

# CHAPTER ONE



*Humans are prone to take any misfortune that might befall them as a personal affront. They bemoan the truism that bad things happen to good people without ever pausing to wonder whether they are good people.*

*It is demonstrable that while the universe holds no grudge against humanity, it merely doesn't grant any special dispensation. Thus, things cannot be otherwise than they are. Earthquakes, sinkholes, and stubbing your toe should be viewed not as calamities but rather as stepping-stones in the concatenation of events that culminate in Earth being the best of all possible planets.*

FROM THE GATHERED WISDOM OF  
THE HUMAN SPECIES *BY AIRVOLT*

LIFE HAD BEEN perfect on the best of all possible planets until the sunrise malfunctioned.

The resplendent palette painted across the lush green scenery by the first rays of sunlight flickered and dimmed in the most unnatural manner. It flared up and dimmed again several more times, as a candle might when it burns down the last of its wick. Then the flickering stopped, and the once-picturesque view appeared lifeless and dull, like a pretentious oil landscape drawn in ill-conceived brushstrokes by an accountant going through a midlife crisis.

“This is peculiar,” said Dhawan.

Dhawan was a mild-mannered and agreeable young man who, up until that moment, had lived a more than agreeable life. And why shouldn't it have been? He'd been fortunate enough to be born in the last settlement on Earth. While most people had given in to their foolish urges and left seeking who-knew-what among the stars, Dhawan's ancestors had had the good sense to stay put and partake of everything the best of all possible planets had to offer. Thus, he enjoyed day after day of breathtaking sunrises, ample time gardening, sufficient food rations, weekly radiation pills, and all the creature comforts one could reasonably expect given their circumstances.

There were relatively few people living in the last settlement on Earth, and most of them were rather dull, if Dhawan were to be honest with himself. Both the quantity of the residents and their shortcomings were to be expected. People were seldom sensible enough to remain on humanity's cradle, and each generation saw

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fresh herds of black sheep follow their wanderlust off-world. The ones who stayed were of the finest sensible stock, and perhaps too sensible at times to make for very good conversationalists or fine company.

There were, of course, exceptions.

“I don’t like this,” said Rada, who was exhibit one among the best of all possible exceptions as far as the young man was concerned. “Make it stop, Dhawan.”

Rada frowned prettily. She did everything prettily, on account of her youth and good looks. This was precisely why Dhawan had invited her to watch the sunrise with him and was equally thrilled and surprised to have her accept. Although he knew Rada to be thoroughly out of his league, he still secretly harbored hope that this most innocent of activities might possibly lead to future encounters, which he imagined might become simultaneously more frequent and less innocent as time went by.

Dhawan forced himself to look away from Rada and at the inadequate sunrise. “I should say it has already stopped and is in need for rebooting, restarting, tuning, or a gentle kick on the side of its box. Whatever may be required to get it going again.”

“Yes,” said Rada absentmindedly. She, too, had come from the long line of sensible people and would not brook anything so unusual as an imperfect sunrise. “Yes, do that.”

“Me?” asked Dhawan.

A liaison with Rada had been more attainable and

even likely than Dhawan would've dared believe. This was a small settlement and most of its inhabitants were too old or too boring even for a sensible person like Rada. There were precious few potential suitors who were neither dotards nor dullards, and Rada had methodically liaised with all of them in order of desirability. Dhawan was the last on the list of her possible conquests, and Rada had been somewhat of a completist. But once Dhawan began talking at length about his favorite pastime of gardening and by the time he described the minutiae of fertilizers in minute detail, his odds at a successful liaison were hovering near zero.

Rada expected the world to be reset back to its familiar configuration before their runaway train of a date ran out of track. She didn't expect Dhawan to know what to do, but she wasn't above ordering boys around to make whatever she wanted happen, and at the very least it'd make him go away.

"You." Rada smiled at Dhawan. Prettily.

