

Elis Royd

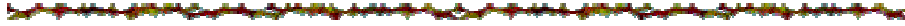


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Author's Introduction to Elis Royd



Life follows a universal, not merely a global, blueprint.

The parameters are basically the same, planet to planet, galaxy to galaxy.

On land: four limbs, two front and two rear.

In a liquid environment, smooth flanks and motive tail

In a gaseous one, forelimbs adapted for soaring and propulsion.

Nothing's cut in stone, and the variations are endless, yet the same *theme* runs through all things living (life cannot exceed its active window), regardless of the fanciful extraterrestrial properties introduced by inventors of new worlds.

Life respire *oxygen*. Living creatures *age*, and eventually *die* (a world can produce only so much sustenance—so 'immortal' creatures would eventually end up eating themselves out of existence anyway). Everything *fits* everything else. Without *trying* to.

Without *thinking* about it.

Intelligence, and sapience in general, are inevitable *flukes*, not necessities.

Life *metabolizes*. You and I, and anything else that eats and craps, are just *food sources* for everything else that eats and craps. That's *what* we are. That's *why* we're here.

Life *adjusts* . . . gorgeously. Even on an artificially enhanced asteroid like Elis Royd—slightly smaller and infused with a necessarily rarer atmosphere than Earth—disparate beings over many generations found their muscles and vital organs adjusting by infinitesimally subtle degrees. This holds true for all living things everywhere: as long as there is *sufficient* oxygen, *sufficient* heat, and *sufficient* metabolic material, life will eventually do just fine.

The laws of physics cannot be broken. But science fiction just wouldn't be much fun if the rules weren't bent once in a while—even with savagery. They simply mustn't be ignored altogether. So artists, whatever your medium, go ahead and animate the impossible—immortality, invisibility, non-organic life, telepathy, the “living dead”, God, ghosts, goblins and ghouls . . . something from nothing—just take the necessary pains to invent a plausible backdrop before you paint.

In all the galaxies I've studied, I've never encountered a life-form (and there are gazillions) remotely resembling *Homo sapiens* in character. This is because we are unquestionably the most advanced species. Unquestionably. So heave a collective sigh, guys; we're top dog, head honcho, king of the mountain. This superiority comes from social evolution (a herd phenomenon), not from intelligence (a very personal experience). It's how the million *apply* the one-in-a-million that spurs growth, spends populations, and ultimately makes the world turn.

Traits of selfishness, hypocrisy, and partisanship (all *isms*) are adaptive functions. Although they're vilified by figures of authority and the media (arguably the very critters most exemplifying these traits), they are necessary, are imperative, are excruciatingly important survival mechanisms—they are what makes us what we are (not who we are). The system cannot be changed. Woe to the blade ignorant of the lawn.

In many ways it was tough chronicling the rise and fall of Elis Royd—not because it was confusing, but because it wasn't. Turns out civilizations, like the universe itself, have a blueprint. *Everything*,

goddamnit, does. So the asteroid's bittersweet destruction, along with its denizens good and wicked, was unfolding just as I was getting to like some of the characters. Elis Royd, before it crumbled, was a microcosm.

Everything is.

I sure do hope you can enjoy—and, way more important, learn something from—this tight little history, before it vanishes, like you and I and everything else, into the great and bleak and ravenous abyss.

Elis Royd



“You are a little soul bearing about a corpse.”

—Epictetus

Bug

The Hoodooman

Four Horsemen

Emra

Human Says

The Commander

The Curios

The Elder

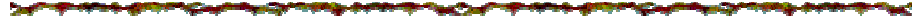
Mhendu

The Administrator

Storyteller

Chapter One

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Beppo took his time on the final grade. He had to: his hooves were split and bleeding, his back aching and stiff. And his little rhia Gwenda—his life-and soul mate, his constant companion—trembled and wheezed as she hiked. A trillion stars loomed on the horizon, but they weren't the night's visual attraction. What drew Beppo was a burnt gold to deep blue gradient—a heat aura spreading like a mushroom's cap just beyond this last weedy hill. At the summit they dropped in a heap. Far below stretched Earth Administration, the gleaming nerve center of Elis Royd—thirty square miles of glorious artificial light, flue-vented blossoms of regenerated heat, and great fans for stirring the ever-dead air—all run by a miniature subterranean atomic power plant. According to folklore, the gates, walls, and fences of Earth Administration—known by the local species as EarthAd—concealed soft beds, clean water, and delicacies light years-beyond the simple imaginations of Elis Royd's long-rotting applicants.

