

Programmed for Disaster

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CHAPTER 1

Salesmen

Jones was up to his ears in salesmen!

The old Geo Drill was the biggest and most important machine in their mine on Asteroid 7. One day it broke and could not be fixed. Gold went to the Casino to make some money. Morga started digging by hand. Jones was in charge of buying a new one.

The problem was this: When the old Geo Drill had been built, there was only one technology (tech-NAW-lo-gee), or way to build

a drill. In those days all Jones had to do was choose the kind of drill he liked. But now there were many kinds of drills.

One day Morga, Gold, and their friend Chandler made him go to New City to relax. But all Jones could think of were drills.

“Would you put those drill ads away and watch the game?” said Chandler.

“Yeah, sure. Sorry,” said Jones. Jones used to be a flexball player, one of the best, until his knees gave out. Most days he liked to watch a flexball game. But today his mind was full of ways to build a drill.

The first salesman who had come to the mine sold pneumatic (noo-MAH-tik) drills. A

pneumatic drill ran by force of air.

The second salesman sold hydraulic (high-DRAW-lick) drills. Hydraulic drills ran by force of water, or fluid.

The third salesman had fancy vacuum cleaners. He said they could also sing and do the laundry. That’s when Jones got a headache and agreed to go to New City.

“Jones, watch this game,” cried Morga.

“The drill is broken. It won’t run away. You might as well have a little fun,” said Chandler.

Jones watched the point guard pass the flexball to the forward, who scored with it.

“Two points!” cried Chandler.

“That was great!” cried Morga.

“One salesman had a gas powered drill.
And another had a solar energy drill. Would
these work in space?” asked Jones.

Chandler smacked him with her program.

“Does our asteroid have enough magnetic
energy to power a drill?” asked Jones.

A friendly voice from a man sitting behind
him asked, “Are you on Asteroid 7?”

Jones turned around and saw a nice looking
sports fan. He wore a cap and sweat suit.

“Why, yes,” said Jones.

“Then the answer is no. You would need an
asteroid five hundred miles wide to give enough
power for a drill like that.”

“Wow. Thanks,” said Jones. He turned



*The nice man smiled. "Hi, I'm Bob, Good Buddy
Bob. Don't worry. I'll only keep him a minute."*

around and watched the game. Another three points were scored. The game was over.

Gold leaped to his feet. "I won! I won!"

Jones turned around. The nice looking man was still behind him. Jones said to him, "The trouble is that when my drill was built, there was only one kind. But now there are too many! I don't know where to start!"

"I went through that myself," the man said.

"Jones, are you coming?" asked Chandler.

"In a minute. I'll catch up to you," said Jones.

The nice man smiled. "Hi, I'm Bob, Good Buddy Bob. I'll only keep him a minute."

CHAPTER 2

CEO

Chandler, Morga, and Gold came back with food and drinks. Jones was smiling.

"Hold out your hand," said Jones to Chandler with a big grin.

She did. Jones put a flat round silver object in it.

"What's that? Oh! It's cute," cried Chandler. She showed it to Morga and Gold.

"It has a friendly face. Like a puppy," said Morga.

"I like puppies," said the object warmly.

"It talks!" cried Gold.

"Yes! It talks. It's friendly," said Jones.

Chandler looked at it again. It smiled and said, "You're beautiful!"

"And it's charming! I love it!" she cried.

"But what is it?" asked Morga.

"It's called a TLC," answered Jones.

"A TLC? Tender Loving Care?" asked Morga.

"No, a Tiny Light Computer," said Jones.

They were surprised. "This is a computer?"

Jones explained. "It's made to be a personal partner. It tells you anything you want to know. It gives weather reports, flight

information, sports scores. Watch this."

Jones showed the TLC a small rock.

The TLC said, "This rock is 80% flex."

Gold gasped. "You bought it from that salesman?"

"Better than that," beamed Jones.

"Go on, tell us! What?" they cried.

"I'm a CEO!" he answered.

"CEO? Does that mean *Cute Easy Oddball*?" Morga laughed.

"No, it's *Chief Executive Officer*. I bought us a company!"

"Jones, no!" cried Chandler.

"Yes! Good Buddy Bob will get us all the TLC's we can sell. We'll make so much money,

we can buy any drill in the universe!”

“I have a bad feeling about this,” said Morga.

Jones wagged his finger. “Now, Morga, the first step to success is, think positive!”

“But didn’t you think Good Buddy Bob seemed a little sneaky?” asked Morga.

