

The Race

by Adam Short

"Come on ladies and gents, we've got a fine race for you here," Gastrix Lagrange bellowed, "Western spiral arm of the Milky Way, little blue planet, lots of humans. Will they go extinct, or won't they?"

The betting shop was a multi-dimensional metastable rip in spacetime, held in place by who knew what galactic forces. Lagrange and his brother Oscar had moved in mere nanoseconds after it formed, and turned the place into their own cosmic gambling den. Beings from all corners of the universe came to wager on matters large or small.

"Population in the billions, passable early technology, plenty of scope for improvement in the near future, but..." Gastrix wagged a wily finger, "they've polluted the environment to within decades of total collapse, and they're perpetually at war. Ladies and gentlemen, these creatures have fission weapons! Anything can happen."

"So what's the race?" asked a cloud of green vapour, swirling among the tables and chairs and somehow holding a betting slip.

"I'm glad you asked. Human technology is passable, not great, by our standards, but passable. Ladies and gentlemen, I'll give you ten to one that they manage to invent their way out of this mess!" Gastrix implored the room, "They're close, very, very close to the sort of tech that can avert this disaster, but will they work it out in time? Ten to one, folks, step on up!"

There was some uncomfortable shuffling towards the back of the shop. Most of the beings in there had some form of precognitive ability, or they would never have set foot in the place. Some shook their heads, sadly, others just ignored Gastrix entirely and kept their eyes glued to the holoscreens hoping the star they'd picked went supernova first.

"Excuse me." It was barely a voice at all, and the speaker was barely there. The wispy little humanoid approached Gastrix, "My employer will take that bet."

"Excellent, clearly a discerning pun... customer." said Gastrix.

"Pun... customer?" Asked the little man.

"Yes, pun... customer. Absolutely. It means 'best customer ever'."

"Of course."

"And might I have your name?" Gastrix beamed.

"I'm the Metatron." replied the Metatron, in a hoarse whisper.

"I'm sorry, sir, could you speak up a bit?"

"No, I'm afraid this is it. I'm terribly sorry. Had to do a lot of shouting about three thousand years ago. Played havoc with my vocal chords."

"Right, yes. And your employer would be?"

"Oh, I'm not allowed to say. He's just over there, in the corner. Doesn't like to get too involved, you know how almighty deities are." Metatron indicated the corner with a stubby thumb.

"No, I'd heard that." He turned to Oscar, "What's that word, Os?"

"Ineffable." Said Oscar, around a mouthful of bacon sandwich. "Means he can't be effed."

"Yes, right. Ineffable." Gastrix beamed again, he liked clever words.

"I don't think that word means what you think it means." Said Metatron.

"No? Really? Oh well. What's his stake, if I might ask?"

"The soul of his firstborn son."

"Wait a minute!" said Oscar, putting the sandwich down and finally paying attention. "Didn't we have him in here a couple of aeons ago?"

"He wagered his son could convert the whole of Western Europe to monotheism, offered the lad's soul up as a stake. I gave him twenty to one, told him the Romans would crucify him!"

"If it helps, they did." Said Metatron. Oscar wasn't sure if it helped or not.

"So, same terms as last time then? Lad goes down there, tries to sort it all out?" Gastrix asked.

"Yup." Whispered Metatron.

"Fine. Ten to one. Sign here."