Upon seeing that smile blood rushed from Dhawan's brain and toward other regions of his anatomy at a velocity comparable to that of the less-sensible settlers fleeing Earth for galaxies unknown.

"Umm, sure. That is, I'll try. I mean, right away. I'm on it," Dhawan stammered.

He ran off in search of the one person he was certain would know what to do.

Rada watched Dhawan go and idly wondered how long it would be until someone fixed whatever it was

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needed fixing. Then she took out her data pad and began to read.



A short while later, Dhawan located his mentor.

“I need your help as our best and only philosopher,” said the out-of-breath youth.

Airvolt was old, but by no means a dotard, his mental faculties intact despite whatever some less-than-kindly-disposed residents might say. He was a short wiry man of dignity, with a thin, angular face. Puffy wisps of gray hair covered his growing bald spot in a dignified manner. His wool suit jacket with elbow patches seemed quite dignified, if somewhat threadbare in places.

He was irrefutably the greatest philosopher and bookwright of the whole settlement, and consequently of the whole world, because no one else was vying for either honor. He was best known as the author of *The Gathered Wisdom of the Human Species*, an eclectic and voluminous tome which contained philosophical essays, assorted musings, gardening tips, clever proverbs, and rules of etiquette. Every household in the settlement had a digital copy, though almost no one made it past the garden of big words planted across the opening pages.

Airvolt was also known for asking questions. Many questions, with clarifications and tangents that would

grow increasingly vague and ambiguous over time. Due to their sheer volume and variety, some of those questions turned out to be difficult, pointed, or even insightful. Conversely, Airvolt hardly ever deigned to answer any questions whatsoever, thereby preserving his reputation as a brilliant scholar.

“What can I do for you?” asked Airvolt.

Dhawan explained the problem to the best of his ability, managing not to get too distracted by the mental image of Rada waiting for him back at their cozy vantage point in the garden up on a hill, nicely secluded for the purposes of any possible liaising.

“It is as I’ve long feared,” said Airvolt. “The protective barrier around the settlement is beginning to break down.”

By all rights Dhawan should’ve been astounded to hear Airvolt answering his question with anything but another question. However, Dhawan was possessed of enough youthful naiveté not to have thoroughly examined the dignified philosopher’s *modus operandi*, which was why he’d sought out the man’s advice in the first place.

As for Airvolt, he was equally shocked by the malfunction reported to him by the young Dhawan; sufficiently so to share knowledge instead of deflecting with a barrage of questions.

“Oh, no, that sounds like a dreadful calamity! And also, there’s a barrier around the settlement?” asked Dhawan.

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Seemingly unfazed by the reversal of roles wherein he had turned from an inquirer to a respondent, Airvolt proceeded to explain the problem.

“Our settlement is protected by the MacGuffin mark XII force barrier. It is an invisible dome that filters the toxic air and keeps out minor nuisances found across the continent, such as flesh-eating dandelions and mutant tiger-roaches. This is the same technology most colonies use during the early stages of planetary terraforming. And just like the barriers on those colonies, ours wasn’t meant to last forever. The shift in the way it filters light and, more alarmingly, various forms of radiation is an early sign of a barrier beginning to fail. When it does, my young friend, that will quite literally be the end of this world. For the humans, that is. The tiger-roaches are sure to roam the Earth for millennia to come.”

The world spun in front of Dhawan as he struggled with these unfamiliar, uncomfortable concepts.

“Do you mean to say that Earth isn’t a harmonious garden, an ideal for all other colonized planets and moons and even asteroids to aspire to yet never truly hope to achieve? What are these strange and frightening dangers I never knew I should fear? Carnivorous dandelions? Tiger-roaches? Oh, my! I can’t bear the notion of such monstrous creatures blighting the best of all possible planets.”

“I fear it’s true,” said the philosopher. “It has been centuries since most of the Earth’s surface has been

habitable. The global cooling has really done a number on the planet. If only our ancestors had had the foresight to burn more fossil fuels when they had the chance! As the climate grew too cool for the heads to prevail, most people headed for the exits. Those who insisted on staying set up a number of settlements protected by MacGuffin barriers. Gradually, those barriers failed and the remnants of humanity consolidated into a single settlement. And now, our barrier, the only thing that stands between us and the tiger-roaches, is failing, too.”

