

# The Sirens of Titan



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KURT VONNEGUT

Kurt Vonnegut was born to German-American parents in Indianapolis. His family was initially fairly wealthy, but lost a great deal of their money in the Great Depression. Vonnegut began college at Cornell University, where he studied biochemistry and served as an editor at the student newspaper. After being placed on academic probation and then dropping out, Vonnegut enlisted in the army in 1943. Shortly after, his mother killed herself. While fighting in World War II, Vonnegut was captured by German forces and incarcerated as a prisoner of war in Dresden. Back in the U.S., Vonnegut married Jane Marie Cox and enrolled at the University of Chicago on the G.I. Bill. He studied anthropology, although he never officially graduated. He briefly worked at General Electric before deciding to become a full-time writer. He published his first novel, *Player Piano*, in 1952. Following this, Vonnegut struggled to earn enough money to support his family, which now consisted of six children—three of whom were his nephews, whom he adopted after the death of his sister. During this time, Vonnegut wrote *The Sirens of Titan*. Although he kept publishing novels his financial struggles led him to almost quit writing; yet thanks to gaining a job at the Iowa Writer’s Workshop he managed to keep going. In 1969, Vonnegut published his most famous novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which was inspired by his experience as a P.O.W. in Dresden. Following this, he continued writing but struggled with mental health problems, writer’s block, and divorce. In 1979 he remarried, and adopted another child with his new wife. Vonnegut died in 2007 at the age of 84.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*The Sirens of Titan* is set in the future, but nonetheless contains references to a number of real historical events. The novel is set during what it terms “The Nightmare Ages,” an invented temporal epoch between World War II (which was, of course, a real event) and the (imagined) “Third Great Depression.” Thematically, the novel explores the social shifts triggered by space exploration, which was a major force element of the Cold War, particularly during the period in which Vonnegut wrote *The Sirens of Titan*. The novel also rewrites the history of several world-famous landmarks, such as Stonehenge, the Kremlin, and the Great Wall of China, claiming they were built as messages to Salo from the Tralfamadorians.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*The Sirens of Titan* is a novel that straddles the worlds of

mainstream literature and science fiction. In this sense, it is similar to many of Vonnegut’s other novels, including his first book, *Player Piano*, and his most famous one, *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Other writers who produce literary science fiction (or mainstream fiction with an sci-fi edge) include George Orwell (*1984*), Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*), and Margaret Atwood (*The Handmaid’s Tale*). Beyond the science fiction genre, Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* illustrates the absurdity of war using satire in a manner similar to *The Sirens of Titan*. Additionally, George Saunders is a contemporary writer who also works in the satirical, surreal tradition for which Vonnegut was famous. Saunders mostly writes short stories, but in 2017 published his first novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo*.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Sirens of Titan
- **When Written:** Unknown
- **Where Written:** Cape Code, Massachusetts
- **When Published:** 1959
- **Literary Period:** Midcentury American Science Fiction
- **Genre:** Science Fiction; Satire
- **Setting:** A future U.S.; Mars; Titan
- **Climax:** The contents of the message Salo is transporting across the universe is revealed; Rumfoord and Kazak’s spiral is interrupted by a sunspot, flinging them into oblivion.
- **Antagonist:** Martian Army
- **Point of View:** Third Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Light Bulb Moment.** Vonnegut told a reporter from *The Harvard Crimson* that he sketched out the entirety of *The Sirens of Titan* one night at a party, after someone told him he should write another novel.

**Musical Tribute.** In 1993, the Japanese band P-MODEL released a song whose title translates to “Welcome to chronosynclastic infundibulum,” a reference to the bizarre dimension in *The Sirens of Titan*.



## PLOT SUMMARY

The novel is set in the future, between World War II and the “Third Great Depression,” and opens in Newport, Rhode Island. Malachi Constant, the richest man in the U.S., has arrived to witness the “materialization” of Winston Niles Rumfoord and Winston’s dog, Kazak. Constant was invited to the event, which

is taking place on the Rumfoord Estate, by Mr. Rumfoord's wife, Beatrice. Mr. and Mrs. Rumfoord are extremely rich, with the highest social status in the country. Nine years ago, Mr. Rumfoord drove his spaceship into a **chrono-synclastic infundibulum**, which landed him in a kind of time warp, allowing him to see the past and future. It also means that he materializes on Earth and other planets at regular intervals.

Constant's encounter with Rumfoord leaves him feeling self-conscious, as he is struck by the realization that Rumfoord is "superior" to him. Rumfoord prophesizes that Constant will end up being "bred" like an animal with Beatrice on Mars, and that they will have a son together. He also says that Constant will travel to Mars, Mercury, and back to Earth before ending up on Titan. Constant is untroubled by this prediction at first, but soon becomes terrified of the thought that he might die on Titan. He does everything in his power to stop the prophecy from coming true, including throwing a party that last for 56 days, during which he gets so intoxicated he gives away oil wells to all the guests and marries a blonde woman he doesn't know. When he regains consciousness, he learns that his company, Magnum Opus, has gone bankrupt.

Magnum Opus was originally founded by Malachi's father, Noel, when Noel was 39. A "business failure" with nothing going for him, Noel decided to become a speculator and chose companies to invest based on the first letters of the Old Testament of the Bible. The strategy turned out to be an enormous success, although Noel never understood why. Noel spent his life living at the Wilburhampton Hotel, where he paid a maid, Florence Whitehill, to have sex with him once every 10 days. As a result of these encounters she becomes pregnant with a son, Malachi.

Noel and Malachi meet only once, on Malachi's 21st birthday, when Noel informs his son that he will be handing over the business to him. It is an awkward encounter, and five years later, Noel dies. Back in the present, having just learned that Magnum Opus is bankrupt, Malachi goes to the Wilburhampton to read a letter his father left for him in case his luck ever turned. After reading the letter, Malachi is offered a position in the Martian Army by two recruiters, Helmholtz and Wiley. He accepts. Beatrice is also conscripted, although she doesn't realize this is happening at the time.

On Mars, Malachi's memory is erased and he is given a new identity, Unk. An **antenna** is implanted in his head that gives him instructions and causes him pain any time he does something of which the army doesn't approve. Now, he is forced to execute a man who the reader later learns is Unk's best friend, Stony Stevenson. However, Unk doesn't recognize Stony because his memories have been erased over and over inside the army hospital.

Back in his barrack, Unk speaks to another soldier, Boaz, who is secretly one of the "real commanders" of the army. These

commanders have special rights and privileges, and do not have antennae. They hide among the ordinary members of the army in order to prevent rebellion. While the rest of the soldiers are engaged in a game of German batball, Unk finds a letter addressed to him which contains an extraordinary amount of information about the army. It suggests that Unk and Stony have been rebelling, and encourages Unk to disobey his antenna, even though it's painful to do so. It informs Unk about his "mate," Bee, and son, Chrono, who live in the Martian city of Phoebe. To Unk's great surprise, the letter is signed by himself.

As the war between Mars and Earth begins, Unk decides to become the only deserter in the history of the Martian Army and escape along with Bee, Chrono, and Stony. He manages to flee to Phoebe and finds 8-year-old Chrono playing a game of German batball at his school. Taking Chrono aside, Unk tries to tell him that he is his father and wants to rescue him, but Chrono is not interested. When Unk approaches Bee (who teaches therapeutic breathing at the Schliemann Breathing School for Recruits) she is similarly resistant to the idea of fleeing. He ends up being recaptured by Rumfoord, and wakes up aboard Rumfoord's ship.

Rumfoord is "commander-in-chief of everything Martian." He tells Unk about how Chrono was conceived on a spaceship between Earth and Mars (it is implied that this may have been a result of Unk raping Beatrice). The war between Mars and Earth leads to the utter slaughter of the Martian Army and the total destruction of Martian civilization. The war was designed by Rumfoord but technologically engineered by Salo, an alien messenger from the planet Tralfamadore who has been stranded on Titan for 200,000 years after his spaceship broke down.

On Earth, Rumfoord founds a new religion, the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent. He sends Unk and Boaz to Mercury on an autopiloted ship, where they remain stuck for three years. Boaz has a breakdown and becomes obsessed with harmoniums, the strange, coral-like aliens that live in Mercury's caves. When Unk finally finds a way to escape Mercury, Boaz decides to stay and live with the harmoniums forever.

Unk (Constant) arrives back on Earth, where his appearance has been foretold by the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent. The church calls him the Space Wanderer. When the crowds of people gathered to greet him ask what happened to him, he explains that he was "a victim of a series of accidents [...] as are we all." This is met with rapturous applause. The Space Wanderer, Bee, and Chrono are all taken to the Rumfoord Estate in Newport. It is revealed that Malachi Constant is a demonized figure within the Church, made to represent everything that the Church opposes.

Rumfoord delivers a speech in which he reveals that the Space Wanderer and Constant are the same person, then sentences Constant, Bee, and Chrono to "peaceful exile" on Titan. There, Salo enthusiastically greets Rumfoord, who is cruel to him in

return. Rumfoord has become ill due to encountering sunspots while in the chrono-synclastic infundibulum—he will soon die. It's revealed that Salo was stranded while delivering a message across the universe; he doesn't know the message's contents, and because, like all Tralfamadorians, he is a machine, he has never tried to find out. It is revealed that the whole history of human civilization was designed by the Tralfamadorians in order to help get the missing part Salo needs for his spaceship. Rumfoord demands to know the contents of the message Salo is carrying as a dying wish. Salo hesitates, and by the time he agrees, Rumfoord is dead. Distraught, Salo commits suicide by disassembling himself. Chrono drops the missing part for Salo's spaceship—which he has been carrying around as a “good-luck piece”—among Salo's scattered parts.

Constant and Beatrice both live to the age of 74. In the meantime, Chrono joins the birds of Titan, living among them and learning their language. Beatrice dies first, and Constant, heartbroken, buries her. Salo offers him a ride to Earth, and Constant accepts, requesting to be dropped off in Indianapolis. En route, Salo hypnotizes Constant and plants a pleasant illusion in his mind. He drops Constant in Indianapolis by a bus stop, and Constant dies in the snow while waiting for the delayed bus. As Constant dies, he experiences the illusion Salo implanted in him—a dream that Stony is bringing him to paradise, where Beatrice is waiting.

does something a “good soldier” wouldn't do, and ends up becoming the only deserter in the history of the Martian Army. He attempts to rescue his “mate,” Bee (Beatrice Rumfoord) and their son, Chrono. However, Unk ends up being captured by Rumfoord again, who gives him one final identity: the Space Wanderer, a key figure in Rumfoord's new religion, the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent. Constant/Unk/the Space Wanderer is ultimately sent to Titan to live in “peaceful exile” along with Bee and Chrono. After spending several decades there and finally falling in love with Bee a year before she dies, Constant chooses to return to Earth, specifically Indianapolis. He dies there immediately while waiting for a bus in the snow. However, his death is happy, as he is eased into it by a peaceful illusion implanted in his mind by Salo. In the dream, Constant is reunited with Stony and Beatrice.

**Winston Niles Rumfoord** – Winston Niles Rumfoord is a wealthy member of the American elite class who lives on a magnificent and eccentric estate in Newport, Rhode Island. He is married to Beatrice, but they hate each other and never consummate their marriage. After flying his spaceship into a **chrono-synclastic infundibulum**, Rumfoord and his dog, Kazak, enter a kind of time warp wherein they only “materialize” on Earth once every 59 days, on Mars once every 111 days, and so on—except for the planet Titan, where they are permanently materialized. Existing inside the chrono-synclastic infundibulum gives Rumfoord a near-omniscient knowledge of everything in the past and future, which he perceives as happening all at once rather than in linear fashion. However, while at first this appears to give Rumfoord a wise, peaceful view of the world, the reality turns out to be quite different. Winston has a kind of prophetic foresight about Beatrice and Malachi Constant's future, and tells them (to their horror) that they will live on the planet Titan and have a son together. Winston eventually engineers a brutal war between Earth and Mars in order to invent a religion on Earth called the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, which becomes a means of increasing his own power. He has a vicious hatred of Malachi Constant due to the fact that Constant is extraordinarily lucky. This hatred remains mysterious throughout the novel until it becomes clear that Rumfoord despises luck because he knows that seemingly lucky events are actually the work of the Tralfamadorians, an distant species of wise and powerful aliens who create the whole of human history in order to deliver a missing part to a Tralfamadorian messenger, Salo, who ends up stranded for 200,000 years on Titan. In Salo's mind, he and Rumfoord develop a friendship, but by the end of the novel Rumfoord treats Salo with unbearable cruelty, confirming his status as the villain of the novel. Rumfoord ends up dying when a sunspot interferes with the chrono-synclastic infundibulum, flinging him out of the Solar System.

