

## HOICE

by Jon Hansen

The most dramatic day in the history of the Human Galactic Empire began one morning in the bedroom of Zom Agorn, a lowly bureaucrat in the Bureaucracy of Internal Affairs, when an alien representing the will of the cosmos materialized at Zom's bedside, while Zom was still in bed.

It was a glowing energy ball about half a meter in diameter, shining like a miniature sun. Zom responded by pulling the covers over his head. From the ball came a voice. "AT LAST I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION, MORTAL. I AM A REPRESENTATIVE OF THE COSMIC WILL. YOU HAVE BEEN SELECTED AS THE VESSEL OF THE UNIVERSE'S PURPOSE. THE TIME OF CHOOSING IS AT HAND."

Zom peeked out and squinted at the alien, wondering for a minute if this was some new wake-up service provided by his landlord. Then the alien's words sank in. "Choosing? What are you talking about?"

"THE UNIVERSE HAS DETERMINED THAT..." Zom winced and raised a hand. "YES, WHAT IS IT?"

"Uhm, would you mind speaking a little more quietly?"

"SORRY — I mean, sorry." The alien's glow dimmed a little. Zom could now make out two dark points that reminded him of eyes. He shivered a little, wondering if he was still asleep. The alien spoke again. "Now, then. As I was saying, the universe has determined that in order to give its more ephemeral inhabitants a greater sense of participation in its

development, from time to time certain individuals are asked to make decisions that will affect its outcome. An approaching point in the space-time continuum has been determined to be the focus for the next such event. The outcome of this event is determined by the individual known as the Sub-altern Assistant to the Tertiary Clerk advising the Project Manager of Internal Affairs Zom Agorn." The alien paused. "I presume that you are he?"

Zom stammered. "Uhm, yes...."

The alien dipped slightly in the air. "Very well then. Congratulations on your honor."

"Honor? What honor?" Zom could feel events moving rapidly out of control. He fumbled for a caffeine tablet, overbalanced, and crashed to the floor.

The alien moved to hover dramatically over the stunned clerk. "Your choice at the approaching focal point of existence will decide the next step in the universe's evolution. If you choose correctly, the universe will a step closer to its ultimate goal of peace, harmony, and an unending supply of chocolate for all peoples everywhere."

Zom whimpered. He must have fallen out of his bed while he was asleep and hit his head. That was his only hope. "What — what happens if I choose incorrectly?" he stumbled. He didn't really want to know, but he had to ask.

The alien's glow brightened suddenly. "CENTURIES MORE OF — oh, sorry. Centuries more of chaos and disorder, eons of neglect and ruin, and cable rates will continue to skyrocket. The usual."

"By the God-Emperor!" This was no dream or hallucination! Frantically he tried to think of a way out of this. "But, but — why did you tell me this? Won't this affect my behavior?"

The alien moved a bit closer. "In your position at Internal Affairs do you not make decisions daily that concern the business of others, and how you decide can have dramatic effects?"

"Well, yes, but stamping someone's request for shipping labels and sending it on for further processing doesn't usually cause the universe to end!"

The alien moved away, make a tut-tutting sound. "That is the problem with you ephemerals! You whine and complain about how the universe has no interest in you or your problems, and as soon as we try to get you involved, you don't want the responsibility! Ah well." The alien moved away from Zom. "With your permission, I will observe the event to make sure all goes well. Carry on as you would normally, and have courage." With that the glowing alien shrank away and disappeared, leaving Zom's bedroom empty except for a lingering smell like burnt popcorn.

"Wait!" wailed Zom, scrambling to his feet. "What am I supposed to do? What am I deciding? Come back!" The bedroom remained empty.

Zom stared up at the ceiling, numb. "The next great event in the development of the universe? What happens if I choose wrong?" Suddenly a loud shrieking began beside the desk. Zom jumped, and then hit the alarm button.

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Zom dressed to the sound of rain splattering against his apartment window. His mind whirred. Responsible? He was responsible? He had enough trouble trying to decide what to wear in the morning. How could he make a decision like that? Shaking his head he pulled on his all-weather cloak and headed downstairs.