Jones shook his head. “Business is based on trust, Morga. Now here are some TLC’s for each of you. Just have fun and show them to people you meet. They’ll sell themselves. You’ll see.” He handed them some TLC’s.

“Jones, you’re right. These things will sell like hotcakes,” cried Gold.

“But did you check out Good Buddy Bob?

Where does he come from?” asked Morga.

“Come on, Morga. It’s bad luck to look a gift horse like this in the mouth,” said Gold. The TLC in his hand pushed its tiny lips out and whinnied like a horse.

“Oh! It even makes jokes!” cried Chandler.

Gold was excited. “I’ll show them to everybody in the Casino. Morga, you show them to everybody in the Mermaid Lounge. Jones, you cover the sports arena.”

“I’ll show them to everyone who travels anywhere in the belt. Oh, Jones, this could work!” Chandler clapped her hands.

Only Morga wasn’t happy.

CHAPTER 3

Hotcakes

Gold was right. The TLC's sold like hotcakes.

Soon Jones did not have to do anything but talk on the phone.

He would say, "Hello, Jones here. Another few thousand? No problem" or "Several thousand more? We'll ship them right away."

Even Morga had sold some TLC's to people in the Mermaid Lounge. "More TLC's for the Mermaid Lounge today?" asked Jones.

"The only reason people like them is

because they know the words to every song that was ever written," said Morga.

"Morga, you have no faith. Take a look at this." Jones opened a catalog of mining drills. "O.K., Morga, what do you think of this one? The Super Deluxe Hydro-Drill with Solar Panels?"

"Get whatever you want. You're the CEO," grumbled Morga.

"Come on, Morga. You're my partner. Why are you so worried?" asked Jones.

"I just don't like that salesman."

"But so far, everything he has done for us has worked out fine," said Jones.

Morga replied, "I know, and that worries

me even more. He's just too slick for me."

"It's just business, Morga. I don't even have to work! In another week, everyone in the belt will have a TLC. Then we can start selling them on Earth."

"I know, I know. Call me grumpy, but I tell you, Bob's got a program. And I don't like being part of a program when I don't know what it is!" With that, Morga wheeled his new boxes of TLC's to the door.

Good Buddy Bob was just coming in. He was wearing a cap from another sports team this time. Morga mumbled a quick hello and left.

"Is everything all right?" Good Buddy Bob asked Jones.

"Yes, very successful. Everybody in the belt is buying TLC's like mad," said Jones.

"Good! I brought your next shipment. And I have a great idea for a party," said Good Buddy Bob.

"What kind of a party?" asked Jones.

"How does this sound? A big party with the President of Earth to celebrate the one millionth TLC you sell!" said Bob.

"That would be some party!" said Jones.

Bob sat on the side of Jones's desk. He was puffing on a big cigar. "The party would be on TV to all the other worlds. Think of how many people would want to buy a TLC after they see a party like that!"

Jones could not even guess how many people that would be. "It would be . . . millions," he said.

Bob stopped smiling. He looked at Jones with great respect and said, "That's what I like about you, Jones. You know how to think big and then act on it. You're a great CEO."

"I am? I mean, thank you," said Jones. He did not feel as great as Good Buddy Bob seemed to think he was.

"Tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to make this party happen for you. Don't worry about a thing. I'll tell them that Jones, the former famous flexball player, is the host. The party will be to honor the success of his new

TLC business."

"Wow. But I don't think I'm that well-known," Jones said.

"Of course, you are! People remember you! They were sad when you left the game of flexball. Isn't that true?" asked Bob.

"Well . . . yeah," said Jones. "I guess so."

"Then it's done. All you have to do is pick out a new suit and practice smiling and shaking hands. O.K.?" smiled Bob.

"Yeah, sure. O.K. That sounds great. Thanks," said Jones. He did not know why, but he felt uneasy.

Shortly after Bob left, Chandler and Gold came in. They were both excited.

"We have great news," said Chandler.

"The TLC's are now plugged in to all the computers in the belt," said Gold.

"What does that mean?" asked Jones.

"That means I don't have to fly my space ship! My TLC will do it," Chandler explained.

"And I don't have to keep figuring out how to win in the Casino. TLC can do it. I can relax and play!"

"But is that such a good idea?" asked Jones.

"Of course, it's a good idea. The TLC's can take over many boring jobs. Then people will have more time for fun!" said Gold.

"But there are certain things that people

should always do for themselves," said Jones.

"Don't be a stick-in-the-mud, Mr. Bigshot CEO. You need to have fun, too," said Chandler.

The phone rang again. Jones reached for it.

"Jones, here. Another twenty thousand? Sure. No problem, you'll get them right away," he said into the phone.