Beppo unhitched Gwenda's little wood cart. "See, my Gwenny? It is as I told you. No more hedgeroots and kunckleberries for us. We will eat as Earthmen, and for once we will recline in comfort." The

rhia's left foreleg was shaking so badly Beppo had to squeeze it between his paws. "We will rest now, girl." He pulled out his homemade wartroot flute and blew a crude four-note melody, watching dreamily as twilight quickly gave way to darkness along the asteroid's craggy rim.

Elis Royd has an interesting history, though it's now just a footnote in the Solar Annals.

Bear with me: the 23rd Century's first great wave of Terran conquest and colonization did not produce those eagerly anticipated troves of precious metals and self-perpetuating photo-energy sources.

What it *did* produce was a laughable answer to that ages-old Earth question: *Are we alone?*

Anything but.

The Milky Way is crawling with, is filthy with, is *infested* with life. So much so that kids on Earth now use a crude and immature aside to mock the slow-witted: "Duh, do you think there's life on other planets?" This *rarity of life* idea was at least as preposterous as that antiquated notion of a spaceship reaching planets light years away. *No single vehicle will ever span such distances.* Our solution was to mimic the old course of European colonization: millions of stations were prefabricated and launched into as many orbits, allowing ships to mathematically leapfrog outpost-to-outpost, until the very galaxy was in gridlock, and triumphant man's artificial glow challenged the timeless dazzle of sweet nature herself. The scary part is that we've only begun the exploratory process.

And even as the burgeoning Local Group War was creating wave after wave of refugees, Earth found herself the beacon for countless extraterrestrial species seeking to become democratized citizens of their conquering saviors. Applications for Earth citizenship were a global bureaucratic nightmare.

A naturalization post, based on an old Earth model, was founded on one of the larger asteroids in the Sirius system. This asteroid was given a rotation with an eighteen hour day, and pumped in a re-circulating atmosphere. Once the place was up and running, it was provisioned with vast food stores and outfitted as a self-contained administrative field; a kind of halfway house for extraterrestrial applicants, or *royds*, willing to stick it out over the long haul. To make the place more attractive, and to help prepare applicants for the *feel* of Earth, many species of Earth flora and fauna were imported. Inevitably countless extrasolar viruses and pests were also imported. Great plagues swept Earthmen and non-Solars alike, while Elis Royd,

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cut off from all meaningful aid, adjusted the hard way. Cadaver-sucking, lamprey-like *bleeders* popped out of the soil, huge warty *leapers* jumped on the necks and backs of walkers, depositing their eggs in fresh sores that never seemed to heal, long serrated *sleepers* slithered from stalks and made their way into the open mouths of slumbering travelers, down their throats, and, through capillary induction, all along their spinal columns. Earthmen desperately turned Administration into a vermin-free fortress with spiked fences and armed gates, off-limits to anything nonhuman, and let the rest of the asteroid go to hell.

As the War escalated, funds for Elis Royd dried up altogether. There was no time or energy for exotic projects; the War took everything. It's shameful now to think of how the asteroid was deliberately neglected, ignored, and forgotten. An abandoned orphan, left to drift generation after generation around Sirius, while the infighting leaders at EarthAd clung to a crumbling, Dark Ages-leaning vision of Christian Capitalist Democracy, and the ignorant adapting species tribalized, learned English, memorized brochures, survived epidemics—and waited for the hallowed doors to open.