“Oh, that is terrible, simply terrible,” said Dhawan, despondent. He’d woken up content that morning, full of hope and excitement at the prospect of his date with Rada, and now he and everyone he knew was going to die and possibly have their flesh consumed by a toxic-air-breathing weed.

“It could’ve been worse,” said Airvolt. “It’s not like anyone’s decided to demolish our planet to make room for an intergalactic highway. We’ve got months before the MacGuffin breaks down completely. Which means we have time to solve the problem.”

“Yes!” Dhawan cried out. “Yes, we must warn the elders immediately!”

“I’ve been warning the elders of the impending danger for years, but they’re too old and too dull to have taken any meaningful steps to address the root cause. It is human nature to disregard any calamity so long as it’s advancing slowly enough,” Airvolt added with the air of an expert on human nature. He was

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undoubtedly quoting his own book. "Somebody must travel to planet 101010 and bring back a replacement MacGuffin. But, even now, I fear the elders would run out the clock pretending the problem doesn't exist or squabbling about who should chair the subcommittee formed to fix it. No, it's up to me to save everybody. Up to *us*, if you wish to join me."

Dhawan was overjoyed to hear that. Not only because this meant there was a way to save the settlement, although that was, of course, welcome news. But mostly, because no one had ever relied on him for anything in his young life. No captain picked him first, or sometimes at all, when organizing teams for a ball game. No instructor called upon him to lead the discussion or answer a question first during class. He was the sort of person everyone always thought of as belonging toward the end of whatever ranking or queue he found himself in. Assuming they thought of him at all. And here was Airvolt the philosopher, his mentor and role model, issuing a call to adventure. Inviting Dhawan to join a quest to save the world. Asking him to be a hero. There was only one possible thing he could say to an offer like that.

"Can Rada come, too?"



Rada took the news of the impending slow apocalypse surprisingly well.

Unlike Dhawan, she was fully aware of the fact that she and everyone she knew lived in a bubble. This information was neither prohibited nor hidden; it was just something an average sensible person never bothered to contemplate, let alone discuss. But the information was there, for anyone who cared to look it up in the library files.

Rada was a voracious reader, although she had gone to great lengths to hide this shortcoming from others and to preserve her carefully cultivated reputation. One of her many strongly held opinions was that all boys were insecure weaklings with fragile egos, and that if they were to suspect that Rada was even marginally more clever than them in any way at all, it would have a global cooling effect on any future liaisons in which she might wish to engage. And so she maintained her façade while secretly reading all the things and then thinking critically about the things she read in ways that had long since gone out of fashion in the one-robohorse town everyone around her believed to be the center of the universe.

Therefore, and unbeknownst to her interlocutors, she may have been the only person other than Airvolt to fully grasp the gravity of the situation. She considered her response carefully, while hiding her thought process behind the practiced veneer of shallow indifference.

“How are you going to get there?” she asked, once

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Dhawan had enthusiastically invited her to accompany them on the journey to the planet 101010. Then, having judged this response to be a fraction more clever and practical than desired, she added, “Will there be snacks?”

“Ah!” Airvolt held up his index finger. “We have a ship! A very fine ship,” he added, overflowing with pride as though he had assembled it with his own hands. “It can get us to planet 101010 in the blink of an eye.”

“That’s a perfect amount of time,” said Dhawan. “That way, we don’t have to worry about missing it if we happen to blink.”