The air was crisp for late fall. Across the street was an entrance to the new High Speed Subway, which linked Old Indianapolis to the Imperial City. Zom made his way in the station and climbed on the car. After nudging out an octogenarian for a seat Zom reached into his pocket and fished out the earphone to his newsfeeder. Ignoring the oldster's glare, he plugged in the earphone and tuned in the weather.

An insufferably cheerful voice announced that, as the Department of Meteorological Control had calculated that 3.5 million metric tons of precipitation were necessary for adequate climate maintenance, rain was scheduled for the next twelve hours over the Imperial City, with ten minute breaks every hour. Zom hoped that he would arrive during one of those breaks. At least with the cloud cover he wouldn't need any UV blocker. He closed his eyes and felt the acceleration push against him. After a ten-minute trip, Zom pushed his way through Central Station to emerge onto the streets of the Imperial City.

The streets were crowded, despite the heavy rains. Citizens filled the sidewalks, jostling their way past one another. The gray clouds and tall, unfriendly buildings were a match for the citizens. Through the streets hummed small hovercraft, filled with cursing people. There was no point in hailing a taxi. Most were now driven by Arcturians, a species noted for its lack of direction and poor sense of humor. Zom shuddered in horror at the thought of having to ride with one of those blue-skinned monsters.

He ducked under a nearby overhang and glanced at the sky. A large laser cannon from the Palace was focused at the clouds, announcing the time until the next dry spell. There wouldn't be a break in the rain for another thirty minutes. There was nothing to do but to try and run for it. The Palace of Internal Affairs was only fifteen blocks away. Zom pulled his slick cloak tightly around him and dashed down the street.

As he approached the palace, a speeding courier droid whizzed by Zom, startling him. Off balance, he stumbled, slipped and fell into the gutter, soaking him in dirty water. With a snarl Zom collected himself and staggered into the Palace.

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Zom stalked through the brightly lit lobby toward the lifts in the back, leaving a soggy trail behind him. He ignored the security guard's raised eyebrow and pushed his way onto a crowded lift. He got out at the 8th floor and stalked down the long dimly lit corridors toward his office.

As he began to enter his security code, a hand reached out and tugged at his cloak. "Zom! My friend, how are you?" It was Gran, a Class 12a assistant clerk from the Department of Meteorological Control. Gran had that handsome, useless look that Zom could only dream of approaching. "Don't you listen to our weather announcements? You are soaked!" Zom opened his mouth to utter something vicious but Gran was already three meters away, pressing his arm against a lovely bureaucrat from the 17th floor. Zom shrugged and

unsealed his office door.

Zom let his now-useless cloak drop to the floor by the door and glanced around his office. Nothing had changed in his little cubicle. Same gray walls, the same glowering expression on the face of the God-Emperor holograph hanging behind his desk, watching him work. Feeling slightly nervous, Zom sat behind his desk.

A flashing red light blinking on his work terminal on his desk caught his attention. With his heart full of dread, Zom touched the Read key. One message awaited him.

It was a low-priority request from the Ambassador's office on KumQ'at Nine. The embassy had decided to repaint the Grand Ballroom. As no suitable native products were available, they needed thirty gallons of a high-gloss ablative coating. Glancing over the request, Zom frowned. He tapped a key. The machine whirred and spit out the request in hard copy. Zom looked closer, nodding. The foolish embassy clerk had forgotten to specify a color. Zom shrugged and reached out for the Refuse response when a thought crossed his mind.

This must be the choice the alien spoke of! Refusing this request might have serious diplomatic repercussions with the KumQ'ats. Zom was not very good at dealing with aliens. Having to speak to them made his flesh crawl. Even thinking about them made him uneasy. Although it was against proper procedure, it might be a good idea to make sure that the request was filled out anyway.

Zom exited the communication system and called up the Guide to Embassy Color Schemes, 86th Edition. However, the terminal merely burped unhelpfully, whirred away, and then sat still. Zom glared and then decided to pick it himself.