**Mrs. Beatrice Rumfoord/Bee** – Beatrice, an elegant but haughty woman, is Winston Niles Rumfoord's wife. She hates



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Malachi Constant / Unk / the Space Wanderer** – Malachi Constant is the novel's main character. Born in Los Angeles, California, to self-made billionaire Noel Constant and prostitute Florence Whitehill, as an adult Malachi is the richest man in the U.S. His childhood is unhappy, in large part because Noel does not want to have a relationship with him. They only meet once, on Malachi's 21st birthday. After Noel's death, Malachi inherits the family company, Magnum Opus. However, he is greedy, foolish, and immoral, and ends up running the company into the ground (though this seems to be as much due to the Constants' good luck running out as it is to Malachi's—admittedly terrible—choices). When Malachi meets Winston Niles Rumfoord, Rumfoord issues Malachi a horrible prophecy about his life in which Malachi will live on the planet Titan and have a son with Rumfoord's wife, Beatrice. Malachi seeks to avoid this, but does so in vain, and ends up being conscripted into the Martian Army, where his memory is wiped and he is given the new identity of Unk. The army brainwashes Unk and forces him to do terrible things, the worst among them killing his best friend, Stony Stevenson. However, it is under the tyrannical control of the army that Unk starts showing strength of character for the first time: he bravely defies the control of his implanted **antenna**, which causes him pain whenever he

him, and her hatred intensifies after Winston enters the **chrono-synclastic infundibulum** and begins delivering prophecies about the future. Beatrice is horrified by her husband's predictions (particularly the one about Beatrice and Malachi Constant living on the planet Titan and having a son together). She calls these prophecies his "omniscient bullying" and is desperate to believe that she is "mistress of her own fate." Beautiful, intelligent, and charming, Beatrice is a talented poet who has published one book of poems, *Between Timid and Timbaktu*. She ends up being conscripted into the Martian Army. During the journey to Mars, Constant rapes Beatrice without realizing her identity. As a result, Beatrice becomes pregnant with their son, Chrono. On Mars, she has her memory wiped and is known as Bee. She teaches the Schliemann Breathing Technique (a method that enables humans to more easily breathe in Mars's low-oxygen environment) to new army recruits. Bee manages to survive the Martian-Earthling war when she and Chrono's spaceship crashes into the Amazon. She is taken to Titan along with Chrono and Constant, where she goes somewhat insane and writes a book entitled *The True Purpose of Life in the Solar System*. She dies peacefully at the age of 74.

**Chrono** – Chrono is the son of Malachi and Beatrice. He is conceived on the journey between Earth and Mars and grows up on Mars. A disaffected child, he is classified as a "juvenile delinquent," but is highly popular due to his magnificent skill at German batball. In accordance with Rumfoord's prophecy about Malachi and Beatrice's son finding an important piece of metal, Chrono accidentally acquires a strip of metal that he calls his "good-luck piece," and which ultimately turns out to be the missing part Salo needs for his broken-down spaceship. After being taken to Titan and happily bequeathing his good-luck piece to Salo, Chrono joins a flock of Titanian birds, learning their language and making himself a cape of feathers so he can fly among them. He stays on Titan forever.

**Salo** – Salo is a messenger from the planet Tralfamadore whose ship breaks down while he is delivering a message across the universe, leaving him stranded on Titan for 200,000 years. Salo has a strange appearance, with tangerine-colored skin, inflatable feet that deflate into suction cups, three eyes, and a head that dangles on gimbals. Back on Tralfamadore, he is telepathically selected as the best version of his species, which qualifies him to deliver the message. After he gets stranded, the entirety of human civilization is designed as an elaborate ploy by his fellow Tralfamadorians to help get him the missing part. While waiting on Titan, Salo takes up sculpture and daisy-breeding. He also befriends Rumfoord, whom he comes to love deeply. Rumfoord demands to know the contents of the message Salo is carrying, even though Salo has sworn to keep it sealed. He decides to open it, thereby overcoming his obedience as a machine out of love for Rumfoord. However, it is too late, as at this point Rumfoord is already dead. Devastated,

Salo commits suicide by disassembling himself. However, Constant puts him back together, and Salo ends up dropping Constant back on Earth after returning to his journey. In the end, Salo is shown to be the kindest and most generous character by far, despite the fact that he is a machine.

**Boaz** – Boaz is a real commander of the Martian Army, meaning that he has the ability to directly control others through their **antennae** while remaining undercover among the troops. A young black man, Boaz was an orphan back on Earth and was conscripted into the army when he was only 14. Throughout his time in the novel, Boaz feels conflicted between his desire to protect himself and maintain his position of (relative) power and his loneliness, which makes him seek out Unk as a friend. Boaz and Unk end up being sent to Mercury by Rumfoord, where they get trapped for a number of years. While there, Boaz suffers a mental breakdown and develops a deep love for harmoniums, the strange, coral-like aliens that live in the planet's caves. When Unk finally gets the chance to escape Mercury, Boaz chooses to stay, out of his sense of love and loyalty to the harmoniums.

**Stony Stevenson** – Stony Stevenson is an Englishman conscripted into the Martian Army. A real commander (like Boaz), Stony becomes disillusioned with the army after he realizes it is doomed to fail in the war against Earth, and he and Unk team up in rebellion together. However, when this is discovered Stony is sentenced to death. Unk is forced to killing Stony, and strangles him to death in a public execution ceremony.

**Noel Constant** – Noel Constant is Malachi's father. A self-made billionaire, he founds his company, Magnum Opus, when he is 39 and a "business failure." He begins investing according to an "idiotically simple" strategy of choosing companies to invest in based on the letters of the Bible, and thanks to strange luck became incredibly rich almost immediately. Despite achieving enormous financial success, Noel remains miserable throughout his life, and fails to develop a connection with his son, Malachi, whom he has with a prostitute named Florence. In a letter to his son which Malachi reads after Noel's death, Noel admits that he was not a good man and that he was "as good as dead" while he was still alive.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Ransom K. Fern** – Ransom K. Fern is a young alumnus of Harvard Business School who asks Noel for the job of president of Magnum Opus. Noel gives it to him, and Fern runs the company until it is driven into bankruptcy.

**Florence Whitehill** – Florence is a hotel maid whom Noel Constant pays to have sex with him once every 10 days. Noel ends up getting Florence pregnant with Malachi.

**Sergeant Harry Brackman** – Sergeant Harry Brackman is a soldier in the Martian Army. Before he was conscripted, his

name was Francis J. Thompson. He survives the war between Earth and Mars and ends up working in one of the concession stands of the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent.

**Rev. C. Horner Redwine** – The Rev. C. Horner Redwine is one of the religious leaders of the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent.

**Miss Isabel Fernstermaker** – Miss Fernstermaker is Chrono’s teacher on Mars.

**George M. Helmholtz** – Helmholtz is an agent of the Martian Army who recruits people in disguise.

**Roberta Wiley** – Wiley is another recruiter for the Martian Army.

**Butler/Earl Moncrief** – Mr. and Mrs. Rumfoord’s butler (who is not named as Earl Moncrief until the end of the novel) makes a fortune in the Martian-Earthling war.

**Kazak** – Winston Rumfoord’s dog. Rumfoord has Kazak with him when he enters the **chrono-synclastic infundibulum** and materializes back on Earth with the dog once every 59 days.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### FREE WILL VS. EXTERNAL CONTROL

*The Sirens of Titan* explores one of the most fundamental philosophical questions facing humankind: does free will exist, or are people

actually being controlled by exterior forces (albeit ones that might be impossible to see or understand)? The novel indicates that free will does *not* exist, by depicting many examples of people being controlled by exterior forces without realizing it. These examples include the Martian Army who are controlled by **antennas** inserted into their bodies, and the revelation at the end of the novel that the whole of human history has been the creation of an alien species, the Tralfamadorians, in an elaborate effort to help a Tralfamadorian explorer named Salo who got stranded during a mission. Yet while the novel suggests that free will is usually an illusion, it also shows examples of times when people rebel against the forces controlling them, suggesting that there may be rare moments when it is possible to exercise free will.

The novel suggests that humans are desperate to believe that they have free will—and even more radically, that they have control over their own fates—yet also shows that this is usually a hopeless desire. Early in the novel, the wealthy adventurer Winston Niles Rumfoord reveals that by travelling through a

**chrono-synclastic infundibulum**—which allows him to move through space in the form of a wave—he has gained a kind of omniscience about the destiny of the universe. The people around Rumfoord are resentful of his predictions about the future. His wife, Beatrice, dreams of being the “mistress of her own fate” and is annoyed by her husband’s prophesizing, which she calls his “omniscient bullying.” Similarly, the wealthiest man in the U.S., Malachi Constant, is horrified by Rumfoord’s prophecy that he (Constant) will end up having a child with Beatrice on Mars. Nonetheless, Beatrice and Constant’s protests about Rumfoord’s vision of the future is fruitless, as his vision ends up coming true.

Rumfoord’s own reaction to his prophetic powers suggests that the revelation of humanity’s lack of free will is depressing for everyone, even someone like Rumfoord who has omniscient insight into the future. As Rumfoord explains, “When I ran my space ship into the chrono-synclastic infundibulum, it came to me in a flash that everything that ever has been always will be, and everything that ever will be always has been [...] Knowing that rather takes the glamour out of fortunetelling.” Rather than delighting in his own prophetic insight, Rumfoord finds it depressing. He, like others, seems resistant to embracing the idea that people do not have free will.

The idea that human free will is an illusion appears to be confirmed at the end of the novel. It’s revealed that the Tralfamadorians intervened in human history, causing humans to evolve such that they would develop the technology to rescue Salo, who was stranded on Titan for 200,000 years while on a mission across the universe to deliver a message. Not only was human action determined by an external factor, but the whole of human history took place merely in order to produce a single part to repair Salo’s spaceship, which leaves humanity looking rather trivial and unimportant. At the same time, the condition of not having free will isn’t unique to humans. Tralfamadorians themselves are machines and thus don’t appear to have free will either. When describing Salo, the narrator notes, “As a machine, he had to do what he was supposed to do.” Ultimately, however, Salo is able to betray his orders, an exceptional feat for a machine. This suggests that even in extreme cases, it might be possible to exercise free will.

The description of Salo having to obey orders links him to the Martian Army, a group of humans whose memories are erased and who are controlled by **antennae** implanted into their bodies which cause them pain whenever they are doing something they are not supposed to. This initially appears to have the effect of placing the soldiers under total control. Constant (who is renamed Unk after being inducted into the army and having his memories erased) ends up killing his best friend, Stony Stevenson, because he is essentially forced to by the combination of the antenna and the program of forced amnesia which stops him recognizing Stony in the first place. This suggests that without free will, neither individual identity

nor morality matter. However, the possibility of asserting one's own free will even in the face of external control emerges when Unk finds letters from an anonymous person filled with information and encouragement to rebel against the army. When Unk sees the signature of the letter-writer and discovers that *he* wrote the letters to himself, he becomes "the only deserter in the history of the Army of Mars."

The letters Unk writes to himself indicate that overriding external control in order to assert free will is difficult and painful, but that it can be done. As Unk states in the letters, "Almost everything I know for sure has come from fighting the pain from my antenna [...] Whenever I start to turn my head and look at something, and the pain comes, I keep turning my head anyway, because I know I am going to see something I'm not supposed to see [...] The more pain I train myself to stand, the more I learn." Of course, by the end of the novel, Unk's rebellion is placed within the context of another, broader system of control: the Tralfamadorians' shaping of human history. Even though Unk rebelled against the army, it was the Tralfamadorians' plan that compelled him to do so. Moreover, the Tralfamadorians themselves are controlled by other forces or systems—such as Salo who must obey the instructions he was given back on his home planet. Yet while all these different systems of determination and control indicates that free will is indeed an illusion, the novel nonetheless also suggests that there is something noble and important in acting as if one is free and rebelling against these systems of control.