All this history, in Beppo's time, was as remote as starlight. His understanding was the same as any other royd's: he was a member of a lower species whose sole purpose and ambition was to be a naturalized Earthman. He'd attempted to finance this dream through hard work: Elis Royd is an ore-rich asteroid, chock-full of prized metals and precious stones for those determined to dig deep enough. But, like many royds, Beppo had spent his life's scrapings on quick 'n' easy naturalization plans presented by various Administration-sponsored organizations. Unfortunately these organizations always seemed to vanish under mysterious circumstances—most likely ambushed, according to Administration analysts, by roving packs of savage royds. Rather than succumb to defeat, Beppo became a student of the Elis Royd Constitution, memorizing an original copy passed down from his great-great-great grandparents, who had perished, he was told, on this very hill, looking longingly on Earth Administration while clutching their cherished applications.

Little Beppo was now two hundred and thirty-seven Solar years old, and Gwenda nearly half that age. Both were hoary and hunched, both were wracked and ridden and almost too weary for words. So it took Beppo all of ten minutes to make it back to his hooves, and longer to right and re-hitch Gwenda. It was easier hiking downhill, and he took heart in the imposing spectacle of EarthAd's

gothic West Gate. His imagination, fueled by Administration brochures featuring grinning lily-white humans toting stuffed grocery bags and rosy-cheeked babes, was way ahead of him.

West Gate's head sentry must have heard Gwenda's tiny lead bell. A cracked yellow searchlight threw a sallow beam all around.

"You," called a voice. "Identify yourself and state your business."

"Beppo of Potter Bogs. I and my rhia have come to expire as Earthmen."

"As *Earthmen*?" There was a bark of laughter, and a muffled exchange with an unseen guard. "You sure don't look like any Earthman I know. And what's that gnarly little thing supposed to be—your racing pony?"

"We have Constitutional affirmation." Beppo pulled a rolled parchment from the cart.

"Keep your paws where I can see them."

An older, gruffer voice approached from behind the sentries. A flashdisk illuminated this man's and the guards' faces while the searchlight played over the cart. "What's that you said about a Constitution?"

"Article 72-A," piped Beppo. "Any denizen of Elis Royd who dies on Administration grounds while awaiting due and proper naturalization shall thereupon be deemed a naturalized citizen of Earth."

"Let me see that thing. Post, open the gate."

There was a clatter of iron chains. The big wood gate rose impressively, and light streamed over Beppo and Gwenda. A badged Earthman in loose shirt and pants stepped up, wiping the sweat from his eyes. All Earthmen sweat prodigiously, and all Earthmen stink like pigs. It's not their fault: the artificially-enhanced environment of Elis Royd will never compensate for the natural, sweet climes of Earth. The asteroid's other species are the products of numberless generations of adaptive survival on worlds no Earthman would last a day on, and their staple diets, like Beppo's and Gwenda's, consist of whatever can be gnawed off the plains and marshes of Elis Royd. Earthmen, by contrast, live sheltered lives filled with rich foods and fattening desserts; all provisioned by those humongous underground warehouses stocked by the asteroid's developers, time out of mind ago.

The Earthman, by his badge a captain of the guard, took the parchment from Beppo's withered paw and unrolled it in the light. In

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a minute he called up, "It's the real deal, all right." He came to a delicately squared and underlined article. "Any denizen of Elis Royd who dies on Admin—" and looked back down. "You'll forgive my impertinence, *sir*, but you don't quite fit the specifications of 'dead'. Not just yet, anyway."

"Very soon now," Beppo mumbled.

The captain harumphed. "What's the difference where you die? Why don't you just piss off with the rest of your kind? Why bother us? You two can die anywhere."

"But not as Earthmen."

The captain stabbed a fat forefinger. "'*On Administration grounds!*' I can read as well as you, and better. Until you're within these walls you're just a pest like all the rest. And what have you to barter?" He looked at shivering Gwenda. "Who's going to pay good money for a faded-out furball like that?"

"Article 74-B3," Beppo said. "Any denizen of Elis Royd seeking sanctuary in relation to any specified clause herein shall be granted entry for due counsel with an Arbiter of Elis Royd."

"West Arbiter cannot be disturbed! Come back in the morning."

