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The elephants on Neptune led an idyllic life.

None ever went hungry or were sick. They had no predators. They never fought a war. There was no prejudice. Their birth rate exactly equalled their death rate. Their skins and bowels were free of parasites.

The herd traveled at a speed that accommodated the youngest and weakest members. No sick or infirm elephant was ever left behind.

They were a remarkable race, the elephants on Neptune. They lived out their lives in peace and tranquility, they never argued among themselves, the old were always gentle with the young. When one was born, the entire herd gathered to celebrate. When one died, the entire herd mourned its passing. There were no animosities, no petty jealousies, no unresolved quarrels.

Only one thing stopped it from being Utopia, and that was the fact that an elephant never forgets.

Not ever.

No matter how hard he tries.

* * * *

When men finally landed on Neptune in 2473 A.D., the elephants were very apprehensive. Still, they approached the spaceship in a spirit of fellowship and goodwill.

The men were a little apprehensive themselves. Every survey of Neptune told them it was a gas giant, and yet they had landed on solid ground. And if their surveys were wrong, who knew what else might be wrong as well?

A tall man stepped out onto the frozen surface. Then another. Then a third. By the time they had all emerged, there were almost as many men as elephants.

“Well, I’ll be damned!” said the leader of the men. “You’re elephants!”

“And you’re men,” said the elephants nervously.

“That’s right,” said the men. “We claim this planet in the name of the United Federation of Earth.”

“You’re united now?” asked the elephants, feeling much relieved.

“Well, the survivors are,” said the men.

“Those are ominous-looking weapons you’re carrying,” said the elephants, shifting their feet uncomfortably.

“They go with the uniforms,” said the men. “Not to worry. Why would we want to harm you? There’s always been a deep bond between men and elephants.”

That wasn’t exactly the way the elephants remembered it.

* * * *

326 B.C. Alexander the Great met Porus, King of the Punjab of India, in the Battle of the Jhelum River. Porus had the first military elephants Alexander had ever seen. He studied the situation, then sent his men out at night to fire thousands of arrows into extremely sensitive trunks and underbellies. The elephants went mad with pain and began killing the nearest men they could find, which happened to be their keepers and handlers. After his great victory, Alexander slaughtered the surviving elephants so that he would never have to face them in battle.

* * * *

217 B.C. The first clash between the two species of elephants. Ptolemy IV took his African elephants against Antiochus the Great’s Indian elephants. The elephants on Neptune weren’t sure who won the war, but they knew who lost. Not a single elephant on either side survived.

* * * *

Later that same 217 B.C. While Ptolemy was battling in Syria, Hannibal took 37 elephants over the Alps to fight the Romans. 14 of them froze to death, but the rest lived just long enough to absorb the enemy’s spear thrusts while Hannibal was winning the Battle of Cannae.

* * * *

“We have important things to talk about,” said the men. “For example, Neptune’s atmosphere is singularly lacking in oxygen. How do you breathe?”

“Through our noses,” said the elephants.

“That was a serious question,” said the men, fingering their weapons ominously.

“We are incapable of being anything *but* serious,” explained the elephants. “Humor requires that someone be the butt of the joke, and we find that too cruel to contemplate.”

“All right,” said the men, who were vaguely dissatisfied with the answer, perhaps because they didn’t understand it. “Let’s try another question. What is the mechanism by which we are communicating? You don’t wear radio transmitters, and because of our helmets we can’t hear any sounds that aren’t on our radio bands.”

“We communicate through a psychic bond,” explained the elephants.

“That’s not very scientific,” said the men disapprovingly. “Are you sure you don’t mean a telepathic bond?”

“No, though it comes to the same thing in the end,” answered the elephants. “We know that we sound like we’re speaking English to you, except for the man on the left who thinks we’re speaking Hebrew.”

“And what do we sound like to you?” demanded the men.

“You sound exactly as if you’re making gentle rumbling sounds in your stomachs and your bowels.”

“That’s fascinating,” said the men, who privately thought it was a lot more disgusting than fascinating.

