

Valewood Tales

The Root of All Evil

Andrew was awake, and not enjoying it. He felt, very strongly, that he deserved at least a few hours of sleep after the day he had just had. Unfortunately his body seemed to disagree. He stared up at the ceiling, and shifted slightly in bed to try and take the weight off the sizeable bruise developing on his back.

In retrospect, it was funny in a weird way. Twenty-four hours ago, he had also been awake, but for entirely different reasons. Twenty-four hours ago, he had been too nervous about leaving home and setting up shop in a different town altogether to get to sleep, and now he was just trying to wrap his head around everything that had just happened. Andrew looked up at the ceiling of the empty blue room he had chosen - there were only two bedrooms not counting the attic, and the other one did not seem to have a bed, so all in all, his choices had been significantly narrowed down.

He winced as he turned over and discovered another bruise on his arm. He imagined that being thrown against a wall several times probably left more subtle injuries than it ever seemed to do to the people on television, and then caught himself wondering if they ever found themselves unable to sleep at night for the reasons that he was now being denied rest. He had accidentally exploded a book, learned nothing about the disappearance of his grandfather, and even less about the bizarre town in which he had effectively found himself stuck.

And on top of that, there was an alien living in his house now. Actually, he wondered if that was an unfair description. Darwin seemed like a reasonable sort of person, and strictly speaking, he was human. Just from another planet. Andrew added another mark to the tally of things he thought he would never find himself saying completely sincerely. There was a lengthy pause as he thought about everything again.

A noise downstairs. Andrew blinked, in the manner of somebody who believed that their day couldn't possibly have gotten any weirder, and then been proven spectacularly wrong. Did Valewood have burglars? It didn't seem like the kind of town which had to put up with them often, but then again, he wasn't entirely sure what kind of town it was anymore. He sat up, pushed the covers back, and hauled himself out of bed.

He got about halfway down the stairs before it suddenly occurred to him that he had absolutely no idea what he was going to do if it was a burglar. Up until a certain point, he had relied on his sister Ruby to deal with unexplained happenings in the night - and those had mostly turned out to be next door's cat.

Andrew found himself following this train of thought so devotedly that he suddenly discovered he was at the bottom of the stairs and almost in the living room before he had a proper opportunity to plan a better course of action. Hesitantly, he stuck his head out and

leaned at the edge of the wall, squinting across the inky blackness to get a better glimpse of whatever it was that was making noises in the kitchen.

Embracing a bold new philosophy of going forward in the face of uncertainty, he switched on the living room light and the room was illuminated in a dull yellowish glow. In the kitchen, at the other end of the room, a man in a red hoodie suddenly fell to the floor and started screaming.

Andrew blinked. "Darwin?" he said, hesitantly. It sounded weird, saying the name of his new housemate-slash-alien-researcher aloud.

His new housemate-slash-alien-researcher didn't seem to notice, because he was too busy writhing about on the floor. Darwin was thrashing his limbs and kicking wildly at things for seemingly no reason, his goggles pulled off his forehead and over his face. Did he get like this when surprised? No he didn't, because Andrew had scared the living daylights out of him back in his weird lair thing in the catacombs of Darkstone Manor and it hadn't caused him to do... whatever this was.

"Blind!" wailed the inventor, "I'm blind! I can't see! It's the end!"

Andrew wasn't entirely sure what to do. He waited a moment, and then Darwin stopped thrashing suddenly and slowly pulled the goggles off of his eyes. He seemed to take a moment to gather himself, and then grinned cheerily at Andrew. "Sorry," he said, discovering the tassels on his hoodie with feigned interest, "I forgot I was on night vision."

"What are you doing down here?" Andrew asked, wearily.

"I got hungry," admitted Darwin, unhappily. "I forgot where you were sleeping so I couldn't ask you, but I decided to be brave and go exploring myself. Then I forgot which room was the kitchen, and I think I tried to eat paper at one point, but it was at about the part where I fell down some stairs that I remembered that my goggles have a night vision setting."

There was a pause.

"By the way, did you know you have a basement full of some really illegal space stuff?" Darwin asked, as he rifled through empty cupboards in search of a snack.

"Illegal space stuff?" replied Andrew, curiously, "All I saw were a lot of boxes and a couple of weird crystals and, uh, some kind of glowing tree thing. And also a mysterious book, but that caught on fire so I don't know if it really counts anymore."

Darwin hesitantly took a bite of a paper cup, and then spat it out into the sink. "Very illegal," he explained, through a mouthful of styrofoam, "Some of that stuff is Class-3 illegal. I found what looked like a prototype Dimension Root down there. Andrew, these edible cups are disgusting."