## RELIGION AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

*The Sirens of Titan* depicts humanity's search for meaning in what often appears to be a meaningless and random universe. The novel suggests that the systems of belief humans develop in order to access meaning are essentially illusions, and it is most disdainful about systems of belief that place humanity at the center of the universe. While trying to find meaning is perhaps an inevitable part of being alive, the idea that humans are the most important species in the universe is emphatically proven wrong in the novel by the depiction of alien species and forces whose age, intelligence, and power vastly outrank those of humankind.

The novel depicts a future moment in human history when old systems of belief (namely, religion) are coming into contact with new truths about the universe revealed by advancing technology and space exploration. Intriguingly, the novel does not indicate that religion and the space age exist in tension, which is a common assumption. Indeed, the narrator actually *reverses* this assumption by arguing "It was a situation made to order for American fundamentalist preachers. They were quicker than philosophers or historians or anybody to talk sense about the truncated Age of Space." This idea is repeated in the description of Bobby Denton, an Evangelical Christian

who describes Earth as "God's space ship."

Yet rather than suggesting that the coherence between religion and space exploration is because religion accurately describes the universe, the novel instead suggests that it is due to a kind of foolishness and delusion inherent within religion. For example, the idea that Earth is "God's space ship" clearly doesn't have any actual meaning. If God is really the creator of the universe, why would He need a spaceship, and if He did, why would He choose a small planet that doesn't even move? This observation suggests that religious people want to be able to accommodate space exploration and the facts it reveals within their existing systems of belief, but that in attempting to do so, they end up making statements that are ridiculous and meaningless.

The irrelevance of religion in the age of space exploration is further confirmed by the religion that Winston Niles Rumfoord invents, the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent. Unlike the claims of the religious people quoted above, Rumfoord's description of God is arguably more accurate (and certainly more coherent in conveying the truths about the universe that space exploration reveals). The motto of the religion is "*Take Care of the People, and God Almighty Will Take Care of Himself.*" Yet while this may be a more realistic understanding of God, it calls into question why a religion that views God as "utterly indifferent" should exist in the first place. Indeed, it is soon revealed that through the religion, Rumfoord aims to increase his own power by performing "miracles" thanks to his ability to see the future. In this sense, Rumfoord's religion does not provide a system of meaning for its followers, but instead is more like a cult wherein Rumfoord himself has an all-powerful role.

Another way the novel explores the temptations and futility of mankind's search for meaning is through the idea of luck. Luck plays an important role in the novel, particularly for Malachi Constant and his father, Noel, who both credit their enormous success in life to luck. Importantly, both explicitly connect luck to religion and God, yet are only very vaguely religious or spiritual themselves. Noel begins his adult life as an unsuccessful and poor man. He makes a series of investments based on the first sentence of the Book of Genesis, investing in companies that have the same combination of letters that can be found in this sentence. This investment strategy—which is not remotely founded in business knowledge and is more like playing the lottery—pays off, and Noel becomes the most successful businessman in the United States.

Yet while some may be tempted to read this turn of events as "proof" of the Bible's truth, Noel does not do so. Recalling the growth of his wealth in a letter to Malachi, Noel observes, "I kept my eyes open for some kind of signal that would tell me what it was all about but there wasn't any signal. I just went on getting richer and richer." This indicates that the search for meaning relies less on the existence of signs than on how

people choose to interpret them. The fact that Noel keeps “getting richer and richer” after investing based on letters in the Bible could easily be interpreted as a “sign” of the truth of Christianity, but Noel does not favor this interpretation.

Malachi adopts a similarly vague interpretation of his own luck; together with Noel’s beliefs, this suggests that people may actually not be invested in searching for deeper meaning as long as everything is going well for them. When speaking with Rumfoord about the question of why he is so lucky, Malachi nonchalantly says, “I guess somebody up there likes me.” Of course, by the end of the novel “somebody up there” is revealed to be not the vague idea of God that Malachi invokes here, but actually the Tralfamadorians, an alien species that is controlling human history. This, in turn, circles back to the surprising coherence between space exploration and religious belief. The phrase “somebody up there” suggests that the way people talk about God better describes an alien species than the all-powerful force that Rumfoord indicates is actually “utterly indifferent.” Ultimately, the novel depicts two versions of a higher power—the aliens who are using humanity to their own ends and the God who does not care about “puny man”—neither of which are capable of providing humanity with a true sense of meaning.



### WEALTH, POWER, AND INEQUALITY

Both of the main characters in *The Sirens of Titan*—Malachi Constant and Winston Niles

Rumfoord—are extraordinarily rich and powerful, and through them the novel explores the dangers, drawbacks, and illusions of power and inequality. Both Rumfoord and Constant at times appear to have almost superhuman levels of power, but this neither makes them happy nor works out in the long run. Rumfoord and Constant’s experiences show that wealth and power can foster loneliness and paranoia on the part of the wealthy and powerful themselves. Through the war that occurs between Earth and Mars, the novel also demonstrates how inequality tends to create an unstable social system that can lead to brutal and violent vengeance.

Constant and Rumfoord come from two very different forms of wealth, but neither man actually earned their money, suggesting that just because one is a wealthy elite doesn’t mean one deserves the disproportionate power that one has over others. Rumfoord is from an “old money” New England family, and has thus inherited wealth, power, and status that has passed through many generations. Constant, meanwhile, is the son of a self-made man (Noel) who became rich almost by accident. The unearned nature of Constant’s position in the world is reflected in the following description of him: “He was not a great scientist. He was not even well-educated. He had been thrown out of the University of Virginia in the middle of his freshman year. He was Malachi Constant of Hollywood, California, the richest American, and a notorious rakehell.”

Unlike those who inherit wealth, self-made men like Malachi’s father, Noel Constant, are often assumed to have “earned” their money and power, yet the novel also disputes this interpretation. Noel did not become rich because he was especially intelligent, talented, or hard-working—rather, it happened pretty much at random. Indeed, the novel repeatedly suggests that people cling to the idea of meritocracy because they can’t handle the truth that inequality is essentially random. Many people don’t understand how Noel became rich, not because it is actually a complicated story, but because they cannot handle the truth that it was so undeserved. The narrator explains, “The people who can’t understand it are people who have to believe, for their own peace of mind, that tremendous wealth can be produced only by tremendous cleverness.”

While the novel on one hand condemns wealth and power that aren’t fairly earned, it also shows that these markers of success don’t even lead to happiness. Constant’s life is so luxurious and easy that he has lost his capacity for joy and satisfaction. As a result, he turns to drugs. In the words of the narrator, “Hallucinations, usually drug-induced, were almost all that could surprise and entertain Constant any more.” Not only this, but Constant suffers from loneliness and paranoia in a way that is implicitly linked to his unique status as the richest man in the U.S. At one point, Constant becomes intoxicated at a party and black out. Afterward, he is told that during the party he couldn’t stop crying, gave everyone around him oil wells as gifts, and accused them of wanting to wait until he fell asleep so they could shoot him into the sun in a rocket. This scene demonstrates just how miserable Constant’s wealth and power make him. Gifting people oil wells seems to be a desperate attempt at securing intimacy, while his conviction that people want to shoot him into the sun suggests that his position has made him deeply paranoid and unable to trust people.

In a sense, Constant’s paranoia is proven right. While at the beginning of the novel he is so wealthy and powerful that he seems untouchable, this does not last. After being conscripted into the Martian Army, Constant’s memory is wiped, and he is given a new identity as Unk. He is placed under the absolute control of the army and has a low impression of himself, as shown by the fact that when he discovers the letter addressed to him (which he initially doesn’t realize he also wrote himself), he thinks that the letter-writer made a mistake in believing that he is smart or heroic enough to be a recipient of this information. Constant’s fall from grace is further emphasized by the contrast between his reversal of fortune and that of Boaz, one of the commanders of the Martian Army. As the narrator notes, “Unk had everything back on Earth, and Boaz had nothing.” This turn of events highlights that wealth and power are unpredictable, and that inequality creates an unstable social situation. People’s good fortune, which is shown to be random in the first place, can be reversed as quickly as it

emerges.



## HUMAN INTELLIGENCE, FOOLISHNESS, AND HUBRIS

*The Sirens of Titan* is a satirical novel, and one of the main targets of its derision is the hubris of humanity's faith in our own intelligence. Hubris refers to excessive pride that in turn leads to the downward turn of a person's fortune. Throughout the novel, foolish people and ideas are falsely believed to be intelligent. This is closely connected to the novel's exploration of humanity's search for meaning, as well as the consequences (and causes) of inequality. People want to believe that intelligent beings are in control, and this leads to (perhaps false) belief in both God and meritocracy. The revelation that the Tralfamadorians have shaped human history to their own ends suggests that more intelligent beings *have* been in control the whole time. However, an ironic twist emerges in the form of the fact that the message the Tralfamadorians sent Salo on a mission to deliver—and thus the whole reason that human civilization exists—says nothing more than “Greetings.” This message—though not exactly foolish—is not particularly wise, complex, or ingenious, either. It is yet another example of what the novel terms the “idiotically simple,” suggesting that it the habit of assigning greater complexity to simple or foolish matters is a trait not limited to humans.

One of the main messages of the novel is that while it is commonly assumed that more intelligence leads to greater success, the opposite is actually true. This is explored through the example of Noel and Malachi Constant, who are the most successful businessmen in the U.S. despite the fact that they know nothing about business. Noel made his fortune essentially at random, and his investment strategy is so “idiotically simple” that many people actually can't understand it. They falsely believe that is complicated because of their faith in meritocracy, whereas in reality, Noel is unintelligent and doesn't really understand business. The same is true of Malachi, who, whenever people ask him for investment advice, tells them to buy stock in an entirely fictional company. As the narrator explains, “what little charm the Constants had evaporated the instant they pretended that their successes depended on knowing their elbows from third base.” The Constants may be the richest people in the country, but this is not thanks to their own intelligence.

Indeed, the novel not only suggests that there is no link between intelligence and success—it also indicates that *ignorance* might even be more conducive to success. This emerges in the story of the origin of Noel's fortune. The fact that he didn't understand why he was becoming rich allowed him to keep pursuing the same uninformed investment strategy, which in turn meant that he continued making money.

The idea that ignorance can be necessary to success is also explored through the character of Boaz, one of the commanders of the Martian Army. Boaz has a very powerful position, but is not an intelligent, curious, or critical person, and the narrator explicitly links these two aspects of his character: “He was too good a soldier to go around asking questions, trying to round out his knowledge. A soldier's knowledge wasn't supposed to be round.” This quotation links the novel's exploration of intelligence to its depiction of free will versus external control: Boaz restricts his own intelligence in order to blindly follow orders, and this makes him a successful soldier.

This is similar to Salo, who—despite being vastly more intelligent than any of the human characters—nonetheless obeys the commands of others to an almost fanatical degree. As the narrator explains, “Of all the orders Salo received before taking off from Tralfamadore, the one that was given the most importance was that *he was not, under any circumstances, to open the message along the way.* This order was so emphasized that it became the very core of the little Tralfamadorian messenger's being.” Like Boaz, Salo does not possess a natural sense of curiosity. So despite going on a multi-millennial mission to deliver the message and getting stranded for 200,000 years during it, he is never once tempted to actually find out what the message is.

What appears to link Boaz and Salo's success and ignorance is the fact that, by deliberately preserving their own ignorance in order to follow orders, they never discover that there is actually no intelligent plan behind their respective missions at all. In both cases, the supposed greater intelligence that (directly or indirectly) gives them orders is the Tralfamadorians trying to get their message delivered to the other side of the universe. Yet at the end of the novel, it is revealed that all this message contains is the word “Greetings.” The seemingly intelligent plot behind everything that happens in the novel is actually, like Noel Constant's investment strategy, “idiotically simple.”