“Do you know what’s *really* fascinating?” responded the elephants. “The fact that you’ve got a Jew with you.” They saw that the men didn’t comprehend, so they continued: “We always felt we were in a race with the Jews to see which of us would be exterminated first. We used to call ourselves the Jews of the animal kingdom.” They turned and faced the Jewish spaceman. “Did the Jews think of themselves as the elephants of the human kingdom?”

“Not until you just mentioned it,” said the Jewish spaceman, who suddenly found himself agreeing with them.

* * * *

42 B.C. The Romans gathered their Jewish prisoners in the arena at Alexandria, then turned fear-crazed elephants loose on them. The spectators began jumping up and down and screaming for blood—and, being contrarians, the elephants attacked the spectators instead of the Jews, proving once and for all that you can’t trust a pachyderm. (When the dust had cleared, the Jews felt the events of the day had reaffirmed their claim to be God’s chosen people. They weren’t the Romans’ chosen people, though. After the soldiers killed the elephants, they put all the Jews to the sword, too.)

* * * *

“It’s not his fault he’s a Jew any more than it’s your fault that you’re elephants,” said the rest of the men. “We don’t hold it against either of you.”

“We find that difficult to believe,” said the elephants.

“You do?” said the men. “Then consider this: the Indians—that's the good Indians, the ones from India, not the bad Indians from America—worshipped Ganesh, an elephant-headed god.”

“We didn't know that,” admitted the elephants, who were more impressed than they let on. “Do the Indians still worship Ganesh?”

“Well, we're sure they would if we hadn't killed them all while we were defending the Raj,” said the men. “Elephants were no longer in the military by then,” they added. “That's something to grateful for.”

* * * *

Their very last battle came when Tamerlane the Great went to war against Sultan Mahmoud. Tamerlane won by tying branches to buffalos' horns, setting fire to them, and then stampeding the buffalo herd into Mahmoud's elephants, which effectively ended the elephant as a war machine, buffalo being much less expensive to acquire and feed. All the remaining domesticated elephants were then trained for elephant fighting, which was exactly like cock-fighting, only on a larger scale. Much larger. It became a wildly popular sport for thirty or forty years until they ran out of participants.

* * * *

“Not only did we worship you,” continued the men, “but we actually named a country after you—the Ivory Coast. *That* should prove our good intentions.”

“You didn't name it after *us*,” said the elephants. “You named it after the parts of our bodies that you kept killing us for.”

“You're being too critical,” said the men. “We could have named it after some local politician with no vowels in his name.”

“Speaking of the Ivory Coast,” said the elephants, “did you know that the first alien visitors to Earth landed there in 1883?”

“What did they look like?”

“They had ivory exoskeletons,” answered the elephants. “They took one look at the carnage and left.”

“Are you sure you're not making this all up?” asked the men.

“Why would we lie to you at this late date?”

“Maybe its your nature,” suggested the men.

“Oh, no,” said the elephants. “Our nature is that we always tell the truth. Our tragedy is that we always remember it.”

The men decided that it was time to break for dinner, answer calls of nature, and check in with Mission Control to report what they'd found. They all walked back to the ship, except for one man, who lingered behind.

All of the elephants left too, except for one lone bull. “I intuit that you have a question to ask,” he said.

“Yes,” replied the man. “You have such an acute sense of smell, how did anyone ever sneak up on you during the hunt?”

“The greatest elephant hunters were the Wanderobo of Kenya and Uganda. They would rub our dung all over their bodies to hide their own scent, and would then silently approach us.”

“Ah,” said the man, nodding his head. “It makes sense.”

“Perhaps,” conceded the elephant. Then he added, with all the dignity he could muster, “But if the tables were turned, I would sooner die than cover myself with *your* shit.”

He turned away and set off to rejoin his comrades.

* * * *

Neptune is unique among all the worlds in the galaxy. It alone recognizes the truism that change is inevitable, and acts upon it in ways that seem very little removed from magic.