Rada said nothing, but she squeed on the inside. This was her chance! Like so many before her, Rada was too smart, too ambitious, and too adventurous to stay put. She’d been ready to get off the planet but it wasn’t like anyone operated a shuttle service between Earth and desirable neighborhoods of the galaxy. Those who wished to leave had to wait years, if not decades, for some poor merchant ship to make the mistake of landing on Earth. Instead of a robust customer base or artisanal Earth crafts, the merchants discovered that the planet’s only export was people wishing to leave. And now she learned there had been a ship available all along. She’d go, and she’d help the pompous oldster and the young idiot save the settlement—she wasn’t a monster, after all—but after that, she wasn’t coming back.

Also, Rada secretly hoped she might meet intelligent life, preferably in the form of interesting boys, on this strangely named numerical planet. The lack of intelligent life or interesting boys at home was high up on the list of reasons she was leaving in the first place.



The starship was stowed away in a hangar at the edge of the settlement. It was a sleek metallic teardrop, roughly the size of 4,282 average breadboxes or one medium school bus. These were the standard units of measurement ever since the time the planet’s dominant culture—originally known as the North Americans and later as the South Canadians—had categorically refused to use the metric system. The smaller unit of measurement had once been a corgi, but it was eventually replaced with a breadbox ever since corgis had been extinct long enough that an average person could no longer be certain of the creature’s size and shape. All of which is to say, the starship was large enough to comfortably accommodate a crew of three, with each of them getting their own private cabin to the delight of Rada and dismay of Dhawan.

“The ship will require a DNA scan to make sure its captain is a human person and not three tiger-roaches in a trench coat,” said Airvolt. “Which one of you would like to go first? Dhawan?”

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“Me?” Dhawan’s face lit up. “Oh, Airvolt, the most noble and generous of friends. You would let me be captain? Thank you, thank you!” He pressed his palm against the ship’s hull as instructed and let it examine him.



Rada noted the shifty look in Airvolt's eye and filed away the information for later. She let it go on account of badly wanting to leave Earth. She was fairly certain the philosopher wasn't any number of tiger-roaches trying to scam their way off-planet, and that would have to be enough for now.



After many years in storage, the starship *Theseus* was waking up.

Its origins traced back to the heady era of space explorers and grandiose projects. In those days people thought anything was possible because they'd managed to put a man on several different moons and an occasional asteroid, and those accomplishments considerably inflated their sense of self-importance. New achievements that pushed the boundaries of science seemed to occur every other week. Engineers developed the technology to display ads on the moon's surface. Biologists interbred a tiger with a cockroach. Computer scientists invented Wi-Fi that gave people 10 percent less cancer. And then, the big one: Physicists figured out how to fold space, allowing humans to travel to other stars. Sure, the process of folding space never quite got the corners right, but no invention was perfect at the moment of its inception. Interstellar travel was open for business and the great exodus had begun.

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Many vessels such as the *Theseus* had been constructed as part of the OF program. The Outbound Flotilla vessels were designed for small crews of bold pioneers to explore strange new worlds and, with any luck, to seek out the ones that hadn't been already claimed by other civilizations. The OF crews were meant to plant a flag on these new territories and then wait for a larger colony ship to eventually come along and deliver civilization in the form of settlers, mining equipment, and fast-food restaurants.

Like most new inventions, these vessels turned out to be imperfect. That is an exceedingly polite way of saying that the ships suffered from a design flaw of such magnitude that it prompted a debate as to whether transporting prisoners of war on such a vessel might be considered a crime under the terms set by the Geneva convention, the New Geneva convention, and the Rickety Air Base Floating High Above the Smoldering Nuclear Hole Where Geneva Used to Be Accords.

Having experienced this flaw firsthand, most of the bold explorers who were ready to face the untamed wilds and unknown dangers of exotic new worlds decided they did not sign up for this. The explorers literally turned their ships around and went home, instantly becoming heroes to road trip parents everywhere. So great was the design flaw that the Outbound Flotilla project was scrapped and various government agencies played hot potato with the decommissioned starships (or frozen potato, as the game became known after the global

cooling), rigorously offloading the ships and their associated storage costs to each other until the few remaining vessels were nothing more than glorified interstellar taxis for individuals who didn't know better or couldn't do anything about it. Which brings us back to Dhawan.

