

## IN THE AUTUMN OF THE EMPIRE

by Jerry Oltion

There's authority, and then there's authority....

The emperor of Earth didn't like to be wrong. Many of his acolytes had learned that the hard way, though this was merely rumor, since no surviving member of the inner court had actually caught Hadron the Perfect in a mistake, nor even witnessed one.

So when the little common girl, who had been brought to the palace garden to provide a photo op for His Excellence amid the falling leaves, asked him, "Why is there autumn?" two of his attendants faked sudden allergy attacks and ran coughing for the infirmary while another quickly said, "It's because of the tilt of the Earth's—"

Too late. The emperor laughed and said in his reedy voice, "Ah, my little darling, that's an easy one. We get autumn because the Earth is moving away from the Sun. Soon we'll be millions of miles away from it, and it'll be winter. But don't you worry, because that's as far away as we'll go, and then we'll swing around in our orbit and head closer to the Sun again, and it will be spring, and when we get as close as we're going to go, it'll be summer and the whole cycle will start all over again." He smiled for the video cameras in a sickly attempt to look caring and avuncular.

Curiously, only one of the camera crew wet himself. The others looked at him in puzzlement as he stammered an apology and rushed after the two fake allergy sufferers.

The others continued filming the emperor and the little girl amid the multicolored leaves, and the videocast streamed out into the data-sphere, where the emperor's billions of subjects heard his explanation. Most of them hardly paused in their labors. A small fraction said, "Hmm, I didn't know that." And a smaller fraction yet said, "Wait a minute, it's the tilt of the Earth's axis that causes seasons."

Those people were never heard from again.

An astute businessman heard the emperor's pronouncement and immediately bought every cubic foot of refrigerated warehouse space he could find, funding it by selling everything he owned in the tourism industry. Then he bought every perishable fruit and vegetable he could lay his hands on, packing them away in his warehouses for a future he hoped would never come.

For the next few weeks the world buzzed with speculation, and even a few jokes about the emperor's knowledge of the planet he ruled with absolute authority, but the continual disappearance of jokesters and people with astronomical training slowed the innuendo until it seemed that the whole incident would blow over by winter. Or summer, if you lived in the southern hemisphere.

Yet one universal truth that had proved true for millennia kept raising its ugly head: it's nearly impossible to purge bad data from the system. The emperor's explanation to the little girl kept resurfacing to blossom across the datasphere yet again. Overzealous teachers even used it in classrooms to curry favor with the censors so they could slip in more controversial lessons about evolution or human sexuality.

People were by now quite used to "coming out of the water dry"—kowtowing to the official truth while privately knowing it was hogwash—but this particular one led to too many

logical inconsistencies. How could Aunt Ortencia be watching her crocuses bloom in Argentina while the leaves fell in Canada if the whole world experienced the same seasons at once? How could Antarctica be dipping into six months of sunlight and the Arctic into six months of darkness if it was autumn everywhere? More to the point, how could people in the Northern hemisphere buy fresh fruit in February if February was winter in the southern hemisphere, too?

Something had to give, and it wouldn't be the emperor. So nobody was really surprised to find vast engines springing up all over the planet, engines that tapped into the very fabric of space for their power and pushed against that fabric with all their might. Earthquakes rocked the world, but the emperor assured everyone that they would soon subside, and in that he was correct. When the stress in every major fault was finally released, the continents relaxed and went along for the ride.

The few surviving astronomers noted a curious thing: Polaris was no longer the north star. Night after night it slipped farther to the south, until the sky whirled around the Cat's Eye nebula in Draco instead.

Thereafter, the Sun rose directly in the east for everyone on Earth, took exactly twelve hours to cross the sky, and set directly in the west. It did that week after week, with no variation whatsoever. The Earth's axis no longer tilted with respect to the Sun.

A careful observer would note that the Sun was also somewhat smaller in the sky than before. The Earth had been moved farther away from it.

Winter arrived in the northern hemisphere as always. People in the southern hemisphere were rudely surprised to discover themselves drifting from spring right back into winter again, but since saying that something was amiss would mean contradicting the emperor's stated view of how things worked—not to mention reality itself now that the planet's orbit had been changed to match his description of it—they prudently remained silent and buckled down for a cold and hungry season. An enterprising businessman's foresight in storing perishables saved people from scurvy and rickets, but it was not a happy time.

The Earth moved on in its orbit, just as the emperor had promised the little girl in his garden. It moved slowly at aphelion, extending winter several weeks longer than usual, but eventually snowbanks thawed the world over. Farmers planted their crops. The growing season was shorter than usual, owing to the Earth's faster orbital speed when nearer the Sun, but there was just enough time for most fruits and vegetables to mature before the weather turned cold again. And the owner of a vast network of refrigerated warehouse space became even wealthier as it dawned on people that an entire planet's worth of perishables would have to be stored at once if they were to avoid a repeat of last winter's famine.

Life went on. People adjusted to the curiously regular days and the oddly irregular seasons, although most secretly longed for the days when they could buy a fresh orange from Brazil in January or take a sunny vacation to Australia when the clouds in Seattle became too much to bear.

The emperor aged, and eventually died. His son ascended to the throne, and a momentary hush fell across the Earth as his new subjects dared to wonder if he might defy his father as children often do once they come into their inheritance.

To improve the odds, a small group of surviving astronomers presented him with a coronation gift of a globe, ostensibly as a symbol of his dominion, but tilted at a rakish angle of 23.5 degrees. It was, in fact, an ancient and valuable artifact from one of the observatory museums. The astronomers had bribed a courtier to install a bright light to the side of the throne that would shine on the globe when they presented it to the new emperor, so that he might see how the northern hemisphere tilted toward the light in its summer, and how it tilted away in winter while the southern hemisphere experienced the opposite season.

Solemnly, they presented the globe to their absolute ruler. Smiling for the cameras that captured this moment for posterity, he accepted it and spun it a couple times around. Then he leaned close and examined the figure-eight printed in the Pacific Ocean. "An ... a ... lemma," he read slowly. "Did I pronounce that right?"

"Yes, your Excellency," one of the astronomers said, and the fact that he wasn't lying to save his skin cheered the others immensely.

The emperor examined the small print next to it. "Showing the Sun's declination throughout the year. And this is a historic artifact?"

"Yes, your Excellency," said the astronomer.

"Ah, then my father *was* wrong."

A collective sigh arose across the entire world, until the new emperor said, "This is clearly a diagram of the Earth's orbit before he changed it to match his mistaken notion. A figure eight. That would explain why everything seemed so timeless during the dead of winter, and again in the middle of summer, when I was a child. The Earth actually did pause there at the extremes of its orbit before reversing course."

He handed the globe to one of his advisors. "Make it do that again." He turned to the cameras and spoke to the world at large. "Your benevolent and merciful emperor now makes his first decree: I will make the world follow its proper orbit, a figure eight."