For reasons the elephants couldn't fathom or explain, Neptune encourages metamorphosis. Not merely adaptation, although no one could deny that they adapted to the atmosphere and the climate and the fluctuating surface of the planet and the lack of acacia trees—but *metamorphosis*. The elephants understood at a gut level that Neptune had somehow imparted to them the ability to evolve at will, though they had been careful never to abuse this gift.

And since they were elephants, and hence incapable of carrying a grudge, they thought it was a pity that the men couldn't evolve to the point where they could leave their bulky spacesuits and awkward helmets behind, and walk free and unencumbered across this most perfect of planets.

* * * *

The elephants were waiting when the men emerged from their ship and strode across Neptune's surface to meet them.

“This is very curious,” said the leader.

“What is?” asked the elephants.

The leader stared at them, frowning. “You seem smaller.”

“We were just going to say that you seemed larger,” replied the elephants.

“This is almost as silly as the conversation I just had with Mission Control,” said the leader. “They say there aren't any elephants on Neptune.”

“What do they think we are?” asked the elephants.

“Hallucinations or space monsters,” answered the leader. “If you're hallucinations, we're supposed to ignore you.”

He seemed to be waiting for the elephants to ask what the men were supposed to do if they were space monsters, but elephants can be as stubborn as men when they want to be, and that was a question they had no intention of asking.

The men stared at the elephants in silence for almost five minutes. The elephants stared back.

Finally the leader spoke again.

“Would you excuse me for a moment?” he said. “I suddenly have an urge to eat some greens.”

He turned and marched back to the ship without another word.

The rest of the men shuffled their feet uncomfortably for another few seconds.

“Is something wrong?” asked the elephants.

“Are we getting bigger or are you getting smaller?” replied the men.

“Yes,” answered the elephants.

* * * *

“I feel much better now,” said the leader, rejoining his men and facing the elephants.

“You look better,” agreed the elephants. “More handsome, somehow.”

“Do you really think so?” asked the leader, obviously flattered.

“You are the finest specimen of your race we've ever seen,” said the elephants truthfully. “We especially like your ears.”

“You do?” he asked, flapping them slightly. “No one's ever mentioned them before.”

“Doubtless an oversight,” said the elephants.

“Speaking of ears,” said the leader, “are you African elephants or Indian? I thought this morning you were African—they're the ones with the bigger ears, right? —but now I'm not sure.”

“We're Neptunian elephants,” they answered.

“Oh.”

They exchanged pleasantries for another hour, and then the men looked up at the sky.

“Where did the sun go?” they asked.

“It's night,” explained the elephants. “Our day is only fourteen hours long. We get seven hours of sunlight and seven of darkness.”

“The sun wasn't all that bright anyway,” said one of the men with a shrug that set his ears flapping wildly.

“We have very poor eyesight, so we hardly notice,” said the elephants. “We depend on our senses of smell and hearing.”

The men seemed very uneasy. Finally they turned to their leader.

“May we be excused for a few moments, sir?” they asked.

“Why?”

“Suddenly we're starving,” said the men.

“And I gotta use the john,” said one of them.

“So do I,” said a second one.

“Me too,” echoed another.

“Do you men feel all right?” asked the leader, his enormous nose wrinkled in concern.

“I feel great!” said the nearest man. “I could eat a horse!”

The other men all made faces.

“Well, a small forest, anyway,” he amended.

“Permission granted,” said the leader. The men began walking rapidly back to the ship. “And bring me a couple of heads of lettuce, and maybe an apple or two,” he called after them.

“You can join them if you wish,” said the elephants, who were coming to the conclusion that eating a horse wasn't half as disgusting a notion as they had thought it would be.

“No, my job is to make contact with aliens,” explained the leader. “Although when you get right down to it, you're not as alien as we'd expected.”

“You're every bit as human as *we* expected,” replied the elephants.

“I'll take that as a great compliment,” said the leader. “But then, I would expect nothing less from traditional friends such as yourselves.”

“Traditional friends?” repeated the elephants, who had thought nothing a man said could still surprise them.

“Certainly. Even after you stopped being our partners in war, we've always had a special relationship with you.”