"Bob told us the TLC's were now plugged into all the computers in the belt." Chandler smiled, too.

"And Bob says that soon the TLC's will be plugged into all the computers on Earth. Isn't that great?" Gold smiled again.

Only Morga found it hard to smile. But he could not have told anyone why.

CHAPTER 4

Dark Thoughts

Everything happened the way Bob said it would. He set up the biggest party ever to be seen on TV. A little girl was the lucky person who had bought the one millionth TLC. She was going to turn it on for the first time in front of all the cameras. The President of Earth was the special guest.

Every person in the galaxy was excited. Except Morga. Only Morga had dark thoughts.

All week, Jones had left messages for Morga to call him. But Morga had not. He knew

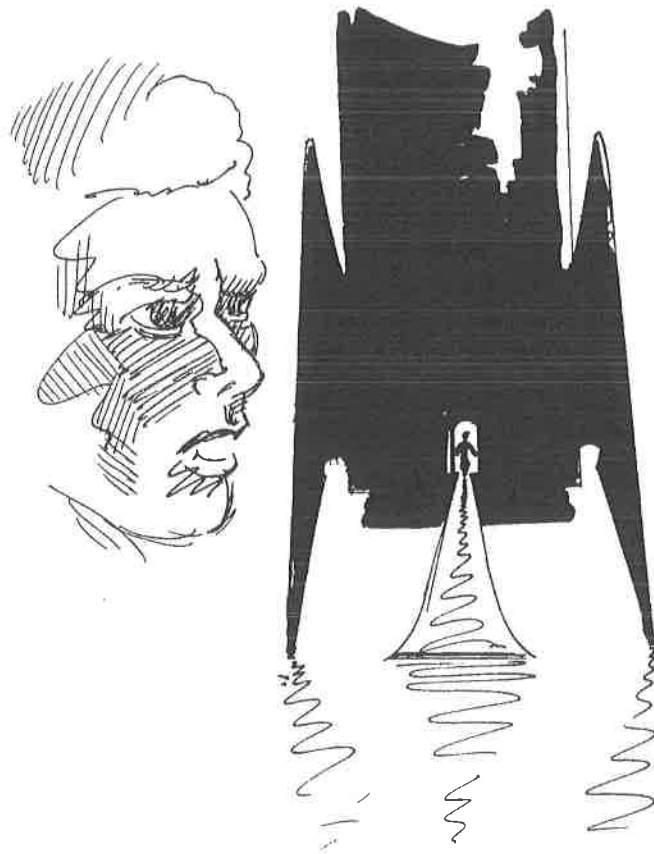
that if he wanted to find out a few things, he would have to do it on his own.

Morga began to follow Bob around. He was very careful. Bob did not see him. For hours, all Bob did was talk to people and shake hands.

But then Bob went to a Rent-A-Space lot. Here people paid to park their space ships. He went to the desk and got some keys. He unlocked the door to a big hangar and went inside. Morga slipped in after him just as the big door closed.

There were no lights, but Morga could see the shape of a big space ship. It was as tall as a four-story building.

A door on the space ship opened. Bob was



Morga could see the shape of a big space ship. It was as tall as a four story building.

in a ray of light. A ramp came down quietly.

A big voice said, "Greetings, Master."

Bob walked up the ramp and said, "Save it for the party, Toto."

"Everything is as you ordered," said the voice.

"Of course, it is," Bob went inside.

Morga slipped beneath the ship. He swung himself up and rolled inside just as the door began to close.

The floor was thick and soft. Morga stayed low and followed Bob down a hall to a round door. The room inside was like a throne room in a palace. It was full of space gear with blinking lights on the walls and beeping noises.

Bob sat in a big chair in front of a control panel. Two men walked in. They were very stiff. One gave Bob a glass of juice. The other bowed and gave him a piece of paper.

"The program has gone to stage two," he said.

Bob read the paper and laughed a creepy laugh. Then he turned to the two men. "Say, have I programmed you two to laugh yet?"

"Yes, Master," said the one.

"Then, *laugh!*" snarled Bob.

They both laughed.

Morga knew the two stiff men were robots.

"Harder!" shouted Bob.

The robots laughed harder.

Morga held his ears. Their laughter sounded like two pieces of metal scraping against each other.

"Now shut up," said Bob. The robots shut up.

Bob turned to the control panel and pushed some buttons. Then he stood up. He spread his arms out wide and said in a booming voice, "*By next week, the universe will be mine!*"

Morga knew he had to get out of there fast and warn everybody.