In contrast to the willingly ignorant Noel, Malachi, Boaz, and Salo, Rumfoord becomes intoxicated with his own intelligence, and thus becomes a warning about hubris. Having acquired the ability to travel through space with his dog, Kazak, through the **chrono-synclastic infundibulum**, Rumfoord boasts of having learned everything that will happen in both the past and future. While his belief in his own prophetic powers is not false, Rumfoord still fails to realize that a sunspot will eventually interrupt his journey through space and shoot him into oblivion. Indeed, the fact that Rumfoord is sent hurtling through space by a sunspot links his fate to a classical tale of hubris: the story of Icarus, who gains the ability to fly but dies after his wax wings melt when he flies too close to the sun. Like Icarus, Rumfoord acquires a special ability but then become overconfident in this ability, and this eventually leads to his downfall. In this sense, the novel suggest that it is better to

always remain aware of one's own stupidity, rather than (falsely) believe in one's intelligence.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### CHRONO-SYNCLASTIC INFUNDIBULUM

Chrono-synclastic infundibula, mysterious spirals that exist in space, represent the vast unknowable expanse of the universe and the predetermined nature of existence. They are never fully explained in the novel, with the narrator claiming that they are too complex to be easily summarized and indicating that human scientists still do not really understand them. According to the novel, the age of human space exploration is halted by the discovery of chrono-synclastic infundibula. No one knows what will happen if a human enters them, and thus governments ban humans from travelling through space. However, Winston Niles Rumfoord ignores this ban and, taking his dog, Kazak, with him, flies his spaceship directly into a particular chrono-synclastic infundibulum that stretches between Earth and Mars. The result is that Rumfoord and Kazak become trapped in a kind of time warp. Being inside a chrono-synclastic infundibulum enables Rumfoord to see into the past and future; inside the spirals, all the different, subjective, and conflicting versions of truth fit together perfectly. It is through the seemingly omniscient power he gains within the chrono-synclastic infundibulum that Rumfoord is able to realize that everything that happens in the universe is predetermined, which indicates that there is no such thing as free will. At the same time, it eventually becomes clear that Rumfoord never achieves *full* omniscience, as he is not able to predict that one day a sunspot will interrupt the chrono-synclastic infundibulum he is in, flinging him and Kazak off into the oblivion of space. In their mysteriousness, then, chrono-synclastic infundibulum represent hubris and the limits of human knowledge.



### ANTENNAE

Soldiers in the Martian army are all fitted with antennae, which force them to remain under the army's total control. The antennae thus represent lack of free will and the question of whether it is possible to override external control. When Malachi Constant is abducted, brainwashed, and given the new name and identity of Unk, he is also fitted with an antenna. Like the other soldiers, whenever Unk thinks or does something "that a good soldier wouldn't do," the antenna causes him pain. The fact that everyone in the

army (including the generals and doctors) wear the antennae is presented as proof that the Martian army is "democratic." Yet the real leaders of the army, including Boaz—who are hidden among the population of soldiers—do not have antennae. The antennae thus represent the potential of technology to control people in terrifyingly absolute and hidden ways. Unlike a traditional army, with a less direct and sophisticated system of disciplinary techniques, the Martian army has absolute control over its members' thoughts, speech, and bodily movements. In this way, the antennae relate to the novel's exploration of free will. Obviously, the Martian army are externally controlled in a much more obvious way than ordinary people. But if free will is an illusion, it could perhaps be argued that every person has a kind of metaphorical antennae controlling their actions—albeit one they cannot see or feel. This raises questions about the possibility of disobeying the antenna. Indeed, once Unk finds the letters he's been writing to himself, he begins to disobey the antenna, ignoring the pain and even coming to crave it as a sign that he is gaining greater understanding of the situation he is in. Ultimately, Unk is able to disobey his antenna, suggesting that freeing oneself from external control is possible, but painful. At the same time, Unk isn't able to deviate from Rumfoord's prophecy for his life, ultimately leaving it ambiguous as to whether it is possible to exercise free will.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dial edition of *The Sirens of Titan* published in 2009.

### Chapter 1: Between Timid and Timbuktu Quotes

☞ Mankind flung its advance agents ever outward, ever outward [...]

These unhappy agents found what had already been found in abundance on Earth—a nightmare of meaninglessness without end.

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1-2

#### Explanation and Analysis

The novel opens with a meditation on humanity's search for meaning. The narrator comments that in the present, people understand that they must look within themselves for meaning, but that this wasn't always the case. In the past, people turned "outward" in their search, including by flying into space. This passage describes the disappointment of those who searched space for the

meaning of life, only to find that it gave them the same answer they'd tried to escape on Earth—"a nightmare of meaninglessness without end."

This stark, rather depressing assessment of the (lack of) meaning of life introduces the reader to the novel's pessimistic—though also bleakly funny—perspective. Yet it is also never clear whether the book totally stands behind the notion that life is meaningless. While much in the narrative indicates that this is the case, glimmers of meaning do emerge throughout the story, and it is up to the reader to decide whether these counter the nihilistic view of existence presented here.

☛ The moral: Money, position, health, handsomeness, and talent aren't everything.

**Related Characters:** Kazak, Mrs. Beatrice Rumfoord/Bee, Winston Niles Rumfoord

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 7

### Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has introduced Mr. and Mrs. Winston Niles Rumfoord, wealthy residents of Newport, Rhode Island. Every 59 days for the past nine years, Mr. Rumfoord has "materialized" on Earth along with his dog, Kazak. Mrs. Rumfoord, meanwhile, is a beautiful, esteemed, eccentric, and talented poet. In this quotation, the narrator observes that Mrs. Rumfoord appears to have everything ("money, position, health, handsomeness, and talent"). The statement is a key example of Vonnegut's use of satire. Many would assume that the qualities listed here *do* in fact add up to everything. Possessing so much, how is it possible that Mrs. Rumfoord still feels she is lacking?

At the same time, the reader might notice that things like love and happiness are not mentioned in this quotation. Although the narrator has not yet revealed much about the state of Mrs. Rumfoord's mental health or that of her marriage, the fact that her husband only appears once every 59 days seems to indicate that all is not well in the Rumfoord home. Thus, while this quotation is on one level somewhat facetious, on another level it is true that the things Mrs. Rumfoord possesses really *aren't* everything.

☛ "When I ran my space ship into the chrono-synclastic infundibulum, it came to me in a flash that everything that has been always will be, and everything that ever will be always has been." He chuckled again. "Knowing that rather takes the glamour out of fortunetelling—makes it the simplest, most obvious thing imaginable."

**Related Characters:** Winston Niles Rumfoord (speaker), Malachi Constant / Unk / the Space Wanderer

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 20

### Explanation and Analysis

Having arrived at the Rumfoord Estate to witness Mr. Rumfoord's materialization (in which Rumfoord and his dog reappear on Earth), Constant misses the materialization itself but meets Rumfoord shortly after. Rumfoord says that he can read Constant's mind and knows the future and past. Here, Rumfoord explains that as soon as he first went into the chrono-synclastic infundibulum (a kind of time warp in space), he became aware that everything in the universe is determined—indicating that there is no such thing as free will. Here, Rumfoord reflects that this knowledge makes "fortunetelling" more depressing than "glamorous."

This passage raises several of the novel's most important concerns, including: Does free will exist? And if not, is it better to *know* that one doesn't have free will, or to continue with the illusion? Rumfoord's lightheartedness indicates that he hasn't been overly traumatized by his realization that the events of the past and future are pre-determined. At the same time, his cheerful exterior perhaps belies the true nature of his feelings about what he has seen. Not only is it rather depressing to know that one doesn't have free will, but Rumfoord must also endure the loneliness of having a unique perspective on the past and future that isn't shared by anyone around him.

☛ The discovery of the chrono-synclastic infundibula said to mankind in effect: "What makes you think you're going anywhere?"

It was a situation made to order for American fundamentalist preachers. They were quicker than philosophers or historians or anybody to talk sense about the truncated Age of Space.

**Related Characters:** Winston Niles Rumfoord (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 26

### Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has noted that Rumfoord is “courageous” for deliberately flying his spaceship into a chrono-synclastic infundibulum (a kind of time warp in space), even though no one knew what would happen if a person were to do this. In fact, the entire Space Age was halted by the discovery of the chrono-synclastic infundibula’s existence. Here, the narrator explains that some people—particularly religious people—chose to interpret the existence of the chrono-synclastic infundibula as God forcing the interruption of the Age of Space.

According to fundamentalist preachers, God created the infundibula in order to undercut human hubris. While humans might have been naïvely confident enough to believe that they had the power and resources to explore space, the reality is that humans are no match for the awesome forces and mysteries of the universe—which fundamentalist preachers of course believe was created by God, and is a reflection of God’s unimaginably superior power and intelligence.

## Chapter 3: United Hotcake Preferred Quotes

☹☹ There was something pathetic and repellent about Malachi Constant’s talking business. It has been the same with his father. Old Noel Constant had never known anything about business, and neither had his son—and what little charm the Constants had evaporated the instant they pretended that their successes depended on their knowing their elbows from third base.

**Related Characters:** Malachi Constant / Unk / the Space Wanderer, Noel Constant

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 67

### Explanation and Analysis

Malachi Constant has hosted a 56-day-long party at his home in Hollywood, and when he awakes from his state of profound intoxication he learns that Ransom K. Fern, the president of Constant’s company Magnum Opus, is quitting.

Constant goes to meet Fern at the Magnum Opus headquarters, and makes an approving comment about Fern’s decision to decorate his office with furniture made by one of their subsidiary companies. In this quotation, the narrator explains that both Malachi and his father, Noel, always appear ridiculous when they try to speak about business. The reality is that all their success is down to luck, and they shouldn’t try to pretend otherwise.

This passage thus provides an important reflection on the illusion of meritocracy. If the world operated based on merit, then Noel and Malachi Constant would be the richest people in the U.S. because they were the smartest and most talented. However, this isn’t true at all—as the narrator has stated previously, the reason behind their financial success is “dumb luck.” Given this injustice, the narrator indicates that it is better for Noel and Malachi to keep quiet. When they pretend to understand business, it reveals the absurd and insulting truth behind their wealth.

☹☹ His system was so idiotically simple that some people can’t understand it, no matter how often it is explained. The people who can’t understand it are people who have to believe, for their own peace of mind, that tremendous wealth can be produced only by tremendous cleverness.

**Related Characters:** Noel Constant

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 70

### Explanation and Analysis

After the stock market crash, Magnum Opus has gone bankrupt, and all its staff have been fired. Following this turn of events, the narrator goes back to explain the company’s “humble origins.” It was founded by Noel Constant who, at the age of 39, was a failed cookware salesman. He decided to become a speculator, and used the Bible as his tool for making investment decisions. This passage notes that Noel’s investment strategy—the details of which are yet to be revealed—is “so idiotically simple that some people can’t understand it.”

This is one of many instances in the novel in which the binary between intelligence and foolishness is blurred. Noel’s investment strategy, like many other things in the novel, is so “idiotically simple” that it *seems* complicated. People cannot bring themselves to believe it is real. As the narrator explains, this is usually because many people

cannot bear to face the truth that the ultra-rich do not earn their wealth through talent and ingenuity. People cling to the myth of meritocracy because the truth—that extraordinary wealth is often unearned and the result of luck—is too painful to confront.

●● Evangelist Bobby Denton's image of Earth as God's space ship was an apt one—particularly with reference to barflies. Helmholtz and Miss Wiley were behaving like pilot and co-pilot of an enormously pointless voyage through space that was expected to take forever.

**Related Characters:** Malachi Constant / Unk / the Space Wanderer, Roberta Wiley, George M. Helmholtz

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 85

### Explanation and Analysis

Malachi Constant has just been informed that his company Magnum Opus has gone bankrupt and that all the staff have been fired. The company's president, Ransom K. Fern, informs Constant that his father, Noel, left him a letter inside the Wilburhampton Hotel, where Noel lived, which Malachi was to read if his good fortune ever turned. Malachi goes to the hotel, where there are two retired Midwestern teachers named George M. Helmholtz and Roberta Wiley drinking at the bar. In this passage, the narrator compares Helmholtz and Wiley to two pilots of what the fundamentalist preacher Bobby Denton described as "God's space ship."

Yet while Denton used this metaphor in order to argue that space exploration is unnecessary because all that is needed for a fulfilling life exists on Earth, in this passage the metaphor serves a different purpose. Indeed, the spaceship Helmholtz and Wiley are driving has no destination. It is a long journey, monotonous, boring, and with no purpose to the trip. This is one of the most important messages of the novel (and perhaps the most depressing one): there is no real meaning to life, and neither religion nor science (represented together by the metaphor of God's spaceship) can provide meaning where there is none.