What color should he choose? Imperial Scarlet was the standard coloring for such a room. Zom nodded wisely. Always best to go with the traditional. As he prepared to fill in the color, he remembered hearing once that the natives of KumQ'at Nine had a visual sense that extended into the ultraviolet! Imperial Scarlet was not what they would perceive at all! Furiously, he tried to calculate what color would give the same effect. For several minutes Zom tried to visualize if fungous yellow would appear scarlet or more of a mauve to the KumQ'ats when another possibility occurred to him.

Suppose this was the wrong choice! His violation of proper procedure might have serious consequences! Zom could foresee his example leading the way to other bureaucrats ignoring their training and offering their own opinions on how to do things! His mind whirled. It would be a disaster!

How could he shift the responsibility? Zom stood up and began to pace. His wet shoes squeaked as he circled the small office. Glancing at the holograph of the God-Emperor behind his desk Zom paused. He would notify his superior. Shift the responsibility onto the shoulders of those above you. Yes, yes, that was it. Zom nodded thoughtfully. He could cite the unusual nature of the request, special circumstances, yes.... "That might work," he murmured. Returning to his desk, Zom called up the communication system and began composing a note to his direct supervisor.

Altern Assistant to the Tertiary Clerk advising the Project Manager of Internal Affairs Kri was to be on vacation for the next tenday. Kri was also a bit of a stickler on regulations. He would undoubtedly chastise Zom for disturbing him on vacation. Zom shrugged. He could take Kri's abuse. There were more important issues at hand. Zom finished the formal greeting and glanced at the request lying in front of him.

Suppose this was the wrong decision after all! Zom could feel his stomach beginning to twist. Kri might do more than just chastise him. Kri might enact some sort of petty revenge on him, such as deny him leave, block promotions, or move his office. There was still room up on the 30th floor. Unfortunately, the lift stopped working at the 18th. He should do the correct thing and refuse the request. No, he should enter the information. No, he should call Kri.

Zom could feel the walls starting to close in. Each choice seemed to spell disaster for him and the Empire. The reminder of the influence he would have on events mocked him. He was in a trap and could see no way out. The monitor sat there, cursor flashing, mocking him. Suddenly Zom screamed and ran from his office down the stairs. As he ran through the lobby howling his fellow bureaucrats made a path for him but did not glance at him.

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Zom staggered out onto the street, panting. His mind raced with the possibilities of each choice he faced. What was the correct decision? What should he do? The whole situation simply made him ill. He ran a hand over his scalp. He could feel a stress lesion breaking out. He had to get control of himself.

The rain had finally stopped. Zom thanked Gran's scheduling, as he had left his cloak back upstairs. What should he do? Zom stood out front of Internal Affairs for a long minute, trying to calm down.

The streets were beginning to fill up with morning traffic, as the clearing weather invited more citizens outside. Street vendors had appeared, offering a variety of goods for sale. Zom paused. He was feeling a bit peckish. The melted algaepatties looked tasty, but so did the fresh SimBananas. After a second of contemplation he moved towards the fruit seller and picked out two good-sized bananas.

As he keyed in the payment transfer a drop of rain landed on his hand. Sighing, Zom took the fruit and hurried back under cover. He suddenly felt very tired. Slowly he entered the lift, ignoring the guard.

Zom made his way back to his office and sank down into his chair. He needed to be sensible about this. The cosmic representative had told him to act normally. His normal response would be to refuse the request. If that was what he would normally do, then that was what he should do. Rules were rules. Zom called the request back up and reached out to the Refuse key when he paused again.

Perhaps he should complete the form himself. While refusing the request was technically the correct thing to do, he couldn't help but think that it was such a minor detail, how could it hurt? It seemed a little silly to refuse a request over something so minor as that. How could it matter?

Zom called up the request from the KumQ'at embassy. He hesitated a moment, then typed in 'Imperial Scarlet.' It was technically correct, and since his name was not on the request, who could blame him? He nodded, entered his approval and forwarded the request for processing. Satisfied, he peeled the first banana.