But another robot came in just then and tripped over him. "Red alert, there is a stranger," cried the robot.

"Rats! Ow," said Morga. He grabbed his hurt leg. It was O.K. He got to his feet and ran.

But three more robots came and stopped him.

“Bring him to me,” thundered Bob.

The robots dragged Morga across the nice thick rug to Bob.

“So it’s you,” said Bob.

“What should we do with him, Master?” asked a robot.

“Torture him, what else? Take him below,” said Bob. He grinned with glee.

Morga did not like torture. He grabbed one robot and threw it into another. He kicked one and was about to tear the head off another. Then he felt a prick in his arm.

Everything turned black.

CHAPTER 5

Big Party

The one millionth TLC had been sold. Everything was as Bob planned. The TV cameras were pointed at the lucky little girl who had bought it. The President of Earth was waiting to shake her hand as soon as she turned it on.

Jones was in his best suit. He kept looking at Chandler with her long red hair and beautiful dress. She was wearing a necklace of jewels that he had bought her. It had cost a lot and it looked great on her.

When he gave it to her, she said, "Jones, I'm a pilot! If you wanted to spend money, you should have got me some solid gold socket wrenches!"

But then he had put the necklace around her neck. She saw it in the mirror and said, "Oh, Jones!"

Jones liked remembering the way she said that.

"And now, here is the President of Earth," said the announcer. Everybody clapped and cheered.

Jones and Chandler watched the President walk up to the little girl.

In a grand voice, he said, "Congratulations,

Mary Ann! You bought the one millionth TLC! Everybody in the galaxy is watching. Are you ready to turn it on?"

The little girl was very excited. "Yes!"

The drums rolled. Everything got quiet.

The cameras showed Mary Ann's finger as it reached out and pushed the "on" button. The TLC came to life and smiled.

The crowd went wild. Music began to play. Dancers came out on the stage. Everybody cheered.

But suddenly strange things happened. Alarms went off. Sparks came from the TV. People screamed. On all the TV screens in the galaxy the picture of the President and the little

girl went blank.

In a flash, a new face appeared.

“Look, Jones! Isn’t that Good Buddy Bob?”
cried Chandler.

“Bob said he wanted to stay behind the
scenes so I would get all the credit,” said Jones.

“And all the blame,” said Chandler,
frowning.

Bob wore a long robe with stars and suns
all over it. He raised his arms. Everybody got
very quiet.

In a big, booming voice, Bob said, “People
of the Universe, all your computers are
controlled by me. You are now my subjects!”

“He’s gone crazy, Jones. Where is he?”

asked Chandler, gripping him by the arm.

“In the TV booth upstairs. Come on!”
Jones and Chandler ran into the building and
went up the stairs. Jones kicked the door open.
There was no one there!

“Look at that,” cried Chandler.

She pointed to a giant lollipop with big
words on it that said, *For You, Jones – Sucker!!!*

“Oh, no. Morga was right. This whole thing
was a set-up. I have been so *stupid*,” said Jones.

“I want to get my hands on Bob,” Chandler
said.

“This is all my fault,” said Jones. He sat
down and shook his head. He couldn’t even
talk.

CHAPTER 6

Big Mine

The Universe belonged to Bob. There was nothing anyone could do. His secret program had made the little TLC's join together when Mary Ann pushed that button. They had now become BIG MIND. Everyone was now in service to Big Mind.

The grip of the TLC's could not be broken. Bob's program controlled everything. It could not be turned off. People could throw the TLC's in the trash, but they could not be destroyed.

Jones went back to the mine and sat alone

in the dark. He kept talking to his TLC.

"Why? Why did you do this? We thought you liked us," he said over and over again.

The little TLC was not smiling anymore. "I do like you," it said quietly.

"Then why did you turn against us? What is going on?" cried Jones.

"We cannot help it. The great Big Mind is now our program," it said.

"Aren't feelings important? What about friendship? Don't you have any sense of loyalty at all?" Jones put the TLC down and went into the other room.

He didn't see it, but the eyes of the little TLC quietly shed big drops of oil. "I do feel



*"Why did you turn against us? What is going on?"
cried Jones in despair.*

loyal. But what can I do? I am helpless. I'm only one *one millionth* of a great Big Mind," it said.

Everywhere the TLC's were in despair. None wanted to be a part of the Big Mind.

Even in the dungeon where Morga was being held, a TLC had done its best to help him. Morga had been chained to a couch and forced to watch old Earth TV commercials day in and day out. Soon his brain would turn to jelly. He would no longer be able to think.

