his forehead. Suddenly, just as Mad was about to shoot, a creaking noise disturbed Short. He looked up and the game was lost. Worm Mad just had time to escape the building as the security-alarm was switched. Nintendo had survived while Mad had failed his first assignment in over ten years.

As he flew back towards his home, Mad tried to understand what had gone wrong. What or who had disturbed Short? He had checked every nook and cranny of Short's offices before undertaking the assignment, everything should have gone as planned. But there was something else that disturbed Mad, a kind of feeling that told him that Short was supposed to be dead. That he was not supposed to be in this situation he was in now. That somehow, for some reason, time had been damaged. Worm Mad had too much on his mind that night, all his problems rushed to the front of his brain and he lost his concentration. Had it not been for this, he would have noticed the jet black Space Cab that was coming straight for him. He didn't.

The first thing he felt was a sharp jolt through his body and tail. Then he lost consciousness.

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~

“Worm Mad!”

A voice was calling him. Pulling him back to the land of the living.

“Worm Mad!”

Louder, more desperate. Whoever it was seemed in quite a severe state of panic.

“Mad!”

Worm Mad opened an eye, then the other. Standing by his bedside was his ex-wife, Eliza. She looked like she had been crying, he couldn't think why. “Hi...” he managed to croak out. His throat was sore and numb though and it ended up sounding like “Hrmmph”

“Oh, thank the gods!” Eliza smiled “I thought you'd gone and died on me.”

“What happened?” he asked.

“You were involved in an accident. A Space Cab hit you. You're lucky to be alive.”

“What are you doing here? I thought you'd be happy I was in hospital.”

Eliza wiped a tear from her eye and looked away.

“How can you say that?”

“We're divorced, remember? We don't like each other...”

“I was just thinking...that maybe...we could...”

“No! You're history! *Old History!*”

“If you'd just listen...”

“No. You listen!” Worm Mad sat up, causing his back a considerable amount of discomfort. “There's not going to be any happy fairy-tale ending for the two of us! We're not even supposed to be here! I don't know why the hell it was but when that space-jet crashed into me, my eyes were opened. I saw everything! The past, the present, the future that was, the future that is. *Everything!* And I realised that it's not the adventures I want, it's the friendship, the camaraderie. And I've lost all that and I can never get back what I lost. There's no undo button in life.”

“Look, what are you talking about? The Governor said he wanted to talk to you and congratulate you for all your good work for the government. He'll be here soon. There's no time for games.”

“Screw the Governor! This isn't a game, Eliza. I never did any good work for the government! I killed for them! They control your life from the cradle to the grave and when they're done with you, will you see a paycheque? Or the barrel of a gun? Because I know what the answer is, Eliza. Well, I've had it! Screw the government because I'm leaving this planet and don't stand here waiting – because I'm never coming back! I'm going to try to find my friends, if they still exist and I'm going to leave with them... and I'll move to Ganymede. Because you know what's good about Ganymede?... The government there don't convict their citizens for doing their job! They don't allow your relatives to be taken by the bloody Kakakakaililla, Eliza! And true, they may be kind of slow moving, they may not have as many adventures as us but who cares? Because we all know those so-called ‘fun action packed adventures’ only lead to one place. An early grave. Now, I know you can't understand any of this but I don't expect you to. The point is that an entity messed with time, prevented me from doing what I should have done. And that entity has no doubt been dealt with. He's gone. But the damage isn't. Oh, sure you can change time but if you do... nothing can put it back to the way it was. And that distresses me, because all though I didn't have much in that other timeline, at least I had friends.”

Worm Mad pulled himself out of bed, ignoring the expression on his ex-wife's face. “Goodbye, Eliza. Tell the Governor I quit.” was all he said. Then with his eyes set on the door in front of him, he began to move. Not just to the door. But his future... and his destiny.

EPILOGUE: “Ganymede”

Miles about miles of vegetation. But not just anybody's vegetation. His vegetation. A tractor roared away in the distance and Worm Mad smiled to himself. Maybe it was Dark Cloud who would run up holding some newly discovered form of fruit. Or Squirminator with some anecdote that would leave them all in stitches.

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But he knew it would be neither of them. Dark Cloud had not even recognised him when he had finally managed to track her down. She had not wanted to leave to Ganymede with him. He had told her about her sister, Eliza, and Dark Cloud had said she would visit her. She had then told him to leave.

As for Squirminator, he was broken, perhaps permanently so. Ren had shoved a spanner down the droids' throat in frustration before Mad found him. He had no idea how to fix his old friend and he was now rusting in the garage, awaiting repair or death with silent inaction.

Mad sighed for his old friends. If only he'd had more time. If only time had not decided to give him a kick in the proverbial crotch. In reality, the tractor was automatic. He felt alone without a friend in the world.

"Hey, nerd-boy!" came a voice behind him.

He turned around to see Bob standing upright with a comical (and unusual) grin on his face.

"Bob? I thought I disconnected you." Worm Mad replied.

"Well, looks like I reconnected meself, dunnit?"

"Why are you talking like that?"

"Like wot?"

"Like that!"

"I dunno wot ya mean. I always talk like this."

"Wait a second – how did you reconnect yourself? That's impossible."

"Nah, standard procedure. All ChronoFish models have it."

"ChronoFish? Don't you mean Chronowerx?"

"Chronowerx? Never eard of em."

"You haven't?"

"Nope."

"But then..." Worm Mad thought about things. How everything seemed so strange, so different. This feeling wasn't new... he had felt it even before the time-alteration. In fact, it had started shortly after he had re-entered his own dimension...but in that case, maybe... "This isn't my dimension at all!"

Squirminator2k appeared in a flash of light.

"There you are, we've been searching everywhere for you." He smiled.

"Squirminator2k?" Worm Mad grinned "My Squirminator2k?"

"I hope so, otherwise that celery stick from the last dimension we visited has a lot of explaining to do."

"So what's been happening with you guys?"

"I'll tell you on the way home. Dark Cloud brought a great little mansion on Pluto. Enough rooms for all of us and we can rent out the other rooms at a profit."

"Let's go then."

And so Worm Mad and S-2k disappeared, back to their own dimension and indeed their own time.

"Bastards" remarked Bob.

The End

Written by and starring Worm Mad and Squirminator2k.

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No gun-toting chimpanzees were hurt during the making of this story.