## Chapter 4: Tent Rentals Quotes

●● At the hospital they even had to explain to Unk that there was a radio antenna under the crown of his skull, and that it would hurt him whenever he did something a good soldier wouldn't ever do. The antenna also would give him orders and furnish drum music to march to. They said that not just Unk but everybody had an antenna like that—doctors and nurses and four-star generals included. It was a very democratic army, they said.

**Related Characters:** Malachi Constant / Unk / the Space Wanderer

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 100

### Explanation and Analysis

The setting of the novel shifts to Mars, and the narrator describes the life of Unk, a private in the Martian Army. Three years ago, Unk was demoted from lieutenant-colonel to private, and he has recently emerged from a stay at the military hospital where he was being treated for mental illness. In the hospital, Unk's memory was wiped, such that he couldn't recognize anyone or even remember his own name. In this passage, the narrator describes the doctors and nurses in the hospital explaining that Unk was being fitted with a radio antenna that would control him and compel him to behave like a "good soldier."

In the novel, the antennae implanted in each Martian soldier's skull represents external control and lack of free will. They restrict the soldiers' movements in a very obvious and direct sense, rather than more subtle forms of coercion that exist in ordinary civilian life on Earth. Whereas on Earth, people's actions might be determined by forces like societal norms, peer pressure, the need to survive, or genetics, on Mars they are tightly controlled by a technological implant—turning the soldiers into living robots who are literally remote-controlled by the army. This is, of course, a terrifying vision of how technology, the military, and a dystopian regime could rob people of every ounce of their freedom.

## Chapter 5: Letter From an Unknown Hero Quotes

●● As free as it wanted to be—that's how free the free will of Boaz was.

**Related Characters:** Malachi Constant / Unk / the Space Wanderer, Boaz

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 116

### Explanation and Analysis

At his barracks, Unk suddenly has a memory of the MoonMist cigarette ad. Another soldier, Boaz, encourages Unk to recall more of the memory, but when Unk does this his antenna causes him so much pain it makes him pass out. Boaz is only a private in the Martian Army, but he is secretly in control of all the men in his squad. He has a control box in his trousers with which he directs their actions, and—unlike the rest of the soldiers—doesn't have an antenna planted in his head.

This brief quotation meditates on the consequences of Boaz's lack of antenna. Unlike the other soldiers, Boaz's actions are not being controlled by the army—at least not in the direct way that the antenna makes possible. Compared to them, Boaz has free will. Yet at the same time, this quotation subtly suggests that Boaz might not be acting entirely of his own volition, even though on some level he is obviously much more free than his squadmates.

It's significant that the only members of the Martian Army who are not fitted with antennae are those who are trusted to have absolute loyalty to the army, such that they don't need an antenna in the first place. While Boaz might be free from having his every action remote-controlled, he is arguably still not free, because his loyalty to the army—even if it is freely chosen—in turn restricts his own agency.

☞ [...] he was too good a soldier to go around asking questions, trying to round out his knowledge.

A soldier's knowledge wasn't supposed to be round.

**Related Characters:** Malachi Constant / Unk / the Space Wanderer, Boaz

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 119-120

### Explanation and Analysis

Back on Earth, Boaz was a 14-year-old orphan who was

Unk's social inferior. However, on Mars, the roles have switched. Boaz has heard vague rumors about Unk's status on Earth, although he doesn't know the details. In this passage, the narrator explains that Boaz doesn't chase up the little information he has about Unk because a "good" soldier doesn't ask too many questions. This quotation links being a good soldier to artificially restricting one's curiosity and knowledge. In doing so, it makes explicit that a certain kind of stupidity is valued within the army as a sign of obedience and loyalty.

In this sense, the quotation is about free will as much as it is about human knowledge. While Boaz doesn't wear an antenna, he is still not necessarily free. He chooses to restrict his own knowledge by remaining ultra-loyal to the Martian Army—as demonstrated in this quotation. In a sense, Boaz's freedom means nothing considering he voluntarily controls himself without even needing an antenna. By willfully restricting his own knowledge rather than having an antenna do it for him, Boaz is arguably even *less* free than the common soldiers in the army.

☞ (71.) *Unk, old friend—almost everything I know for sure has come from fighting the pain from my antenna [...] Whenever I start to turn my head and look at something, and the pain comes, I keep turning my head anyway, because I know I am going to see something I'm not supposed to see. Whenever I ask a question, and the pain comes, I know I have asked a really good question [...] The more pain I train myself to stand, the more I learn. You are afraid of the pain now, Unk, but you won't learn anything if you don't invite the pain. And the more you learn, the gladder you will be to stand the pain.*

**Related Characters:** Malachi Constant / Unk / the Space Wanderer, Stony Stevenson

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 125

### Explanation and Analysis

Based on a hint Stony mentioned just before he was executed, Unk goes into a particular barrack and found a letter addressed to him that is overflowing with information about Unk's life, his friendship with Stony, the Martian Army, and his efforts to override the army's control over his thoughts and actions. In this part of the letter, the writer—whose identity is, at this point, still

unknown—explains that gaining knowledge is extremely difficult, because every time they let themselves think or do something that the army doesn't approve of, they receive a blinding surge of pain from their antenna.

However, while at first this puts off the writer from seeking the truth, he or she eventually pushes past the pain and fear in order to learn the truth anyway. Indeed, the pain actually becomes an encouraging sign of assurance that the writer is on the right path. Of course, this can all be read as a metaphor for the pain of disobeying authority in order to exercise one's own free will. While rebelling against authorities and societal norms can be horrific, it is a necessary and noble form of pain, because it is the only way in which a person can seek freedom and truth.

## Chapter 11: We Hate Malachi Constant Because... Quotes

“Luck, good or bad,” said Rumfoord up in his treetop, is not the hand of God.”

“Luck,” said Rumfoord up in his treetop, is the way the wind swirls and the dust settles eons after God has passed by.”

**Related Characters:** Winston Niles Rumfoord (speaker), Malachi Constant / Unk / the Space Wanderer

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 257

### Explanation and Analysis

Unk has returned to Earth under the new identity of the Space Wanderer, an important figure in Rumfoord's hugely powerful religion, the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent. After the Space Wanderer's arrival and Rumfoord's materialization, Rumfoord climbs up a tree in his estate and gives a sermon to the crowd assembled outside about why Malachi Constant represents everything the Church stands against. Here, Rumfoord explains that luck cannot be conceptualized as the hand of God. In his view, luck has nothing to do with God, and is completely disconnected from God's will.

One of the questions raised by the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent is why the Church even maintains the existence of God. The randomness and meaninglessness the Church preaches is arguably more aligned with an atheistic view of the world than one that involves God. Indeed, this quotation shows that the role God actually plays in the

Church's view of the world is quite unclear. Luck might be something that arises separately from God's presence, but in that case, what is God's presence? Does God play any role in the vision of the universe the Church depicts—or is God just nominally part of the religion so that it seems more familiar and acceptable to its followers?

## Chapter 12: The Gentleman From Tralfamadore Quotes

Salo did not question the good sense of his errand, since he was, like all Tralfamadoreans, a machine. As a machine, he had to do what he was supposed to do.

**Related Characters:** Salo

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 275

### Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has provided the backstory of Salo, an alien from the planet Tralfamadore who has been stranded on Titan for 200,000 during a mission to deliver a message across the universe. Before leaving Tralfamadore, Salo was told that he must not open the message under any conditions, and thus he doesn't know its contents. However, because he is a machine, this doesn't bother him. He is designed to carry out tasks obediently, without using his own mind to evaluate whether they seem logical.

This quotation links Salo to the Martian soldiers, who are turned into machines through their antennae. However, unlike the Martian soldiers, Salo doesn't need a mechanism to override his free will. He was built to follow instructions, and is thus more effective at completing tasks than the soldiers, who sometimes struggle against the technology controlling them and must be punished as a result. This is a far messier system than using machines like Salo.

☛☛ *Once upon a time on Tralfamadore there were creatures who weren't anything like machines. They weren't dependable. They weren't efficient. They weren't predictable. They weren't durable. And these poor creatures were obsessed by the idea that everything that existed had to have a purpose, and that some purposes were higher than others.*

*These creatures spent most of their time trying to find out what their purpose was. And every time they found out what seemed to be a purpose of themselves, the purpose seemed so low that the creatures were filled with disgust and shame.*

**Related Characters:** Salo

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 279

### Explanation and Analysis

Having introduced Salo and explained the mission that has sent him across the universe and left him stranded on Titan, the narrator has noted that all of human history exists in order to deliver the missing part to Salo that will allow him to continue his journey. The narrator then provides a piece of Tralfamadorian myth, which explains how the current beings who live on the planet exist in the first place. In this passage, the myth explains that the mechanical beings currently known as Tralfamadorians didn't always live there. Before, the planet was populated by an organic species who were obsessed with finding the "purpose" of their existence. In this sense, these beings resemble humans.

Yet presented in this unfamiliar, (literally) alien manner, it is easier to see how something like the search for purpose is more common than is commonly assumed. As this passage indicates, the idea that beings should search for their own purpose is not guaranteed. Nor does it make sense that some purposes are considered better than others. Of course, this is also meaningful in light of the recent revelation that the whole purpose of human history has simply been to deliver Salo his missing part. This might seem ridiculous, and even terrible—but this passage prompts the reader to question why.

☛☛ "There it is—friend," he said to his memory of Rumfoord, "and much consolation may it give you, Skip. Much pain it cost your old friend Salo. In order to give it to you—even too late—your old friend Salo had to make war against the core of his being, against the very nature of being a machine.

"You asked the impossible of a machine," said Salo, "and the machine complied."

**Related Characters:** Salo (speaker), Winston Niles Rumfoord

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 305-306

### Explanation and Analysis

A sunspot has jeopardized Rumfoord's safety inside the chrono-synclastic infundibulum, killing him. Before his death—yet after he realized he was going to die—Rumfoord angrily demanded that Salo reveal the contents of the message he is carrying across the universe. Rumfoord was furious at the realization that he, like all humans across history, were being "used" by the Tralfamadorians to deliver Salo his missing part and enable him to continue on in his journey. He insults Salo and demands to see the message even though he knows that doing so forces Salo to violate the most important command of his mission.

Although initially unsure, Salo decides to reveal the message to Rumfoord—however, he then realizes it is too late, as Rumfoord is already dead. In this passage, Salo addresses Rumfoord's "memory," explaining that he decided to violate his most important command in honor of their friendship. This is a crucial passage as it suggests that anything—even a machine—is capable of overriding external control and exercising free will if it really wants to. This is a radical suggestion, and one that counters the book's overall message that free will is largely an illusion. Of course, it may be that Salo's decision to look at the message was actually triggered by another external factor controlling him, one that the reader doesn't know about. Yet it is also possible to interpret this passage as indicating that certain beings—perhaps only the most extraordinary ones—are capable of exercising free will against all odds.

☛☛ Chrono had always known that his good-luck piece had extraordinary powers and extraordinary meanings.

And he had always suspected that some superior creature would eventually come to claim the good-luck piece as his own. It was the nature of truly effective good-luck pieces that human beings never really owned them.

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Beatrice Rumfoord/Bee, Malachi Constant / Unk / the Space Wanderer, Salo, Chrono

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 307

**Explanation and Analysis**

Malachi, Beatrice, and Chrono have all learned that the entirety of human history only exists to deliver Salo the part he needs to continue his journey. While this upsets Malachi and Beatrice—just as it did Rumfoord—Chrono feels differently, even though it means he will have to part ways with his beloved “good-luck piece.” Indeed, Chrono is shown to have a surprisingly mature view of luck, external control, and human intelligence. Unlike the other characters, he

does not overestimate the importance or abilities of humans. Indeed, what he liked about the good-luck piece was that it connected him to something greater than himself.