"—'due counsel'," Beppo whispered timidly. "Captain, I shall not last this night. Profound biological awareness is common to my species. This is why we have come. This is why we have come tonight."

The captain reared. "You have no legal representation! You and that silly ass can rot right here and who'll know the difference? Where are your witnesses?" He craned up. "West Gate Guard! What did you see down here?"

The two sentries lowered their heads and looked away.

"The bottom of the scroll," Beppo said. "Please."

The captain unrolled the parchment completely. At the bottom was a dated testament to Beppo's intentions, signed by two score witnesses. The ink was still fresh. "I can't read this crap."

"Those are the witnesses you seek," Beppo said. "They retain a copy." He looked up respectfully. "Certainly a member of the Arbiter's court reads trans-species?"

The captain dropped his hands. "I give up." He called to the sentries, "Somebody roust West Arbiter. I know, I know. This isn't going to be pretty." He tucked the scroll under his arm. "I'll hang onto this. Come along, you."

The captain led them through West Gate into EarthAd proper. Beppo's jaw dropped at the numberless shops, closed for the day. There were lights all over the place; streetlamps, advertisements in glowing primaries, large and small blinkers. The roads were sweet, squared, and cobbled; heaven to the hooves.

"Pick it up," said the captain. "Now that you woke him, you sure as hell don't want to keep him waiting. Let's go, let's go, let's go."

They followed the main road to an imposing structure grander than anything Beppo had ever imagined. On a seemingly endless stairway, he was made to bump up the cart one step at a time while the captain glowered, and he and Gwenda had to undergo humiliating full-body cavity searches while their little cart was shaken down. Inside the building stood the Guard, stiff as cardboard cutouts, their eyes following Beppo and Gwenda all the way to West Arbiter's Chambers.

It was dark in the Chambers, and they were forced to cook there for the better part of an hour, facing a caving old desk beside a faded Terran flag. The place was a humidior for body odor—the whole room stank of Earthmen come and gone. The sweat of concentration, of squabbling, of arguing over spoils and shares, clogged the rents in the walls' peeling wood like burnt fat caking a crematorium. Beppo comforted his sagging rhia with a white whiskered paw.

A clammy bailiff walked in from the hall. "Stay where you are. Don't speak unless you're spoken to. Understand that you've come at a bad time."

Now a series of curses rose behind a heavy old oak door. The door banged open and closed, open and closed. More curses, another bang, and then a rickety aluminum wheelchair burst into the room and creaked up to the desk.

West Arbiter was certainly in his nineties; toothless, wattled, and half-blind, but just as tough as petrified wood. The blariness, the wispy white strands of hair—the overall *wildness* of his expression was that of a very old man cruelly torn from desperately needed sleep. The bailiff brought him his teeth and carefully wound him up in a heavy black robe. West Arbiter slapped away his hands. His voice was a toy flute: "Who demands sanctuary?"

"This is Beppo," said the bailiff, reading from the captain's prepared statement. "He claims his Constitutional right to perish in Earth Administration with the guaranteed status of Earthman, as validated by Article 72-A, and upheld by Article 74-B3 in cross-

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reference. The clauses have been underscored in red for Your Arbiter's perusal."

West Arbiter gestured irritably. "Where the hell's my eyes?"

The bailiff hefted a device shaped like a fishbowl on a lamp stand, carried it to the desk, and plugged it in. He swiveled the prescription-ground bowl laterally, then wrapped and secured the parchment to the glass. West Arbiter switched on the reading light and stuck in his head. For a while there was nothing to be heard but grunts and wheezes. Finally he popped his head back out and said, "I have seen enough."

The bailiff switched off the device and slid it aside.

West Arbiter gored Beppo with his eyes. He turned to the bailiff. "Has it been properly disinfected?"

"There are apparently time constraints. His death and all that."

West Arbiter looked back. "You. Come forward."

Beppo limped up to the desk and meekly folded his paws.