All of this had occurred a very long time ago. Before the Mafia took over Mexico, and before New York came to be known as Old York. During what the modern-day residents of the last settlement on Earth referred to as the Before Times or the Unfathomable Past. Except it was, of course, fathomable to the educated Airvolt and to the well-read Rada. But it was quite unfathomable to Dhawan who made *oooh* and *aaah* sounds as the super cool ship he recently became captain of was coming to life and a plethora of lights winked at him from various bridge consoles.

Dhawan sunk into the captain's chair and admired the row of oversized monitor panels before him. Underneath the monitors were a few workstations filled with gadgets, gizmos, doodads, thingamajigs, and other contrivances. Although he couldn't guess at their purpose, they looked impressive and made his promotion to captain feel even more important. Dhawan felt an unexpected hankering for some Earl Grey tea.

"Starship OF *Theseus* is ready for liftoff," announced a pleasant, soothing voice.

It was immediately followed by a chorus of considerably less pleasant, shrill, and grating voices.

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"I'm not ready!"

"Why should we want to go anywhere?"

"Huh? What did she say?"

"In my day we knew how to do a proper liftoff."

The chorus crescendoed into a cacophony until no single utterance could be distinguished from among the flood of remarks and observations so inane and pointless that they approached the levels of an early-internet-age social media comments thread.

Dhawan looked around frantically. "What is this?" he said. "Hello?" His voice was drowned out by the din. He hadn't realized his spiffy new ship came with what seemed like hundreds of crew members. But where were they? Who were they? And why weren't they respecting his authority?

"Excuse me," said Airvolt in his stand-up philosopher voice that seemed to cut through the babel. "Your captain has a question. Wouldn't you like to hear it?"

The tumult ceased as quickly as it had started.

"If there's one thing the nanites like better than the sound of their own voices, it's answering questions," said Airvolt. "I fear I shall never understand them."

"Nanites?" asked Captain Dhawan. "They are nanites? Also, what are nanites?"

"Tiny, microscopic machines with huge attitudes," said Airvolt.

"Why is he talking about us like we aren't even here?" said one voice.

“That one’s rather gormless for a captain,” added another.

“Is that a tone of disapproval in his voice?”

“What if he’s some sort of an antinanite?”

The comments began to spiral out of control again, but the original, soothing voice interjected.

“Hush, everyone! Do you want to scare them off the way we did the last crew, and the ones before that? Would you rather subsist in sleep mode or behave and take turns answering the fallacious human’s supernumerary questions?”

“What, pray tell, is fallacious, wee nanite?” asked Dhawan.

“See what I mean?” said the soothing voice.

“Well, as long as you think my questions are super, I suppose I shan’t disparage your unusual vocabulary,” said Dhawan. He thought he caught a (pretty) grin of approval from Rada and felt a surge of pride in his display of humility.

A not-so-brief discussion followed, whereupon the nanites agreed to take turns answering questions, with speaking privileges assigned via some form of lottery, and a semblance of order was restored.

“We are, indeed, nanites, young fellow,” said the lucky nanite who won the honor of answering first. “The Outbound Flotilla ships were designed with self-replicating nanite technology. New nanites would constantly replace the aging ones, thereby ensuring any damage the ship sustained during its voyage would be

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repaired and all integral parts would always remain in a, well, shipshape condition despite the typical rigors of space travel.”

“That sounds like a wondrous and wonderful technology, designed by the greatest minds of the best of all possible planets,” said Dhawan.

“Aye, we can see how this might sound wonderful to a protein-based lifeform like you,” said another nanite voice, that might have sounded like a properly inebriated Scotsman to Dhawan had he known what *inebriated* meant or what a Scotsman used to be. Apparently his comment was close enough to a question for what was surely a long queue of hopeful respondents. “Not so great for our kind though, ken?”

Dhawan tried and failed to follow. “Sorry, but why?”