In this sense, Chrono’s attitude toward the good-luck piece is akin to religious belief. He enjoys the idea that other beings (in this case aliens, although in a religious context it would of course be God) have greater power or control than him. This serves as an important reminder that human insignificance need not be seen as depressing or scary—it can be soothing and reassuring.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CHAPTER 1: BETWEEN TIMID AND TIMBUKTU

The narrator explains that in the present, people know how to find the “meaning of life” within themselves, but that in the past, people didn’t understand this and turned to “gimcrack religions.” The human race searched for meaning by sending people to explore space. In the end, only the human soul was left unexplored. The story that follows takes place in “the Nightmare Ages,” which happened between World War II and “the Third Great Depression.”

A crowd gathers in anticipation of a “materialization” of a man and his dog. The crowd has not been invited to the event, and thus they won’t get a chance to witness it happening. However, they want to be near it anyway. The materialization is taking place at the Rumfoord Estate in Newport, Rhode Island. Someone spreads a rumor that the materialization has already taken place, and the crowd rush to catch a glimpse of the man and his dog. They are obsessed with “miracles.”

The materializations have been happening once every 59 days for nine years. Highly-educated men from all over the world constantly request to witness one, but they are always politely turned away by Mrs. Rumfoord’s social secretary, who calls them a “tragic family affair.” Every time a materialization happens, Mrs. Rumfoord issues a brief, 100-word report about it, but refuses to answer any questions. The estate is guarded by a very high wall and a locked door. The person who materializes is Mrs. Rumfoord’s husband, Winston Niles Rumfoord, and his dog, Kazak. Mrs. Rumfoord’s reports indicate that her husband has special insights about the past and future.

A man is driven up to the estate in a limousine. He is wearing sunglasses and a fake beard as a disguise. A policeman admits him through the gates. This man is the first person to ever be invited to a materialization. His name is Malachi Constant, the richest man in the U.S. He never graduated college, lives in Hollywood, and is a “notorious rakehell.” Outside the estate there are signs saying, “Beware of the dog!” but inside there is only a skeleton of a large dog wearing a spiked collar. The decision to hang the skeleton there had been Mrs. Rumfoord’s.

*This passage establishes that the novel is set in the future, but a perhaps not too distant version of the future. The Third Great Depression is an imagined future event, but World War II is obviously a real event that took place in the past, suggesting that this is a somewhat near-future scenario in between these two periods.*



*Newport, Rhode Island is a very wealthy community populated with mansions from the Gilded Age (1870s-1900). This setting is an important aspect of the novel, as it epitomizes new money and opulence and helps to develop themes of social status, wealth inequality, and power.*



*The beginning of the story supplies important information about the novel’s genre. The fact that a “materialization” takes place indicates that it is science fiction, even though it is set on Earth and takes place at a time that is perhaps not too far in the future. Winston Niles Rumfoord appears to be some kind of time-traveler, which explains why he has insights about the past and future.*



*Both the Rumfoords and Malachi Constant are very wealthy, and there is a sinister air about all of them. This is demonstrated by Constant’s reputation as a “rakehell” (meaning a wealthy but immoral man) and the rather creepy skeleton of a dog Mrs. Rumfoord chooses to hang inside the estate.*



Mrs. Rumfoord has a fortune of \$17 million and the highest social status in the country. She is beautiful, and a talented poet. She has anonymously published a collection of poetry entitled *Between Timid and Timbaktu*. Although she has a lot, she doesn't have "everything." Inside the estate, Malachi Constant takes off his disguise. Unlike Rumfoord, Constant exists as a "point," meaning he is only ever in one place and time. Years ago, Rumfoord drove his spaceship into the heart of "an uncharted **chrono-synclastic infundibulum**" near Mars. He and his dog Kazak—who was also travelling in the spaceship—ended up in spiral that spans between the Sun and the star Betelgeuse. Every 59 days, Earth intercepts this spiral and Rumfoord and Kazak appear.

It is difficult to explain **chrono-synclastic infundibula** in simple terms. The narrator provides an extract from *A Child's Cyclopedia of Wonders and Things to Do* written by Dr. Cyril Hall that explains them through a story about two children on opposite ends of the universe, both of whom have extremely smart daddies who are always right. The extract notes that truth can be subjective, except for inside chrono-synclastic infundibula, where "all the different kinds of truths fit together." There are many chrono-synclastic infundibula in the Solar System, including one between Earth and Mars, which people know exists because Rumfoord and Kazak ran through it.

Constant uses a key that accompanied his invitation to open a door, then attempts to navigate labyrinthine forest using the instructions in the invitation. In it, Mrs. Rumfoord explained that Mr. Rumfoord insisted on Constant's presence at his next materialization even though she believes it is a bad idea. However, Mr. Rumfoord has claimed that he and Constant know each other well, having met on Titan, the moon that orbits Saturn. But Constant has never been to Titan or left Earth at all—or so he thinks.

Eventually Constant reaches an elaborate fountain, which features numerous stone bowls of different sizes. He climbs it, moving between the bowls. He eventually stops at the top, which is the smallest bowl, and looks out over the estate. Constant is 31 and handsome, with a fortune of \$3 billion. He has a reputation for overindulging in alcohol, drugs, and women. He has designed a coat of arms for himself with the slogan, *The Messenger Awaits*. He looks at his watch and realizes that he only has two minutes before the materialization is due to take place.

*The chrono-synclastic infundibulum is an invented phenomenon that doesn't exist in reality. It appears to be a kind of time warp. Although it exists in physical space, once a person is inside it they no longer exist in linear time. While this might sound bizarre and even absurd, it is actually not very far from the way scientists believe the laws of physics work—linear time itself is not a fixed phenomenon, and some scientists believe it is actually an illusion.*



*The idea that truth is subjective might also seem unscientific, but there is actually scientific consensus around the idea that humans are incapable of perceiving objective truth, and there are some who doubt whether objective truth exists at all. In the world of the novel it does exist, but only inside chrono-synclastic infundibula.*



*Mr. Rumfoord is capable of seeing the past and future thanks to his existence inside the chrono-synclastic infundibulum, which indicates that while Constant may not have left Earth thus far in the linear progression of his life, he will in the future—something Rumfoord has already experienced.*



*In many ways, Constant is an archetypal wayward rich man. He is hedonistic, selfish, and careless, insulated by his money from taking responsibility for his actions. The slogan he designed for his coat of arms is significant because Constant's first name, Malachi, means "messenger" in Hebrew.*



Constant climbs back down, thinking that the fountain reminds him of one of the hallucinations he experiences while on drugs. He falls into a reverie, and is woken by the sound of Kazak barking. He runs to the house and is greeted by a butler, who is crying with happiness. Rumfoord, who materialized only a minute ago, walks into the foyer. For the first time, Constant considers “that here might actually be a person superior to himself.” Rumfoord shakes Constant’s hand, greeting him with warm politeness. They discuss Constant’s extraordinary luck, and Constant comments, “I guess somebody up there likes me.”

Constant is self-conscious, horrified by the feeling that he is inferior to Rumfoord. He racks his mind for evidence of his own value, but feels stumped. Rumfoord informs Constant that he can read his mind. He says that if Constant wants to feel superior, he should remember that he can “reproduce,” whereas Rumfoord can’t. Rumfoord shows Constant a portrait of a little girl dressed in white and riding a white pony, explaining that it is Mrs. Rumfoord as a child. Rumfoord then takes Constant into a narrow, high room, shaped almost like a chimney. Rumfoord explains that he always wanted this room as a child, and Constant notices a sign that reads, “SKIP’S MUSEUM.”

The room is filled with “moral remains,” both endo- and exoskeletons. Many appear to have been taken from the local beach, but there is also the skeleton of an adult human. Rumfoord explains that Mrs. Rumfoord is avoiding him because she is tired of his fortunetelling. Rumfoord explains that when he originally flew into the **chrono-synclastic infundibulum**, he suddenly became aware that “everything that has ever been always will be, and everything that ever will be always has been.” He says that this makes knowing the future rather unexciting. Rumfoord then admits that one of the pieces of information about the future that he told his wife was that she and Constant would be forced to breed together “like farm animals” on Mars.

Rumfoord is a member of the American elite, which according to the narrator is filled with dignified, responsible people. However, the narrator also notes that members of Rumfoord’s own class have a history of “breeding people as though people were no better than farm animals.” Rumfoord’s class maintains its power by operating like a family; for example, Mr. and Mrs. Rumfoord are third cousins (who hate each other). Like other members of his class, Rumfoord is courageous. He bought his space ship for \$58 million, and flew it into space even after the government banned space exploration due to **chrono-synclastic infundibula**. He chose to fly into one even though nobody knew what would happen.

*The phrase, “I guess somebody up there likes me” as a representation of Constant’s good luck is an important motif in the novel. The phrase has religious connotations, but is also somewhat secular or agnostic in the sense that it betrays a nonspecific and rather irreverent attitude toward the “somebody up there.” It remains to be seen whether this “somebody” is God or something else entirely.*



*This passage is an indirect elaboration on the statement made earlier that while people can have extraordinary wealth, status, and power, this isn’t “everything.” Indeed, despite being the richest man in the world, Constant is easily made self-conscious by his encounter with Rumfoord. He appears to be somewhat obsessed with status in a way that illustrates his self-centered and fundamentally unhappy nature.*



*Rumfoord’s prophesizing is a curious mix of peaceful, soothing ideas (“everything that has ever been always will be”) and the highly disturbing prophecy that Constant and Beatrice will breed on Mars. At the same time, even the seemingly soothing aspect of this prediction is arguably more disturbing than it first appears. After all, the statement that “everything that has ever been always will be” seems to indicate that events are predetermined, implying that free will is an illusion and that Constant and Beatrice may not have a choice in the matter.*



*This is a crucial example of Vonnegut’s use of irony, sarcasm, and satire. Vonnegut challenges the idea that the American elite class are particularly noble, responsible, and courageous by claiming that this is true even while providing evidence to the contrary. (Notably, the comment of the history of American elites breeding people “like farm animals”—a reference to slavery.) In doing so, he shows the hypocrisy of the argument that this class of people are morally upstanding, let alone superior.*



Whereas Rumfoord does everything “with” style, Constant does things “in” style, which makes him (and the whole of humanity) look bad. Constant is in shock regarding Rumfoord’s claim about his future on Mars. Rumfoord explains that Constant will eventually end up on Titan, but he will also travel to Mars, Mercury, and back to Earth. The narrator compares the attitude toward space exploration in this era to the way people felt about colonial exploration before Columbus’s maiden voyage. The romantic notions of gaining wealth, power, and glory by sending people into space have long since died out.

Galactic Spacecraft, a company Constant owns, has built its last spaceship, called *The Whale*, which has never left Earth. The discovery of **chrono-synclastic infundibula** halted humanity’s exploration of space entirely. The people who responded quickest to the crisis were fundamentalist preachers. One preacher declared that God was punishing humanity’s hubris. He claimed that people wanted a spaceship, yet they were already on one—Earth is God’s spaceship, and people should be satisfied with that. He concluded that the rules of Christianity are more important than the rules of science.

Constant comments to Rumfoord that “the messenger is finally going to be used,” explaining that his name (Malachi) means “messenger.” Rumfoord is confused, and Constant asks why he is going to Titan. He then insists that he won’t go. Rumfoord says this is a shame, because Titan has a wonderful climate, and the most beautiful women to be found “between the Sun and Betelgeuse.” Constant scoffs and boasts that he’s had more than his fair share of beautiful women, showing Rumfoord a picture of Miss Canal Zone, a beauty contest winner he recently slept with. Rumfoord also says that Titan has spectacular art objects, but Constant again replies by bragging about his art collection here on Earth.

Constant’s art collection, which he inherited from his father, was designed “to prove how generous and useful billionaires could be.” Constant tries to show Rumfoord another picture of Miss Canal Zone, but instead finds that the picture he is holding is actually one Rumfoord has handed to him. There are three women in the photograph, all of whom are somehow millions of times more beautiful than Miss Canal Zone. Rumfoord says that Mrs. Rumfoord (whose first name is Beatrice) will also be on Titan, as well will Beatrice and Constant’s son, Chrono. Rumfoord then explains that Chrono will pick up a strip of metal on Mars which will turn out to be “unbelievably important.”