Andrew opened the one cupboard he remembered had some semblance of food in, and took out a packet of crisps. "Er, have some of these," he said bemusedly, and tossed the packet to Darwin. To his immense relief, the Reloovian inventor opened it like a normal person and immediately began eating crisps like a normal person.

This was more heartening to Andrew than it probably seems. "What's Class-3 illegal?" he asked, positioning himself on the sofa as Darwin rapidly devoured the bag of crisps. Darwin took a moment to answer as he finished pouring the crisps into his mouth, and then another moment as he tried to stop himself from choking.

"Are you finished?" Andrew said, eventually.

"Hold on a second," replied Darwin, and punched himself in the stomach, "Okay, I'm good." He crossed through to the living room and perched on the arm of the sofa. "So you have, like, laws on Earth," he began.

"Darwin, I- I know what illegal means. I'm just saying, uh, should we be worried about it?" Andrew shuffled nervously on the sofa, picking nervously at his words as if they were a meal he loathed but had been served and felt it impolite not to eat.

Darwin pulled a face, and then shrugged. "I don't really know," he admitted, and this satisfied Andrew for several seconds. They sat in a bemused sort of silence under the pale yellow light of the living room. Andrew felt that this was terribly awkward, but wasn't entirely sure where to go next with the conversation.

"So we should probably go grocery shopping tomorrow," he said, eventually, "I don't have much else in, other than that *Crunchers* multipack. It was about the only food I remembered to bring. I reckon that sandwich Mum made me is still sitting on the kitchen table at home."

"I think I brought a toaster," replied Darwin.

"Not much use if we don't have any bread."

The Reloovian inventor considered this. "I'm working on that," he said, "We could try toasting some crisps?"

"I think that's more likely to set something on fire," Andrew muttered, fiddling with his phone. His Twitter account seemed to have a new follower, someone with the username *May_Kasura91* and a profile picture of a cat holding a knife. He hit the 'follow' button and looked blankly at the other side of the room again, its black screen of a TV nestled casually against the wall.

"It's not really a big concern," said Darwin, "I brought spares."

"Spare *toasters*?"

He shrugged nonchalantly, "I'm a big fan. Earth's greatest invention, if you ask me."

"Huh. I would have said something like vaccines. Or the internet." Andrew pulled a face, and thought about this for a second. He thanked his lucky stars he hadn't said 'anime', very nearly the first thing he had thought of.

His new housemate, however, seemed to disagree. "Well, you didn't strictly invent the internet. You discovered it, really," he replied.

"I don't think that's right," said Andrew.

"Neither did Tim Berners-Lee."

Andrew folded his arms. "Okay," he said, "That doesn't add up. You can't honestly tell me with a straight face that you believed Ronald Reagan to be the prime minister but you have exact knowledge of who invented the world wide web."

Darwin pulled a face and shuffled away from him slightly, a feat which was hard to accomplish because of the fact that he was still perched on the arm of the sofa. He awkwardly fiddled with the tassels on his hoodie again. "So my research into Earth history wasn't *entirely* comprehensive," he admitted, "Sometimes I just got stuck looking at the parts which weren't depressing."

"They're few and far between," Andrew said, nodding appreciatively.

"Outside of that, I mostly focused on weird paranormal stuff in the town. Oh, and literature. There's a lot of it, and the old stuff is really interesting when it's not downright bizarre. Did you know that Oedipus-"

"Yep."

"Oh." Darwin thought about this for a moment, and Andrew decided to seize his opportunity to get some answers.

"So what's it *really* like on Reloo? What did you mean when you said it was a splinter of human society? What's the government like? Tell me about the intergalactic trading hubs. Have you ever kissed a robot?"

The Reloovian waited a few seconds until the questions exhausted themselves. He thought about it, and then stuck his hands in his pockets, "Er, it's just sort of normal, I suppose. I've never really thought about it. We have normal people things."

"That's disappointing-"

"Y'know, like spaceships, laws, sports, TV shows, trading outposts, that kind of thing." Darwin shrugged, "It's all fairly standard." He opened his mouth to continue, but found himself unexpectedly interrupted.

Andrew gripped his arm, an expression of awe on his face. "Darwin, spaceships are *not* normal people things." His face fell suddenly. "Wait, sorry, is that racist?"

"A bit."

"Sorry. I meant Earth-wise. Oh my god, I can't believe I'm saying this. I can't believe I live the sort of life now where a sentence like that makes sense to me. Oh, my god." Andrew found that the words were falling out before he could stop them. "Oh my god," he said again, and rubbed his eye. The bruise seemed like it was starting to fade.