“You have?”

“Sure. Look how P.T. Barnum made an international superstar out of the original Jumbo. That animal lived like a king—or at least he did until he was accidentally run over by a locomotive.”

“We don't want to appear cynical,” said the elephants, “but how do you *accidentally* run over a seven-ton animal?”

“You do it,” said the leader, his face glowing with pride, “by inventing the locomotive in the first place. Whatever else we may be, you must admit we're a race that can boast of magnificent accomplishments:

the internal combustion engine, splitting the atom, reaching the planets, curing cancer.” He paused. “I don’t mean to denigrate you, but truly, what have you got to equal that?”

“We live our lives free of sin,” responded the elephants simply. “We respect each other’s beliefs, we don’t harm our environment, and we have never made war on other elephants.”

“And you’d put that up against the heart transplant, the silicon chip, and the three-dimensional television screen?” asked the leader with just a touch of condescension.

“Our aspirations are different from yours,” said the elephants. “But we are as proud of our heroes as you are of yours.”

“You have heroes?” said the leader, unable to hide his surprise.

“Certainly.” The elephants rattled off their roll of honor: “The Kilimanjaro Elephant. Selemundi. Mohammed of Marsabit. And the Magnificent Seven of Krueger Park: Mafunyane, Shingwedzi, Kambaki, Joao, Dzombo, Ndlulamithi, and Phelwane.”

“Are they here on Neptune?” asked the leader as his men began returning from the ship.

“No,” said the elephants. “You killed them all.”

“We must have had a reason,” insisted the men.

“They were there,” said the elephants. “And they carried magnificent ivory.”

“See?” said the men. “We *knew* we had a reason.”

The elephants didn’t like that answer much, but they were too polite to say so, and the two species exchanged views and white lies all through the brief Neptunian night. When the sun rose again, the men voiced their surprise.

“Look at you!” they said. “What’s happening?”

“We got tired of walking on all fours,” said the elephants. “We decided it’s more comfortable to stand upright.”

“And where are your trunks?” demanded the men.

“They got in the way.”

“Well, if that isn’t the damndest thing!” said the men. Then they looked at each other. “On second thought, *this* is the damndest thing! We’re bursting out of our helmets!”

“And our ears are flapping,” said the leader.

“And our noses are getting longer,” said another man.

“This is most disconcerting,” said the leader. He paused. “On the other hand, I don’t feel nearly as much animosity toward you as I did yesterday. I wonder why?”

“Beats us,” said the elephants, who were becoming annoyed with the whining quality of his voice.

“It’s true, though,” continued the leader. “Today I feel like every elephant in the universe is my friend.”

“Too bad you didn’t feel that way when it would have made a difference,” said the elephants irritably. “Did you know you killed sixteen million of us in the 20th Century alone?”

“But we made amends,” noted the men. “We set up game parks to preserve you.”

“True,” acknowledged the elephants. “But in the process you took away most of our habitat. Then you decided to cull us so we wouldn’t exhaust the park’s food supply.” They paused dramatically. “That was when Earth received its second alien visitation. The aliens examined the theory of preserving by culling, decided that Earth was an insane asylum, and made arrangements to drop all their incurables off in the future.”

Tears rolled down the men’s bulky cheeks. “We feel just terrible about that,” they wept. A few of them dabbed at their eyes with short, stubby fingers that seemed to be growing together.

“Maybe we should go back to the ship and consider all this,” said the men’s leader, looking around futilely for something large enough in which to blow his nose. “Besides, I have to use the facilities.”

“Sounds good to me,” said one of the men. “I got dibs on the cabbage.”

“Guys?” said another. “I know it sounds silly, but it’s much more comfortable to walk on all fours.”

The elephants waited until the men were all on the ship, and then went about their business, which struck them as odd, because before the men came they didn’t *have* any business.

“You know,” said one of the elephants. “I’ve got a sudden taste for a hamburger.”

“I want a beer,” said a second. Then: “I wonder if there’s a football game on the subspace radio?”