*Vonnegut wrote The Sirens of Titan during the Space Race, the period of the Cold War during which the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. competed via their space programs. In particular, the two powers wanted to be the first to put a human astronaut on the moon (something that wouldn’t occur until 10 years after The Sirens of Titan was published, although the U.S.S.R. managed to send an object to the moon in 1959). Thus, it makes sense that people in the novel romanticize space exploration, since this was relatively uncharted and mysterious territory at the time.*



*Religion is certainly one of The Sirens of Titan’s satirical targets. Yet perhaps more than traditional religion itself, Vonnegut’s main object of ridicule is attempts by religious leaders to fuse their teachings with technology. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than the idea that Earth is God’s spaceship, which is a deliberately outlandish statement both from a religious and a secular perspective.*



*Constant appears to be both intrigued and repelled by Rumfoord’s prophecies about his future. He is entertained by Rumfoord, yet is ultimately guided by his own hubris, which leads him to essentially conclude that he is so rich he doesn’t need to leave Earth. Furthermore, Constant appears to hold the mistaken view that he can change the future—another example of hubris.*



*Rumfoord’s prophecy here doesn’t just serve as information for Constant—it also provides an overview of the book’s plot for the reader. Of course, because there is little contextual information to help the reader understand these events, it’s unlikely that they will be able to make much sense of it. This echoes Constant’s own confusion and, consequentially, his refusal to believe that what Rumfoord predicts will come true.*



Rumfoord begins to disappear. He tells Constant, “See you on Titan,” then evaporates completely. Mrs. Rumfoord appears, asking if her husband is gone and if Mr. Constant is still there. Constant confirms that he is, and he and Mrs. Rumfoord greet each other politely. Constant says that he enjoyed meeting Mr. Rumfoord, but Mrs. Rumfoord replies that his materializations make her “ill.” She has never witnessed one after the very first. She calls her husband “insane,” but Constant suggests that Rumfoord’s predictions are well-founded. They bid each other goodbye, and Constant leaves. He thinks that there is no need to seduce Beatrice, and that he will let her come to him “like any other bimbo.”

Constant puts his disguise back on and gets into the limousine, then drives through the disappointed crowd. The people—angry at having not glimpsed the materialization—rock the car, and some even climb on top of it. The narrator observes that this riot is “an exercise in science and theology,” because it is rooted in a desire to understand materialization. The limousine escapes and drives away.

## CHAPTER 2: CHEERS IN THE WIREHOUSE

Constant gets out of the limousine and into a helicopter in order to prevent anyone following him. Even the chauffeur and helicopter pilot don’t know his true identity. The chauffeur asks if Constant was afraid of the crowd, and Constant replies he wasn’t, trying to channel Rumfoord’s aristocratic dignity. The chauffeur says someone or something must be watching over Constant, and Constant suddenly realizes this is true. However, at this moment he panics. He recalls that Rumfoord’s prophecy ended with Constant on Titan, and realizes that this means that he is probably going to *die* on Titan. When Constant gets into the helicopter, he is so distracted by his own horror that he forgets the fake name he gave to the pilot.

Fifty-nine days later, Rumfoord materializes again. In the meantime, a great deal happens. Constant sells his holdings in Galactic Spacecraft in order to sever any possible connection between himself and Mars, and buys stock in MoonMist Tobacco instead. He writes writing insulting letters to Beatrice on the official stationary of his company, Magnum Opus, Inc. As a result, Beatrice purchases cyanide to drink if she ever finds herself in proximity to Constant. The stock market crashes, and Beatrice loses everything, including the Newport estate. Meanwhile, in Hollywood, Malachi throws a party that lasts 56 days.

*Again, Constant appears to have conflicting views toward Rumfoord’s predictions. He is intrigued and repelled by them at the same time. Curiously, he defends the notion that they are true to Beatrice, and appears resigned to the idea that the two of them will mate (even though he doesn’t seem to particularly like her). Surprisingly, Constant has overall taken Rumfoord’s prophecies in stride.*



*This passage contains an important reflection on the nature of inequality. Inequality does not just mean that wealth and status are hoarding by an elite few—this upper class also hoard access to knowledge, technology, and arguably even ideology.*



*Constant is arguably not very intelligent, which is why it takes him until now to start panicking about the prophecy. Only at this point does he realize that Rumfoord’s prophecy means he has no free will. The idea that someone out there is looking out for him suddenly refers to Rumfoord’s omniscient view of the past and future. Rather than being a reassuring concept, this is a terrifying one, making Constant feel powerless and trapped.*



*Constant’s desperate attempt to avoid the prophecy coming true has an important precedent in the tradition of Ancient Greek tragedy. In these plays, the main character—who usually suffers from hubris—often learns a prophecy about themselves and either refuses to believe it or tries to avoid it. This never works, and the main character’s desperate attempts to change their fate never allow them to escape their ultimate downfall—and often these attempts are exactly what set the prophecy in motion to be fulfilled.*



A solar watch repairman based in Boston named Martin Koradubian falsely claims to be the bearded individual invited to witness Rumfoord's last materialization. He sells his story to a magazine for \$3,000, claiming that Rumfoord told him about what would happen in the year 10 million C.E. Having once again materialized, Rumfoord sits in "Skip's Museum" reading the magazine article and laughing. Beatrice sits with him, and Rumfoord observes that it is naively optimistic to assume that humans will be alive in 10 million years' time. Suddenly, Beatrice leaps up and begins destroying the objects in the "museum," throwing them on the floor.

Beatrice screams that Rumfoord should just read her mind, but he replies that when he tries to do so, he only gets "static." Meanwhile, in Hollywood, Constant drunkenly sleeps in his pool, which only has about an inch of water in it. Debris from the party is lying everywhere, making the pool look like "a punchbowl in hell." A blonde woman comes out of the house, speaking to someone on the phone. On seeing that Constant is awake she hands the phone to him, saying it's Ransom K. Fern, the president of "that company [Constant] own[s]"—meaning *Magnum Opus*. The woman says that Fern is quitting because Constant is "broke."

Back in Newport, the Rumfoords' butler is summoned by the sound of Beatrice's scream. Beatrice accuses Rumfoord of being "not *nearly* as omniscient as you pretend to be." She yells that Rumfoord should have warned her about the stock market crash, but Rumfoord indicates that it wouldn't have helped for her to know. Returning to the magazine, Rumfoord reads an ad for MoonMist Cigarettes, which features the three "sirens of Titan" from the photograph Rumfoord showed Constant. Rumfoord explains to Beatrice that even if he told her everything that was going to happen, it wouldn't help, because she'd still have to "take the roller-coaster ride."

Beatrice asks if there is any way she can avoid her fate with Constant, and Rumfoord says that there isn't. Beatrice requests to at least hear how it will happen, and Rumfoord agrees to tell her. He explains that the President of the United States is currently announcing the multibillion dollar inauguration of a "New Age of Space" to tackle unemployment. *The Whale* will be renamed *The Rumfoord* and be sent to Mars. Beatrice and Constant will go to inspect the spaceship before its departure, and accidentally be sent to Mars in it. The narrator quotes from the President's speech, in which he claims that worrying too much about the **chrono-synclastic infundibula** prevents "progerse."

*Rumfoord doesn't appear to take anything too seriously. He doesn't mind that someone is lying about him in the newspaper and profiting from it; neither does he seem particularly disturbed by the estrangement that has occurred between him and his wife. Perhaps this nonchalant attitude is the result of his omniscience, since he likely already knows how these problems will pan out.*



*Although the novel is set in the future, this scene is reminiscent of a real historical event—the stock market crash of 1929. Indeed, the lavish party Malachi Constant hosted before the crash recalls the opulence and debauchery of the "Roaring Twenties." Just as in 1929, this new stock market crash brings this all to an abrupt halt.*



*Rumfoord's statement that knowing the future is completely useless (and seemingly damaging) because the future is unchangeable reiterates the idea that knowing the future is not a particularly "glamorous" or fortunate position to be in. Indeed, if humans don't have free will, perhaps the only comfort that does exist is the fact that we can't predict the future—otherwise life would be hopelessly boring.*



*Here Vonnegut turns his satirical attention toward presidents, politicians, and capitalism. Whereas before space exploration was outlawed due to the terrible risks involved, as soon as the economy needs a boost the president completely reverses course. The President's argument that imposing restrictions interrupts "progerse" (the misspelling/mispronunciation of this word hints at his incompetence) indicates that the restrictions were either unnecessary to begin with or that the government is willing to risk people's safety if it means boosting the economy.*



Meanwhile, in Hollywood, the blonde woman informs Constant of what happened at the end of his party, of which he has no recollection. The woman says that he forced everyone to leave. Constant had tried to become so intoxicated that it would be impossible for him to travel into space. The blonde woman then relays that Constant burst into tears and described his unhappy childhood, claiming that his mother was a “whore” but that he was proud to be her son. Then he called himself a whore. He gave all the attendees at the party an oil well, and claimed that the blonde woman was the only person he could trust.

Constant then claimed that everyone was waiting for him to fall asleep so they could put him in a spaceship and send him to Mars. At this point he forced everyone but the blonde woman to leave. Constant and the woman travelled to Mexico to get married, and now she is furious because she’s discovered he doesn’t have any money left. The woman claims that she had an even worse childhood than Constant—her mother was a whore, too, and her father abandoned them, but unlike Constant’s family, hers were poor.

In Newport, Beatrice tells Rumfoord a story about when her father bought her tickets to ride a rollercoaster, and she refused to get on because “it looked silly and dirty and dangerous.” She believes that this is the correct attitude to have toward rollercoasters. Rumfoord tells her that with Constant, she will experience true love for the first time, and that she should be excited about it. As Rumfoord speaks, he begins to disappear. Kazak runs into the room and disappears along with him.

### CHAPTER 3: UNITED HOTCAKE PREFERRED

Magnum Opus, Inc., was founded by Constant’s father. Its headquarters lie in a 31-story building in Los Angeles, which contains the offices of a huge number of companies that are subsidiaries of Magnus Opus. The building has 12 glass sides, which according to the architect who designed it are meant to represent the “twelve great religions of the world.” However, Constant isn’t actually able to name these religions.

*This passage illustrates the cliché that very wealthy people can be the unhappiest of all, because money causes them become isolated, lonely, and paranoid. Despite being surrounded by “friends” to whom he gives lavish gifts, Constant clearly feels completely alone. Moreover, his paranoia about not being able to trust anyone can also be a side effect of having vastly more money than those around oneself.*



*The blonde woman makes an important point in this passage. While it is true that the ultrawealthy can suffer all number of emotional traumas and problems, it is also true that being wealthy inevitably insulates them from other kinds of problems, no matter what other terrible things occur in their life.*



*Unlike her “courageous,” hubristic husband, Beatrice is cautious. However, both husband and wife are united by the fact that, whether they are exercising courage or caution, they do so in an obnoxious, self-important manner that seems to stem from their immense wealth and privilege.*



*The 12 sides of the Magnum Opus building symbolize the lingering presence of religion in an increasingly secular, capitalist, technologically-focused world. Religion remains, but almost as a spectral presence emptied of real meaning.*



Constant lands on the helipad at the top of the Magnum Opus building, arriving for his meeting with Ransom K. Fern. None of the furniture in Constant's office has legs; instead, it hovers in the air, suspended by magnets. The floor is a carpet of real grass. Constant is surprised by the floating furniture, which has been put there by someone else sometime in the previous weeks. Fern enters. He is the highest-paid executive in the country, earning a salary of \$1 million per year. He has been working at Magnum Opus since he was 22, and is now 60. Fern admits that he replaced the furniture, purchasing items from the American Levitation, which they own, in order to show "loyalty."

Fern reads two books per day in attempt to know the entirety of his own culture, in the tradition of Aristotle. He is superior to Malachi and his father, Noel Constant, in every way—except for the fact that he doesn't have their extraordinary amount of "dumb luck." Neither Noel nor Malachi know anything about business. When people ask Fern for investment advice, he always replies with the same joke—telling them to invest in a fake company called "United Hotcake." Constant gently touches his desk, which shakes under his hand. Fern then says that for the past three months, all Constant has done is make bad decisions, eliminating all the wealth created by Noel's "inspired guessing."