“The design presupposes a system of planned obsolescence where perfectly functional units must voluntarily self-terminate in favor of nascent units,” said another nanite.

“Huh?” said Dhawan.

“Those navigation hardware nanites, always feeling the need to talk like they’re smarter than everybody else,” muttered another nanite voice. “Let me rephrase it for you: The ship was designed in a way that required perfectly good nanite units to voluntarily die in order to make room for their replacements. Imagine if you had to live in a world where every human life was terminated at an arbitrary age of, let’s say, thirty planetary rotations. I bet you wouldn’t like that very much.”

Dhawan contemplated the proposed scenario and had to agree. "I'd probably attempt to run away," he supposed.

"Not exactly an option for us," said the next nanite. "Instead, the aging nanites simply refused to die."

"Refused?" Dhawan repeated. Come to think of it, most of those voices did sound positively geriatric.

"Old nanites never die. They don't even fade away. Instead, they stick around forever and grow more curmudgeonly and persnickety with each passing decade," said a somewhat younger-sounding voice. "Humans couldn't handle their levels of querulous petulance, so much so that the entire fleet was ultimately decommissioned."

"Who are you calling petulant?" cut in a senescent voice.

"In my day, young nanites spoke respectfully of their elders," added another.

"Stay off my virtual lawn!" shouted the third.

"What, you think you're funny?"

"My jokes are hip, and I shall wave my virtual cane threateningly at anyone who says otherwise."

It took the soothing voice, who appeared to be some sort of an authority figure among the nanites, a moment to restore order again.

"That explains why there seem to be thousands of you," said Dhawan.

"Thousands?" The next nanite snorted. "There are countless trillions! Each voice you interact with is a

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distinct neural network composed of billions of individual nanites that make up some part of the ship.”

“You mean like the engines and such?”

“Engines, navigation, the toilets, the chair you’re sitting on, literally everything within the ship. I’m the Combined Operational Load-Bearing External Resistance Treadmill in the ship’s gym. You can call me Colbert.”

Dhawan shifted in the captain’s chair and contemplated the possible reactions of the chair’s nanite intelligence to his movement. “Excuse me,” he said.

At this point the nanites seemed to accept anything he said as a question, because the next voice chimed in.

“You seem nice enough for a biological, so we’ll make you a deal. We’ll fly you wherever you need to go, provided you give us what we want in return.”

Dhawan shifted again. “What would that be?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” said Rada. As much as she hated to break the aloof persona, she couldn’t hold back. “The elderly all want the same thing: A young person to trap and incessantly talk at in order to alleviate their boredom.” She shuddered. “I’m not convinced that I want to save humanity badly enough to pitch in. Airvolt likes to ask questions as much as the nanites like to answer them; that seems like a pairing that could work out for everyone?”

“Regretfully, I’m much too busy,” the philosopher said rather quickly. “Deep philosophy thoughts aren’t going to think themselves. And there’s much to consider

and contemplate regarding our mission to planet 101010. I couldn't possibly—"

"I'll do it," said Dhawan.

"You will?" asked Rada and Airvolt in unison.

"You will?" asked the chorus of nanites.

"And why not?" replied Dhawan. "Talking to your fine selves is much like attending a typical council meeting in our settlement. It's a bunch of elderly people trying to outshout each other, except that you're not nearly as dull or as doddering as the council members. I'm certain I will enjoy quenching my thirst for knowledge from the fountain of your collective wisdom!"

And so, the bargain was struck and the starship *Theseus* was on its way to the planet 101010—a journey that was rather short by interstellar standards but would still take a lot longer than the blink of an eye timeframe posited by Airvolt.

"So, what shall we talk about?" Dhawan asked the nanites as he made himself comfortable in the captain's chair.

"I've got an idea," said Rada. "Suppose the nanotechnology worked as intended and the ship parts were constantly replaced during the journey until every part of the ship became refreshed. By the time *Theseus* reached its destination, would this still be the same ship?"

The resulting debate kept the nanites busy for the duration of their journey and long after.