As he took a bite, there was a bright flash of light before his desk. Startled, Zom froze, expecting to see the cosmic representative before him.

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Instead, a different alien shimmered into being before him! A tall humanoid towered over Zom, its head brushing the ceiling as it bent toward the shocked clerk. It was a bright yellow, with clusters of dark brown patches here and there on its surface. It was wearing a flowing purple cloak. Two long appendages extended from the creature, stretched toward him. "Greetings, lesser thing," buzzed a box attached to the alien's midsection. "This individual brings greetings to the empire of this star cluster. This individual is an ambassador of a neighboring star cluster, the Fenorb. Despite your kind's apparent lesser state, this individual wishes to open communications of a diplomatic nature."

Zom sat in shock. He had no diplomatic training whatsoever! The creature, in an apparent disregard for proper channels, had invaded his office at this, the crucial moment for poor Zom and the universe! This must be the decision he was to make! What should he do? Shocked beyond words, Zom could only sit and stare at the ambassador. His jaw hanging open, the piece of banana fell onto his desk with a small plop.

The alien ambassador twitched backwards slightly. Its arms waved back and forth agitatedly. "What is this? Outrageous!" The alien's translator unit managed to produce a slightly offended tone. "Your kind would so engage in such barbaric behavior? Uncivilized indeed!"

Zom sat helpless. Obviously he had offended the alien, but he had no idea how to correct the situation gracefully. Hurriedly he stood, forcing a smile. "Your Omnipotence! Forgive me for my lack of manners, as I am only a humble clerk in our great empire." As Zom tried to soothe the alien, he quickly scooped up the food fragment and chucked it into the nearby incinerator unit.

Unfortunately, that seemed to offend the alien even more. The ambassador-creature continued its tirade. "This explanation is unacceptable! You are accountable for its actions, and this one has no choice but to take action! You will be punished for this insult!" With these words the alien produced a hostile-looking device and leveled it at Zom. Zom squawked and threw himself behind his desk. As he reached cover, the alien vaporized a large chunk of Zom's chair.

Things were getting out of hand. Not only was Zom untrained for diplomacy, but he had no experience with combat. The most ferocious action he had ever seen had been a cleaning android that had thought he was a pile of old laundry that needed folding. As the alien stepped around the desk for another shot, Zom did the only thing he could think of to do. He screamed.

He screamed long and hard, a terrible wail of dismay, fear, and general whininess. Amazingly enough, the alien did not shoot Zom but staggered back, apparently shocked by the terrified clerk's shout. It held its appendages up in the air and began to do what appeared to be a two-step across the office. Taking advantage of its momentary confusion, Zom bolted for the door.

Unfortunately the ambassador's path happened to intersect Zom's by the door and they

collided. Again off-balance, Zom toppled to the floor. The alien fell to the ground with a hard plop. Its translator box gave an indignant squawk and the alien pointed its weapon at Zom. Desperate, Zom grabbed his nearby cloak and threw it over the alien's head. Blinded, the shot went wide, blowing a hole in the ceiling.

The ambassador began struggling with the cloak, shouting something unintelligible. Zom couldn't make out what the ambassador was say, but he got the impression that it was definitely a threat. Finally the alien seemed to slump in surrender. There was another shimmering to the previous one and the alien disappeared, taking Zom's cloak with it. Zom blinked.

For a long moment there was nothing. Then there was a tremor. From elsewhere in the building Zom could hear cries of dismay. "What is this? There isn't an earthquake scheduled for another year!" Quickly Zom ran from his office down the hall. He wasn't sure what was going on, but he knew he was probably responsible. Bypassing the lift Zom headed into the stairwell. From deep in the depths of the building came a loud groan. Zom ran faster and faster. His footsteps echoed in the stairwell, sounding like the tramp of doom.

Suddenly he slipped and began to fall. As he banged his way down the stairs he could begin to feel himself losing consciousness. As he finished bouncing the last two flights there came an especially loud boom, and every thing went away for a while.