“It’s really curious,” remarked a third. “I have this urge to cheat on my wife—and I’m not even married.”

Vaguely disturbed without knowing why, they soon fell into a restless, dreamless sleep.

* * * *

Sherlock Holmes once said that after you eliminate the impossible, what remains, however improbable, must be the truth. Joseph Conrad said that truth is a flower in whose neighborhood others must wither. Walt Whitman suggested that whatever satisfied the soul was truth. Neptune would have driven all three of them berserk.

* * * *

“Truth is a dream, unless my dream is true,” said George Santayana. He was just crazy enough to have made it on Neptune.

* * * *

“We’ve been wondering,” said the men when the two groups met in the morning. “Whatever happened to Earth’s last elephant?”

“His name was Jamal,” answered the elephants. “Someone shot him.”

“Is he on display somewhere?”

“His right ear, which resembles the outline of the continent of Africa, has a map painted on it and is in the Presidential Mansion in Kenya. They turned his left ear over—and you'd be surprised how many left ears were thrown away over the centuries before someone somewhere thought of turning them over—and another map was painted, which now hangs in a museum in Bombay. His feet were turned into a matched set of barstools, and currently grace the Aces High Show Lounge in Dallas, Texas. His scrotum serves as a tobacco pouch for an elderly Scottish politician. One tusk is on display at the British Museum. The other bears a scrimshaw and resides in a store window in Beijing. His tail has been turned into a fly swatter, and is the proud possession of one of the last *vaqueros* in Argentina.”

“We had no idea,” said the men, honestly appalled.

“Jamal's very last words before he died were, ‘I forgive you’,” continued the elephants. “He was promptly transported to a sphere higher than any man can ever aspire to.”

The men looked up and scanned the sky. “Can we see it from here?” they asked.

“We doubt it.”

The men looked back at the elephants—except that they had evolved yet again. In fact, they had eliminated every physical feature for which they had ever been hunted. Tusks, ears, feet, tails, even scrotums, all had undergone enormous change. The elephants looked exactly like human beings, right down to their spacesuits and helmets.

The men, on the other hand, had burst out of their spacesuits (which had fallen away in shreds and tatters), sprouted tusks, and found themselves conversing by making rumbling noises in their bellies.

“This is very annoying,” said the men who were no longer men. “Now that we seem to have become elephants,” they continued, “perhaps you can tell us what elephants *do* ?”

“Well,” said the elephants who were no longer elephants, “in our spare time, we create new ethical systems based on selflessness, forgiveness, and family values. And we try to synthesize the work of Kant, Descartes, Spinoza, Thomas Aquinas and Bishop Barkley into something far more sophisticated and logical, while never forgetting to incorporate emotional and aesthetic values at each stage.”

“Well, we suppose that's pretty interesting,” said the new elephants without much enthusiasm. “Can we do anything else?”

“Oh, yes,” the new spacemen assured them, pulling out their .550 Nitro Expresses and .475 Holland & Holland Magnums and taking aim. “You can die.”

“This can't be happening! You yourselves were elephants yesterday!”

“True. But we're men now.”

“But why kill us?” demanded the elephants.

“Force of habit,” said the men as they pulled their triggers.

Then, with nothing left to kill, the men who used to be elephants boarded their ship and went out into space, boldly searching for new life forms.

* * * *

Neptune has seen many species come and go. Microbes have been spontaneously generated nine times over the eons. It has been visited by aliens 37 different times. It has seen 43 wars, five of them atomic, and the creation of 1,026 religions, none of which possessed any universal truths. More of the vast tapestry of galactic history has been played out on Neptune's foreboding surface than any other world in Sol's system.

Planets cannot offer opinions, of course, but if they could, Neptune would almost certainly say that the most interesting creatures it ever hosted were the elephants, whose gentle ways and unique perspectives remain fresh and clear in its memory. It mourns the fact that they became extinct by their own hand. Kind of.

A problem would arise when you asked whether Neptune was referring to the old-new elephants who began life as killers, or the new-old ones who ended life as killers.

Neptune just hates questions like that.

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