West Arbiter said, "I'll not waste our time with silly questions. You wouldn't have gone to all this trouble if you weren't sincere. I understand, by dint of that annoying captain of the guard, that you are to die tonight with chronological certitude. So be it. But understand that, by any sane reading of this Constitution, you can only be a dead Earthman. While you live you are merely a lesser species present as our fawning guest—an unlettered, ignoble creature born only for bogs and hollows, an embarrassment and failure; a dirty, ugly, untrustworthy specimen scraping humbly at the mat of godlike sophistication—a foul thing unfit, by any stretch of the imagination, to bear the proud title 'Earthman'. Are we clear on this, sir?"

When little Beppo nodded shyly, West Arbiter leaned back and grinned ear to ear. "So you want to be an Earthman . . ." He snapped his spindly fingers. "Perhaps I am growing soft with the years, Beppo, but since you *are* here, and while you *are* alive . . . would you like a taste of what it's like to actually *live* as an Earthman? A last supper, so to speak."

"Oh," Beppo breathed, "so very, very much."

"Bailiff!" West Arbiter snapped. "Pass the word! Beppo is to be treated as a man of Earth tonight! You will be his personal tour guide. Give him the red carpet treatment. Make him feel at home."

"One other thing," Beppo interjected. "Sir. Such a small thing. My rhia. She too will pass this night. Gwenda is my soul mate. If you look at the seventh clause under Article 79, you will see that family are included in the Honorary Earthmen's provision. Gwenda is all the

family I possess; I cannot exist without her, nor she without me. Our deaths must be as one.”

West Arbiter’s head rocked on his clasped hands. “You’ve certainly done your homework, Beppo. I don’t need to examine the Constitution ad infinitum. What the hell! Tonight Earth Administration is the genial host of you and your rhia, and tomorrow you shall both be interred, together, on Earthmen’s turf . . . as men of Earth!”

Beppo fought back the tears. “Oh, thank you so much, sir.”

“Scat!” West Arbiter barked. “And if I cannot get back to sleep I’ll have that captain of the guard impaled on his own spinal column. Be of good cheer, little Beppo, for tonight you die.”



“This,” said the bailiff, “is the main galley. It’s where we come to eat at specific meal times, but Earthmen are free to hang out and munch whenever they’re in the mood.”

“Incredible!” Beppo said. “The aromas! Beyond my most savory dreams.” Beside him, Gwenda was craning and sniffing like a pup. Little by little a plaintive whine seeped from her wet twitching muzzle.

“There’s a menu over the counter, but it probably won’t make much sense to you. Why don’t we walk along the buffet and you guys just select whatever looks good.” To the lady behind the counter he said, “Stroganoff for me. Cheese sticks and honey crisps.”

“It all looks wonderful,” Beppo gushed. Gwenda’s muzzle slid back and forth below the sneezeguard. “What is this?”

“Milky Way pudding,” said the bailiff. “Baked sweet dough, raisins, butter, cinnamon, sugar, warm cream.”

“Gweny says yes.”

The server smiled with her eyes. “And for you?”

Beppo’s eyes searched the floor. “Just something light,” he said. “Would boiled roots be too dear?”

“Hot butter beans and ham it is,” she said. “Corn bread and mashed potatoes, sweet peas in cheese. Butter pecan ice cream with a side of mixed berries and whipped. Big glass of cold milk to wash it all down.”

“Tab’s on Administration,” said the bailiff.

“And the tip?”

“Covered.”

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They sat quietly until the server brought their food. Everybody laughed when Gwenda buried her head in the pudding, but a moment later the ice was back.

"I just said you were covered," the bailiff muttered, "so's your food wouldn't come cold. I'm sure as hell not paying for all this. What've you got in that little cart?"

"I'm sorry?"

"What are you using for barter? There's this food, the Arbitrator's fees, my eight percent, your burial plot . . . you got any precious stones, or gold in your teeth? How much could I get for this raggedy animal? He'll have to be tanned; forget the fur. And he'll have to be dried for jerky. No one's gonna want to eat this mangy stuff as-is."

"*She* is to be buried with me. I was under the impression we were to be treated as Earthmen."

The bailiff gave Beppo a hard look. "Okay, *Earthman*. Now why don't you tell me what's in the cart? What's under that blanket?"

