

# CHAPTER 1

[Six months earlier.]

**Y**ou're out of beer."  
"Don't bother me. I'm busy."  
"Chips too. There are no chips in this house."

It's twilight in Ooolandia, a world like many other worlds but with an extra "O." A world filled with the feathered, the furred, the scaled, the shelled, the shorn, and the nearly naked. Mammals, microbes, reptiles, arachnids, insects, hominids, and the all-too-humanoid bustle about together, occasionally bumping into those who don't fit into any category at all—those who are, essentially, one-offs.

The discussion regarding provisions is taking place between one such one-off, known as Tabook, and his friend, Banshoo, a monkey on a mission.

"I'm working on something important here."

"Chips are important. Beer is very important."

Tabook is rummaging through the cupboards in Banshoo's kitchen. Banshoo is sitting at the desk in his living room, a cozy

place filled with overstuffed furniture, overstuffed bookshelves, and several oddly annotated landscapes hanging slightly askew.

“There’s something big going on, Tabook, something so big it’s hidden from sight.” His thick, fluffy coat and furry face look reddish-brown in the lamp’s glow as his black eyes scan quickly through the notebooks piled high in front of him. “I’m seeing so many improbable changes. It’s all got to be connected somehow.”

Tabook saunters into the living room carrying a jar of peanut butter and a spoon.

“You notice too much, Shooo. There’s a lot to be said for simply walking by.”

“It’s my job to notice things.”

“Yeah, yeah, big deal phenologist. I hate to break it to you, buddy, but nobody cares. Nobody even knows what ‘phenologist’ means.”

Banshooo sighs. “I’ve told you what it means. We study natural events, recording what happens and when it happens. It’s how we know that something is changing.”

“Great. So you notice things. What’s the big deal?”

Tabook sticks the spoon into the peanut butter jar and scoops out a generous mouthful. Covered in shaggy black fur, he stands upright on his back feet, his long forearms sporting sizable paws. He’s tall and what might be called...unexpected. His face looks a bit bearish but with long floppy ears that often get in the way of his primary interest—eating.

Banshooo frowns. “You don’t understand what’s at stake here, Book. The water’s drying up, the weather’s getting weird, and some kind of puzzling anemone anomaly has taken hold.”

“Hey, I know. Strange things are happening, but they’ll figure out something before it all goes south. And if they don’t, well, we’ll wish we’d loaded up on beer and chips while we had the chance.”

Banshooo watches his friend eat and considers, not for the first time, how right Tabook might be. Hardly anyone seems to care about the extraordinary developments that he documents every day, or about the fact that the information he has amassed over the years indicates there is a rapidly accelerating shift occurring; a shift that could result in dangerous instabilities. Even in his job at the

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Ooolandian Department of Nature, where you'd think they'd care about that sort of thing, no one seemed to want to hear about it.

Tabook plops down on the couch, puts his feet up on the tea table, and balances the peanut butter jar on his belly. It wobbles a bit then steadies. "Hey! Look at that! Abs of steel." He burps, and the jar topples onto the floor. Chuckling gleefully, he picks it up and scoops out another big spoonful as he looks over at Banshooo. "So. Wanna go bowling later?"

In the meadow outside the little house, the wind makes a low whistling sound through the tufted grass, while across the field, hidden deep inside the center of a wood lily, minute abnormalities uncurl themselves.



Night arrives and the Ooolandian sky reveals itself in all its bizarre beneficence, jam-crammed with an extraordinary complement of stars and planets, not to mention a number of other celestial-type objects floating about. Most spectacular of all are its three big moons. Ooolandians are particularly proud of their moons and they have reason to be. One is crimson, one is blue, and one is a kind of apricot color. It's pretty awesome, actually.

Amid all that rich profusion, there is only the one Ooolandian sun. One big, exploding fireball hanging way out there all by itself. It comes up. It goes down. It comes up again. It's the kind of thing everyone gets so totally used to there's no noticing at all. And so it was that it took a long time to see that something was changing. Something was changing in the Ooolandian sky.

Early on, there were a few who thought they noticed something but they didn't know what, and when they tried to talk to the others about it, nobody listened. In Ooolandia, it can be hard to be heard if you question things, especially if you aren't sure what your own questions might reveal.

Then the bees started dying. Today, there are only three bees left in Ooolandia and they're not talking. Having barely survived the enslavement and poisoning of their entire species, the three

have gone into hiding. Permanently. In response to this die-off, the Ooolandian authorities are working to create bioengineered insects for mass pollination while promoting processed rations for all. Fortunately, the general population has become quite fond of disodium 5'-ribonucleotides.

Then too, there was the matter of the fireflies. One of the oldest Ooolandian festivals is the annual Dipper Dance celebrated when the Big Dipper bows down toward the ground while vast numbers of blinking fireflies ascend up to the heavens, creating a dazzling spectacle during which everyone dances, makes music, drinks a lot of sparkling wine, and generally goes crazy all night long. It was a grand tradition celebrated since ancient times, so extraordinarily beautiful that it was enough to stop even the most clever of cynical remarks in mid-snark.

However, each year for a while now there have been fewer and fewer fireflies, so the Ooolandians created electric fireflies, which made them very proud of themselves and filled the sky with blinking lights and which, after you had twirled, whirled, and drunk enough, looked pretty much the same as the living lights of the living fireflies. And so the festival continued somewhat as before, even though all the old songs written about the fireflies didn't really make sense anymore. But they were sung anyway, for old times' sake.

Some old-timers didn't think "old time's sake" was enough and they grumbled and griped and worried about where the fireflies had gone. But the old-timers were, after all, old. They didn't appreciate the astounding ingenuity that had created all that electricity, which was, truth be told, astounding.

Most Ooolandians were very proud of these kinds of accomplishments. They built many magnificent things and then they built some more. They moved the earth, re-routed rivers, cut and cleared, dug and drilled, blew and spewed and sprayed stuff everywhere. Lots of different stuff. Stuff they made in their impressive laboratories. Stuff that gave them control.

Then, one night, the blue moon went into eclipse and didn't come out again. At that point everyone noticed. There was a big hole in the sky, surrounded by a ghostly shadow. You couldn't miss

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it. Now began much discussion and argument. Some said it was no big deal; some said it was a very big deal. Some said it was in the natural order of things; some said it was extremely unnatural. Some said it would work itself out on its own; some said they should be doing something.

Unfortunately, such arguing can go on forever and sometimes there isn't much time to waste. Sometimes, while everyone is arguing, something bad is going on. Something really, really bad.