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When Zom came to, it was at first hard for him to tell, as it was still dark. Dust filled the air, choking him. "What in name of the God-Emperor has happened?" he whispered. Slowly he sat up, trying to get his bearings.

Zom could begin to make out a faint glow. After a moment, it brightened, revealing itself to be the cosmic representative. "CONGRATULATIONS, ZOM," boomed the alien. "YOUR PERFORMANCE WAS OUTSTANDING."

"Outstanding?" Zom coughed. "What happened? Where am I? And speak quietly, my head hurts."

"You are in the sub-basement of your building. The Fenorbs leveled it with a thermonuclear device. Judging from the destruction, I would say it was of moderate size. The Fenorbs detonated it after you assaulted their ambassador."

Zom stared at the alien in horror. "A thermonuclear — ! You mean, I caused — oh God-Emperor! His Worshipful Presence will have my internal organs ripped out and placed on display!" Zom began looking wildly about, trying to spot the Imperial Guard before they came to arrest him.

"Very unlikely. The entire Imperial City was destroyed in the attack by the Fenorb, killing all of the inhabitants of the city, including your God-Emperor. Similar devices have been detonated at the capital city of each of the Three Thousand Worlds in the Empire." The alien's voice held a trace of satisfaction. "Your empire's government has now effectively ceased to exist. The Fenorbs are a most efficient species. Not very good at finding the correct office, mind you, but still efficient."

The enormity of the alien's words struck Zom like a blow. The Empire of Three Thousand Worlds, which had stretched across the galaxy for over a thousand millennia, had been destroyed in the blink of an eye. Zom sat back, stunned. "There is no need to fear," said the alien. "The Fenorbs have returned to their home galaxy, never to return. Your behavior mortally offended them. You are in no further danger." Numb, Zom did not move. "Zom. What is troubling you?" said the curious alien. Zom looked at him in disbelief. "Right, sorry."

"It isn't fair," moaned Zom. "How was I supposed to know how to treat an ambassador? All I do is forward or deny requests!" Zom suddenly shivered. "That isn't why the ambassador reacted like that, is it? Just because I forwarded that request?"

"A request? — no, no, Zom. The Fenorbs bear an unfortunate resemblance to your bananas. Perhaps you noticed?" Zom looked blank. "Ah, well. The ambassador at first thought you were eating a miniature version of his people. That's why he reacted the way he did."

Zom couldn't believe his ears. "So I failed? Just because I decided to have a piece of fruit for lunch rather than a sandwich?" He was beginning to sound a bit outraged. He had had a hard day, and he wasn't taking this news very well.

"Failed?" The alien's voice seemed puzzled. "What makes you say this?"

"What makes me — what are you saying?! The Empire has been destroyed! The greatest government this galaxy has ever seen has been overthrown! And I am responsible! Wouldn't you call that a failure?"

"Failure? No, no, Zom! You succeeded! Haven't you been listening to me?" The alien sighed. "Greatest government this galaxy has ever seen, yes." The alien paused. "But not the greatest it will ever see."

The cosmic representative hovered closer to Zom. "Your Empire, while mighty in its own way, needed to be removed. Your race was being intellectually strangled. Independent thought patterns and the freedom to act are necessary to reach the ultimate goals of the universe. Your Empire's demise has paved the way. Now a less-advanced species with these tendencies can develop and move ahead." The alien began to slowly fade. "Farewell, Zom. You have our gratitude, and we thank you for your participation."

"Wait!" cried Zom. "Now what?"

The glow brightened again. "What do you mean?" The alien sounded puzzled.

"So that's it? You're just going to leave me trapped under a pool of radioactive slag to die? Right after I succeeded in helping the cause of the universe?"

The alien sighed. "You ephemerals complain so much. 'Don't leave me here, I'll die!' Very well." The alien brightened. A soft glow enveloped Zom. "Now that I think of it, you could be of some help to me." As Zom felt himself being carried away on a bed of warm light, he could still hear the cosmic representative droning in his ear. "How'd you like to be reborn into the Fenorb Empire? I think you'd look quite striking as a giant yellow banana." •



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