"My personal affairs. There are certain things one cannot part with."

"Like rare metals, maybe? Gemstones? Everybody knows you royds hoard what you find. What good's it gonna do you when you're dead?"

"Nothing like that."

"Then you won't mind if I look." He scooted closer to the cart.

An odd little panic gripped Beppo. It was cross-species; for the first time in his life he was feeling violated. "Don't touch that," he managed.

"Fifty-fifty," said the bailiff. "I can fence for you. You've got the goods, I've got the connections."

"No!"

"I'll make sure you get the snazziest headstone. I'm telling you, this is your lucky day." He took a broad step to the cart and yanked away the coarse blanket. Underneath were half-gnawed roots, hand-polished pebbles, various antique Administration brochures extolling the wonders of Earthlings, and Beppo's personal drawing pad and journal.

"What is all this shit?"

"My thoughts and artwork," Beppo said. "Earth Administration literature . . . some rocks I was planning on painting . . . breakfast leftovers."

The bailiff glared for a long minute. “Man of Earth,” he muttered, picking up Beppo’s barely-touched plates and tossing them in the disposal chute. Sensing his design, Gwenda immediately snorted the last of her pudding. The bailiff silently led them out the building and back onto the main road. The little party of three made their way down the darkened streets in a silent file. Shadowy humans, male and female, watched quietly from doorways and hollows; the bailiff flashed his badge and they melted into the dark. Farther on were ramshackle homes, where Earthmen stared from porches; Beppo smiled fraternally, but the eyes slid away. He’d never been so conscious of being a royd. The narrowing streets became side roads, and soon they were following an old dirt path that gave way to a field, a wetland, and finally a marsh reminiscent of home.

Now the only illumination was starlight. Beppo and Gwenda pulled the cart through deepening muck, their hooves slurping in staggered time. To their left ran the circuitous pale of Earth Administration: a high steel fence capped by razor wire and studded every few hundred yards with egress-only spiked turnstiles—entrance to Administration grounds required tandem keys for temporary displacement of the turnstiles’ retaining bars. It was obvious, by the dully shining gristle on the spikes, that generations of royds, desperate or slow-witted, had given their all attempting to beat the system. The bailiff used a multi-stepped reflector to scatter starlight before them, and at last they reached a particularly desolate arm of EarthAd—a place Beppo recognized as just beyond Harrow Bog. The bailiff shined his reflector on a sinkhole and turned.

“This is your plot. You and your animal may die here. As you lack funds, you lack all funerary expenses. That means no one to cover your corpses, and no marker. However, the ground here is soft, and in time your bodies will certainly be absorbed.” The bailiff gave a little flick of a salute. “Vaya con Dios,” he said, “‘Earthman’.”

Beppo bowed clear to the waist. “Goodbye, fellow Earthman. And bless you. And bless all we men of Earth.”

“Yeah, right.” The bailiff receded into the night.

Beppo began guiding Gwenda, but the rhia went straight into seizure and dropped on her belly. He unhitched the cart and lifted her in his arms. She was too heavy to bear outright, so he half-carried, half-dragged her through a turnstile, out of Earth Administration and into Harrow Bog. The two struggled up the incline to a solid hill and collapsed in a pile of paws and hooves.

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“There there, girl,” Beppo cooed over and over, while the rhia bleated and shook in his arms. In the ground around them, bleeders responded to her throes by erupting from the dirt and leaping on her muzzle and flank.

“No!” Beppo wailed. “Not yet!” He frantically peeled them off, even as Gwenda’s final shudder ran down his frame. The bleeders jumped from her forelegs to his face and throat, sprouted between his legs, pinned his ankles to the ground. He flailed his arms and rolled onto his back. And the vermin piled on savagely, forming a writhing violet hump. Beppo lurched twice, attempting to rise, but was overwhelmed by the weight and frenzy. And the many sucking mouths passed the precious fluids deep into the ground, to their flopping starving *mater*, her tapering purple limbs clamped to a hundred narrow jags in the black hole that is Elis Royd.

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