

# FERMI'S ZOOKEEPERS

*Discretion is the better part of valour.*

BY DAVID GULLEN

“Kifloon! Pick up, Kifloon! Where are you?”

“Wha —? What? Zephnal, do you have any idea what time —?”

“Kifloon! They’ve called, they’ve actually called!”

“Oh my Gods, the embarrassment. Tell me they haven’t.”

“They *have!* What do I do? What do we do?”

“Hang up. Hang up now. Touch nothing. If the lights are on, leave them. Lie down under the window and wait for them to go away.”

“Lie down under the —? Don’t be ridiculous. Oh, wait, you think it’s the Tosmons from number 17. Yes, embarrassing isn’t the word but no, not them. Lie down under the window, ha ha, that’s very good.”

“It’s not the Tosmons?”

“Ha ha, no.”

“Who, then?”

“That’s brilliant, I love it, such a great idea. I can just see 20 star systems, a trillion people all lying down under the window with the curtains drawn, waiting for the Tosmons to go away.”

“Zephnal.”

“Ha ha, that’s so ridiculous —”

“Zephnal!”

“What?”

“Get a grip.”

“I — He he. Yes, I’m sorry, Kifloon.”

“It’s all right, I can tell you’ve had a bad shock. Now tell me, who was it that called?”

“You won’t believe me.”

“Hurlax and the Queetons from last winter? Say it’s not so.”

“Scale it up a few orders of magnitude.”

“Just tell me.”

“Earth.”

“Wha —? Say what now?”

“I said you wouldn’t believe me. Planet Earth. The Earthlings. You know. Those guys.”

“I — I never — we never —”

“Yes. Talk about embarrassing, OK?”

“Ah...”

“Kifloon? Are you there? Speak to me, Kifloon. I can’t do this on my own, I need your help. What do we do?”

“Let me think ... All right. What does their message say?”

“Hello.”

“Um, that was actually my question.”

“Have we any idea what they are?”

“Not dinosaurs, obviously.”

“No. Gods, those poor dinosaur people. They were doing so well. Some days I can hardly look in the mirror.”

“I know, I know.”

“I really liked the dinosaurs.”

“Me too. Such a shame. What a disaster. Anyway, I think the Earthlings are mammals now. Still 100% organic, steady-state metabolism, internal fertilization —”

“Not like us, then?”

“No, but maybe one day.”

I mean, if they can send a message like that they’re obviously pretty bright.

I looked at the data and they’re coming along —”

“What if they’ve worked it out, Zephnal? What if they’ve discovered it wasn’t a meteor that wiped out the dinosaurs? What if they’ve worked out it was, in fact, half a million tonnes of first-contact starship travelling at 0.08c suffering catastrophic brake-engine failure and no way to course-correct?”

“There is that.”

“And you think the thing with the Tosmons is embarrassing? I really, really do not want to have that conversation with planet Earth.”

“Me neither. So what do we do?”

“Nothing. Don’t respond. Total silence in their direction. Shut it all down.”

“So we really are just going to hide?”

“Yes, I suppose we are.”

“For how long?”

“Until they go away.”

“Kifloon —”

“What?”

“They really are coming along quite fast.”

“Your point?”

“I think they might be building a ship and coming here.” ■



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

“‘Hello’? That’s it? Just ‘Hello’?”

“Just ‘Hello’.”

“What does it mean?”

“I think it means, you know, ‘Hello’.”

“You’re not helping. We need to understand what kind of hello their hello is. Are they just shouting it from the rooftops for the heck of it? Is it the kind of hello you say when you’re surprised? Or is it the kind when you finally catch up with the bastard who jattared you in the zorch down some dark alley?”

“Hmm. I see what you mean.”

“So, what do we do?”

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