"It's not *that* interesting," mumbled Darwin, slightly embarrassed.

"Sorry. Right. Yes. Sorry," said Andrew, who suddenly found that the implications of everything he had seen and learned in the past twenty-four hours were starting to set in. These were the kind of revelations that, as far as he was aware, nobody else in human history ever really got with any degree of frequency. It had seemed rather more depressing when he was lying in bed staring at the ceiling earlier, but now he was mentally giving himself the whole Carl Sagan.

"Tell me about the splinter of human society thing," he managed to say, eventually. "Are you, like, 100% biologically human? Are there real aliens out there?"

Darwin thought about this. "Well, nobody really knows any specifics, but the whole society was put together about a millennia or so ago when some humans were dumped on the planet. Possibly by more advanced aliens, but we can't actually be sure. Ancient Reloovians were terrible at recording history."

"So you got sent here to steal ours."

To his surprise, Darwin did not seem to grasp the specifics of the joke. He looked away slightly and seemed a little downcast. "I don't want to talk about it," he said.

"Oh, okay. Um, sure, that's cool," replied Andrew, awkwardly scratching the back of his head. There were a few more unbearable seconds of silence as he searched desperately for another topic to grasp at. "So the other guys seem nice," he said eventually.

"You don't know them?" asked Darwin.

Andrew pulled a face. "No. I've only just moved in. May and Liz thought I was a burglar and tried to get me arrested, and Moe's just this... vaguely sinister rich person."

"I don't think that's fair."

“No, you’re right. All rich people are sinister,” said Andrew, and Darwin laughed. They sat in slightly less awkward silence as Andrew fiddled briefly with his phone again and found that May appeared to have sent him a picture of herself with a pile of destroyed Securobot pieces. He took a moment to wonder when she had taken this.

“They seem like reasonable people if you’re planning to get to know the place better,” said Darwin, cheerily. He glanced out of the living room window at the night sky, vaguely obscured by the trees on the other side of the street. Andrew guessed he was thinking about home, and something occurred to him.

“You mean you’re not?” he asked.

Darwin made a vague noise of confusion, and adjusted his goggles slightly.

“What about you? Aren’t *you* planning to get to know the place better?” Andrew scratched the back of his neck awkwardly, hoping he wasn’t being too intrusive. His new housemate didn’t seem to mind.

“I shouldn’t, really,” Darwin replied, glumly, “I’m not supposed to make connections in the field.”

“I mean, you already destroyed your student-issue Securobot thing with the help of four other randoms and threw a ball in my face. I’ve still got the bruise to show for it!” Andrew gestured cheerfully at his black eye, and Darwin squinted to make it out in the electrically-lit gloom. It was, mostly, a little splodge of purple around an otherwise normal-looking eye.

“Sorry about that,” he said.

Andrew chuckled to himself. “Eh. I’m pretty sure I have worse bruises from the robot. Anyway, my point is, you can’t plan on keeping yourself locked up in the basement reading books for the rest of your time here, can you?”

“It’ll be dull, but that’s just how research is,” said Darwin, “I’m married to my work!”

“Hmm,” Andrew muttered, “I nearly got married once. There was an accident at my cousin Steven’s wedding. The priest was drunk and the bride got lost.”

Darwin raised a quizzical eyebrow.

“I’m told she was into me,” Andrew said, not entirely confidently, and thought about this for a moment. The look on his face betrayed his doubts, and he stood up. “I think I’m gonna head to bed,” he began, and found that he was unexpectedly unable to finish his sentence because of an ominous rumble suddenly and without warning emanating from beneath the house.

Andrew looked at Darwin. Darwin looked at Andrew.

"I don't think I'm gonna head to bed," said Andrew.

About a minute and a half later, the two of them were venturing into the basement. Darwin was brandishing a torch dramatically as they descended the stairs. He shone it over the shelves and boxes suspiciously, looking for the source of the frankly seismic rumble.

They reached the bottom of the stairs, and Andrew turned the light on. Darwin coughed awkwardly, almost affronted. "I brought a torch," he said, looking miffed.

"And I brought a light switch," Andrew replied, "I mean, I didn't actually buy it. It was in the house when I got it. It came with the house."

"So how *did* you get the house?" Darwin asked, as he stuck his head in a cardboard box and yelped in pain upon colliding with several cassettes full of 80s music, "I think I missed the exposition about that part."

Andrew, who was busy investigating a bookshelf, paused. "Well, my granddad died a couple of years ago," he explained, "I say 'died'. He went missing for a couple of weeks and then a body turned up in the river, so..."