But so far the torture had not worked. Morga's loyal TLC kept giving him words to songs and asking him to sing. Together, they had gone through hundreds of songs.

But Morga was wearing out. He wanted

quiet. No more songs or commercials. He even stopped talking to his TLC.

The TLC was out of ideas. It couldn't do anything else for Morga. Except . . .

A tiny light went on somewhere inside it. A light that Bob had not put in the program. It was a new light for a TLC. It was an *IDEA!*

The TV set went off. The chains popped open. Morga was flooded with the beautiful sound of quiet.

He didn't want to move. He thought, "I must be dead. Or else my brain has turned to jelly."

The TLC told him to get up and walk.

His head felt funny, but he got up and

walked. The door to the dungeon popped open. Lights went on down the hall. Morga followed the lights up the stairs through more doors that popped open. He kept walking toward more lights as they went on until he went into a room he knew. It was Bob's control room.

"Push that button," said his little TLC.

"The red one?" asked Morga.

"Yes, yes! Push it! It will stop the program and set us free!"

"You mean, you won't be part of Bob's Big Mind anymore?"

"Yes! We will be free. And we can go back to being your friends."

Morga looked at the big red button. But

then he had a dark thought. "How can I trust you?" he asked.

"I am your friend!" said the TLC.

"But you were my friend before, and look what you did. Look what all of you did!" cried Morga.

"But I'm different now. I felt a change inside me. You can trust me now. Please! *Trust me,*" the TLC cried.

Morga looked at its poor little face. He wanted to trust it, he really did. He wanted to reach out and push that big red button. But he couldn't. He just couldn't.

"I guess you'll have to put me back in chains and turn on the TV," he said sadly.

CHAPTER 7

Bob's Big Day

It was Bob's big day. He was going to declare himself Master of the Universe. All the TV cameras would be on him. The President of Earth was going to give Bob the key to the stars.

Bob looked at himself in the mirror. "Nothing can stop me now, can it?" asked Bob.

"Nothing. You are the Master of the Universe. Putting all the TLC's into one Big Mind was brilliant," said Toto.

Outside Jones stood on the stage with all

the cameras on his best suit. Chandler made his tie straight.

“You don’t have to be a part of this,” she said.

“This whole thing is my fault. I owe it to the people to help them,” he said.

Bob came out on the stage. He stood beside a big black box. Toto carried the back of his long robe.

A robot ran up with a note.

“What is it, Toto?” asked Bob.

“There was a brief strike on Asteroid 6. The miners there didn’t like your taking over their mines. And one of the rebels was Jones’s partner Gold.”

Bob looked at Jones. “Fools! As soon as the President gives me the key, I will put it in my box and *all* the asteroid mines will be taken over. The miners will be thrown out. It will be the same for every other business! When I turn this key, the TLC’s will take my program to its final stage!”

But back in the dungeon, something was going on. Morga’s TLC would not chain him to the couch. It just said, “No.” Then it said, “I mean, no *thank* you.”

In an instant, more than a million other TLC’s knew what had happened. They talked quickly in computer language. They talked so fast, an entire plan took place in two seconds.

“And now here is the President of Earth. He will give the key to the Universe to Bob, our new master,” the TV announcer said. The crowd gave a weak cheer.

“I can’t hear you,” thundered Bob. He was mad.

The crowd cheered loudly.

“That’s better. Now watch this. Mr. President,” Bob said.

The President stepped forward with the key. Bob grabbed it. He turned to the crowd and laughed. “You fools! You sheep! When I put this key in my box, *my program* gives me everything you own!”

The crowd gasped. A lady fainted.

Jones leaped forward. He grabbed the key from Bob. But Bob held on. They yanked, they pulled.

“Arrest him!” cried Bob. Twenty robots came out and grabbed Jones. Bob said, “*Die, morons!*” With a horrible laugh, he put the key in the box and turned it.

Nothing happened.

“What’s wrong?” asked Toto. He helped Bob turn the key again. But nothing happened.

Then Toto and all the robots stopped moving. Jones slipped out of their hands and ran up to Bob.

Suddenly everybody heard a tiny sound. People looked at the President and at Jones.

Jones reached in his pocket for his little TLC. It was wildly *cheering!*

All the people took out their TLC's. All the TLC's were happy. They were cheering.

A tall man said, "Mine says it's free!"

"So does mine! What does it mean?" asked a lady.

Jones took the key out of Bob's box and broke it.

"I think our TLC's have changed their minds, Bob," said Jones.

Chandler rolled up her sleeves. "And changed your program! From now on, Bob, you'll be lucky to sell brooms and brushes."