"Was it his body?" Darwin said, holding up a shimmering crystal to the electric light of the basement. It reflected some impossible colours on the wall, and he put it back.

There was a brief moment of uncomfortable silence as Andrew tried to figure out how to respond to that. "Well, yeah," he replied. "I mean if it wasn't him, it was someone biologically identical. Anyway, they sorted out his will and it turns out my parents got the house, um, except they didn't really need it."

Darwin opened his mouth to respond, but something rumbled again, louder and closer. He and Andrew exchanged nervous looks and then lunged for the source of the disturbance, located right behind them. It was the tree thing Andrew had seen earlier - tubular, about four feet tall and glowing slightly with strange blue lines indented all over the thing. A panel with circular indentations sat near the top of it, and it appeared to be mounted on wheels and rested against the wall, like a very bizarre cannon.

A tube extended from one side of it like a miniature chimney. It appeared to be the thing that was rumbling ominously, and as it did so, a pool of sinister blue energy was beginning to accumulate on top of the device. The two of them looked at it, bemused.

"What is it?" Andrew asked, peering at the thing, "A warp drive?"

"A warp- a *warp drive*?!" spluttered Darwin, "If I put that thing in a spaceship it would- well, I'm not sure what it would do, but I feel like it would cost a lot of money."

Andrew narrowed his eyes at his new housemate. "Why don't you tell me what it is instead of insulting my not unreasonably limited knowledge of anything existing beyond the confines of my tiny and primitive planet, Mr. Smartfart?"

"*Mr. Smartfart?*"

"I don't know! I was trying to be clever."

"You're not very good at it," Darwin said, and squinted closer at the machine. "Well, from the... everything, I think this is what they call a Dimension Root out in the Daellan clusters."

Andrew's eyes widened, and he peered over the rim of the thing at the bubbling pool of light that appeared to be growing atop it. "A Dimension Root. I can't believe that's an actual name for an actual thing that actually exists. What does it do?"

"Well, first of all, it's banned in over nine hundred civilised systems," explained Darwin, "But you're lucky, because I don't think the galactic governments count Earth as civilised." He tapped the side of the Root, and frowned to himself.

"Yeah, I know," groaned Andrew, "Mostly harmless and all that. Why is it rumbling like it's going to explode or something? And what's with the pool of light water thing on the top? God, I hate asking so many questions."

Darwin shrugged. "I don't know how these things work. All I remember from my notes is that criminals tended to use them to shunt entire planets into other dimensions to save money on solar tax."

"*Solar tax?*"

He scratched the back of his head. "It was either that or ice cream tax."

Andrew fished around on the floor near the thing and found a biro quietly abandoned beneath a box which had been taped up and labelled *Misc*. Holding it at arm's length, he dipped the pen into the pool of glowing liquid and winced as he pulled it out and found that half of it no longer seemed to exist.

"Yikes," he said, "Bang, and the pen ceases to exist on this dimensional plane. What is it, some kind of battery acid?"

Darwin made a slightly troubled noise. "Probably quantum fluid. Which is pretty much the same thing. Don't touch it, unless you want your reality to unfold around you."

"Great," Andrew said to nobody in particular, "The space tree is leaking time juice. Let's call the astro-plumber!" He kicked a box in annoyance, and it fell over, spilling out a bunch of bizarre alien tools that neither of them recognised. "Huh. Fancy some emergency home

repair?" he asked, crouching over something that looked like it was usually inserted in a place best left undescribed for purposes which were also best left undescribed.

Darwin shook his head. "I'm not so sure that's a good idea," he said, and then the Dimension Root started to rumble again. The entire basement seemed to shake on a level neither of them could quite describe, and the glowing blue fluid started to drip out of the Root, where it made contact with the floor and went straight through it.

"I think we rather have to," said Andrew, watching the droplet disappear into a vast and unknowable chasm of its own making, "The fate of the universe, and to a lesser extent my house, appears to depend on it." He held up one of the bizarre tools and pushed the Dimension Root round a little so that it was somewhat more neatly positioned in the centre of the room. On its back there was a panel, and as he ran a nervous hand over it, it slid off.

The two of them crouched to get a better look inside the device, and immediately regretted it. Inside the Dimension Root was a cluster of bizarre, branch-like growths with vaguely glowing blue leaves, and a whispering noise which made both of them feel uncomfortable. Darwin adjusted his goggles awkwardly and stood up straight.

Andrew, instead, reached inside and immediately found a couple of wiry branches which were glowing with a more sickly green than the cool blue emitted by the rest of the device. His face lit up as he bunched them together and pulled them out as much as he could, revealing them in the basement's electric light.

"There's your problem," he said knowledgeably, "These weird bits are glowing a weird green when they should be glowing a weird blue, probably."

"Maybe they're supposed to be green," commented Darwin.

"And maybe *you're* supposed to be helping me fix the dangerous space thing," Andrew retorted, jabbing a finger at his new housemate. He turned back, squinted at the branches and tried to think about the source of the problem. "You said it was leaking quantum acid or something, right?"

"Quantum fluid," Darwin corrected, "Are you suggesting there might be a loose cap?"

Andrew pulled a dour face. "Maybe that's what green wires mean in space. Loose fuel cap, replace immediately or risk destroying the very fabric of reality." He looked down at the space where the fluid had dripped into the floor and dug what appeared to be a very, very deep hole. "Seriously, is that going all the way to China?"

"It's far more likely that it'll just come out in an ocean somewhere," the Reloovian said, "But that won't be a problem in our lifetime. If anything, it'll probably fix those rising sea levels of yours."

“Not quite the solution for global warming we were looking for,” Andrew said dryly, and he reached further up inside the Root. “Can you give me a hand with this? It’s just that I don’t really feel like losing mine.”

Darwin hesitated.

“Come on, please,” Andrew pleaded, “Sometimes to make an omelette, you have to break a few non-intervention policies.”

An awkward pause.

“I’ll give you more crisps,” he said, and Darwin grinned.

Half an hour later, they had managed to stop a Dimension Root from leaking quantum fluid and unfolding the fabric of reality using only a collection of bizarre tools and something that Andrew very seriously suspected was for bedroom use only.

There were a few cavernous holes in the floor that Darwin said most definitely led to the molten core of the Earth, but Andrew decided that if he didn’t think about it too hard then it was probably okay. For the time being he had just put a few sheets of cardboard over them and then together they had rolled the Dimension Root back into place. The two of them stood and triumphantly surveyed their handiwork.

“I’ve come a long way from unblocking a toilet with a watering can,” Darwin said enthusiastically, hands on his hips.

“You’ve what?” asked Andrew, but the Reloovian was already heading up the stairs..

He found Darwin in the living room a couple of minutes later, watching cartoons on some random channel somewhere. Andrew glanced up at the clock and found that it was almost four in the morning. He groaned and awkwardly cleared this throat.

“Oh! Andrew,” said Darwin, cheerfully but slightly tiredly, “Feel free to join me. I was just watching this show about a talking cat with the power to time travel anywhere in time as long as his family loves him. It’s just like my life, except not really at all now that I think about it.”

Andrew stood in the doorway between the stairs and the hallway, and rubbed his eyes. “I’m probably going to head to bed for real this time,” he said, and pulled his dressing gown tighter around himself. “Thanks for your help with the dimension thing.”

Darwin nodded cheerily. “I can’t really research a planet that’s covered in quantum holes,” he replied. “Maybe we can go see the others tomorrow and tell them about it.”

“I thought you didn’t want to leave the house?” Andrew asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I *did*, but then I sort of decided that would be boring," explained Darwin. He thought about this for a moment. "Plus, I want to know why your strange grandfather had highly illegal technology just stored away in the basement of his very normal house. Also your friends seemed nice. I liked the blue one!"

"That's the spirit. You've just got to get out there sometimes," Andrew said, and suddenly realised just how tired he was. His face fell. "God, this is the kind of advice I should have been giving to myself aged 12. That guy was a prick."

His housemate blinked in surprise. "You used to keep yourself locked up in the basement reading books?" he asked, "I think I would have gotten on well with him."

Andrew frowned, shamefacedly. "I was going through a weird period where I tried to pretend I was a tortured soul and wore a lot of black. Didn't really work because my hair was both blonde and curly. Then I spent five years trying to be an actor, and that didn't work out either," he explained.

"I know what you mean. When I was like, 5, I said I was going to be a quantum physicist. And look at me now!" Darwin grinned, and nodded sagely.

"Yeah," said Andrew, "You read books in basements."

He was back in bed, staring at the ceiling. The blue room was a little less bare now, it seemed. The moonlight playing off of the assortment of hanging clothes on the wardrobe door was no longer kind of irritating, but served as a reminder that there was an entire civilisation out there with trading posts and spaceships and a frankly disappointing lack of literature. And also, of course, that he had managed to almost single-handedly stop a tree machine from space leaking uncertainty juice into the Earth.

Andrew blinked. The swelling on his eye had definitely gone down, which was good. He turned over in bed and found that he still couldn't sleep.

This time, however, it didn't seem so bad.

THE END