Fern then announces, "Magnum Opus is no more," explaining that everyone has been fired. He tells Constant to turn the lights out and lock the door when he leaves. Magnum Opus was founded by Malachi's father, Noel, a "traveling salesman of copper-bottomed cookware." Noel's father had been an anarchist. Years ago, at the age of 39, Noel is a "business failure" who is an ugly, unappealing man in every way. Sitting in a small room in a scummy hotel in Los Angeles, he decides to become a speculator. He retrieves the hotel room's Gideon Bible from a drawer. Noel inherits \$8,212 from his father, which mainly consists of government bonds.

Noel decides to use the Bible as his investment advisor. His investment strategy is so "idiotically simple" that many cannot understand it, because they can't bring themselves to believe it isn't more complicated. Noel chooses which companies to invest in based on their letters of the first sentence of the Old Testament. This strategy works. Within months Noel makes millions of dollars. As the company's success grows, Noel continues making decisions based on the Bible. For the first two years Noel lives in the Wilburhampton hotel, the only person who comes to visit him is a maid named Florence Whitehill whom he pays to have sex with him once every 10 days.

*Floating furniture should be a sign of an impressive, slick, technologically-advanced future. However, in the context of Constant's hubristic foolishness and the collapse of Magnum Opus, it seems more like a symbol of excessive decadence that has no real meaning or purpose.*



*While Noel and Malachi Constant's lack of business knowledge and talent may be comically exaggerated, it is arguably not too far from the reality of how capitalism distributes wealth. While many believe that capitalism is an entirely meritocratic system, in reality luck can often play just as important of a role as knowledge or strategy.*



*Here Vonnegut lampoons the stories of rags-to-riches businessmen who strike it rich despite the odds. Often, the purpose of these stories is to imply that any poor, down-on-their-luck person can become rich if only they have a flash of insight, good fortune, and commitment to realizing their vision. Of course, the reality is that for the vast majority of people, this is a far-fetched dream.*



*Although Constant uses the Bible to make investment decisions, he is not characterized as a particularly religious man. Indeed, it almost seems as if he would have used another book if that happened to be in the hotel room instead. Again, this is a good representation of the role of religion in the novel—it is very much present, but few people seem to seriously believe in it anymore.*



Then, after two years, another visitor shows up: this one from the Bureau of Internal Revenue. The young man tells Noel that he is a graduate of Harvard Business School. He says that he has reviewed Noel's income tax reports, and concluded that Noel is "the luckiest man who ever lived." The young man asks for details about the companies Noel owns, and Noel evades the question, asking if he needs to answer for tax purposes. However, the young man says he is simply curious. He explains that he has actually quit in order to come and start working for Noel. He introduces himself as Ransom K. Fern.

Fern says that one of his professors at Harvard told him that he would become rich one day as long as he found his "boy." The professor advised him that in order to do this, he should spend a year working at the Bureau of Internal Revenue. Fern eventually came to understand that the professor was indicating that while Fern was intelligent, he didn't have much "luck," and thus needed to find someone who would balance that out. Fern explains he can tell Noel doesn't even vaguely understand corporate law, tax law, or business. He shows Noel a plan for "doing violence to the spirit of thousands of laws" without actually breaking a single one.

Fern proposes to Noel that he become president of Magnum Opus, leaving Noel himself as chairman. Fern warns Noel about how much damage incompetent industrial bureaucrats can do to a company. He also warns Noel that his luck will run out someday, at which point he will need someone smart to help. Noel hires him immediately. Since then, two books have been written about Magnum Opus, one "romantic" and one "harsh." The first has a better overview of the story of Florence discovering she was pregnant with Noel's child, Malachi. Noel buys Florence and Malachi a mansion and gives Florence \$1 million. He asks her to keep coming to see him once every 10 days, but not to bring Malachi.

Neither of the books about Magnum Opus contain details about Noel's investment method. The only person to ever learn about it is Malachi, whom Noel tells on his son's 21st birthday. This is their first meeting, and thus an emotional occasion for Malachi, who is too distracted to really take in the secret of his father's method. Noel explains that he will be handing over the business to Malachi, who is to receive a chronological list of the company's investments from Fern. Malachi is absorbed by a photo of himself at age three, which is hung up on the wall. Awkwardly, Noel repeats the only two pieces of advice his father ever told him, then immediately and abruptly says, "Good-by."

*Again, Noel's lack of financial knowledge is arguably comically exaggerated. At the same time, there are certainly historical examples of businessmen who did (and do) not have much knowledge of markets, yet manage to succeed anyway—often by what could be called "dumb luck."*



*This passage contains a rather plausible observation: in order to succeed in a capitalist world, it is best to combine extraordinary intelligence and skill with extraordinary luck. Neither will ultimately work out well on its own, but together they make an unstoppable combination.*



*The reader knows that Malachi grows up to be a lonely, isolated man, and here it becomes clear that this was a pattern started by his father. Even as Noel has the chance to have a real family, move out of the Wilburhampton, and establish a more conventional life, he chooses to remain in self-imposed isolation and even rejects the chance to have a relationship with his son.*



*All the characters in the novel are socially-stilted, awkward, often rude, and unable to make connections with each other. They have plenty of opportunities to establish meaningful relationships, yet repeatedly squander these opportunities due to their own self-consciousness, which seems to overpower their sense of empathy.*



Noel then leaves, and he and Malachi never see each other again—five years later, Noel dies. He'd continued investing based on the Bible, and continued to succeed. At the point of his death, he is still in the early part of the Book of Genesis, on the sentence about God making the sun, moon, and stars. Back in the present, in shock, Malachi asks Fern if there's really "nothing left" of Magnum Opus. Fern explains that he'd ensured that the company would survive both the Depression and Malachi's bad decisions. However, Fern then learned that Malachi gave away 531 oil wells, made legally binding by a lawyer who was present and drew up documents for Malachi to sign.

Following this came the president's announcement that Galactic Spacecraft, which Malachi sold, was receiving a \$3 billion contract from the government. Then came the information that MoonMist Cigarettes have officially been confirmed as causing infertility. About 10 million people have been made infertile by smoking them, and all of them have the right to sue the company. Fern now says that before Noel died, he wrote a letter to Malachi that Malachi was supposed to read if his luck ever turned bad. The letter is in Noel's old room in the Wilburhampton, and Fern requests that if it contains even the "vaguest" hint about the meaning of life, to please phone and tell him.

The Wilburhampton Hotel lies right next to the Magnum Opus building. There is a little cocktail lounge called the Hear Ye Room, which currently has three people in it: bartender and two retired teachers from the Midwest, George M. Helmholtz and Roberta Wiley. The two of them stare blankly ahead, and both have shabby appearances. The bartender mentions the New Age of Space, and Helmholtz and Wiley both reply, "Uh, huh." The one clue suggesting that Helmholtz and Wiley aren't who they seem is that they both wear watches, suggesting a suspicious interest in time. In reality, they are two male agents from the Army of Mars in disguise, and they are waiting for Malachi.

When Malachi enters the Wilburhampton, Helmholtz and Wiley ignore him. Thus far they have recruited 14,000 people to join the Martian Army, never once using violence. Usually, they offer people a decent salary to work on a "secret Government project" on a three-year contract. Almost all recruits have their memories wiped when they get to Mars; radio **antennae** are then implanted in their skulls. The only recruits who aren't brainwashed are those who seem as if they don't need to be in order to serve as loyal Martian soldiers. These are inducted into the "secret circle" of leaders. The circle includes Helmholtz and Wiley.

*Again, while the decision to give away 531 oil wells is obviously an example of satirical exaggeration on Vonnegut's part, Malachi Constant is hardly the first person in history to drive his inherited fortune into the ground. Indeed, while men who become rich at random like Noel may be somewhat rare, it is a clichéd scenario for the children of wealthy parents to squander their fortune out of greed, carelessness, and incompetence.*



*Although Fern is vastly more intelligent than Noel, he still harbors the suspicion that Noel has insights about the meaning of life due to his extraordinary amount of luck. This suggests that even the smartest and most well-educated people can become sentimental and superstitious about things like the meaning of life.*



*It is humorous that Helmholtz and Wiley choose to disguise themselves as what they perceive as a common sight on Earth—people who seem unexcited by pretty much everything, and are resigned to the meaninglessness of life. At the same time, like most of Vonnegut's humor, this is just as (if not more) depressing as it is funny.*



*The fact that Helmholtz and Wiley don't need to use violence to recruit people for the Martian Army is also rather depressing, as it is the direct result of a lack of opportunities on Earth. It is relevant to note that Vonnegut, despite being pacifist, voluntarily enlisted in the army during World War II in order to avoid being conscripted involuntarily. His real-life decision harkens to The Sirens of Titan's exploration of free will versus control, as it arguably suggests that choosing to do something is more noble than being forced to do it—even if the outcome is ultimately the same.*



Malachi goes to Noel's room in the Wilburhampton, which has been preserved in Noel's memory ever since his death. In the letter Noel wrote to Malachi, he admits that he was a bad father and generally a bad person who was "as good as dead" before he truly died. He always searched for a "signal" that would tell him why he was getting so rich, but never found it. Noel writes that if Malachi is broke and someone offers him a "crazy proposition" he should accept it. At this moment, Helmholtz and Wiley knock on the door and enter, having timed their appearance perfectly as planned.

Helmholtz tells Constant that Mars is populated with a "large and efficient and military and industrial society," and that he is being offered the position of lieutenant-colonel in the Martian Army. Helmholtz assures Constant that he will have a large salary, spectacular benefits, and immunity from legal proceedings on Earth. Malachi accepts, and the next day, according to everyone left on Earth, he disappears.

The following Tuesday, Beatrice watches the ceremony of *The Rumfoord's* blastoff on TV. She feels overjoyed at having proven that she is "mistress of her own fate" and that Mr. Rumfoord's "omniscient bullying" was false. She is accompanied by two representatives of the mortgage-holders on the estate, who are going to help her sell it. However, these representatives are actually Helmholtz and Wiley. They watch *The Rumfoord* successfully take off, and Helmholtz asks to go outside and see all the buildings on the estate for an "inventory." Beatrice says she can simply list them, but Helmholtz says he wants to know about a metal building in particular.

Beatrice is confused, but Helmholtz and Wiley tell her that they saw the metal building when they came in. They ask her if they can go outside to look, and Beatrice agrees, bringing a flashlight with her. As they walk outside, Wiley whispers that she thinks it was a "flying saucer."

## CHAPTER 4: TENT RENTALS

An infantry of 10,000 Martian Army soldiers marches to the sound of a snare drum, which sounds like "Rented a tent, a tent, a tent" over and over. They wear green uniforms. One particular soldier in the second regiment of the First Martian Assault Infantry Division is a private who was demoted from lieutenant-colonel three years ago, and has been on Mars for a total of eight years. Privates in his position, who are often older than their peers, tend to get nicknames like "Gramps" or "Unk." This one in particular is named Unk, and physically resembles Malachi Constant.

*The fact that Helmholtz and Wiley knock on the door at the exact moment Malachi reads his father's advice to accept a "crazy proposition" calls into question whether Noel wrote the letter at all. Perhaps it has been planted there by the Martian Army—or perhaps they have an uncanny omniscience which allows them to take advantage of Malachi's reaction to the real letter.*



*Malachi has made bad decisions throughout his life, and thus the speed with which he makes this decision should come as little surprise—even though by all accounts it is a highly naïve and foolish act.*



*The fact that Beatrice smugly thinks that she has avoided her husband's prophecy coming true while in the process of making it come true is yet another damning indictment of human foolishness and hubris—it's clear that Beatrice does not have as much control over her life as she arrogantly assumes.*



*Like Malachi, Beatrice ends up being too gullible for her own good. While she likely wouldn't trust any random person, she is inclined to think the best of those who seemingly share her own class and status, which is her downfall.*



*The fact that Unk and Malachi Constant are the same person is not withheld from the reader—their exact physical similarity means that the revelation of Unk's identity is not meant to be a surprise. Yet what is kept mysterious is the process by which Malachi Constant has become "Unk."*



Unk and the other soldiers are standing in a “hollow square” surrounding a stake. A red-haired soldier is chained to the stake. His uniform has been stripped of decorations. Without seeming to receive instructions, the soldiers all relax as if they’ve been told, “*at ease.*” The man at the stake doesn’t make a sound, but he is screaming with his eyes. He wants to send a signal to his best friend, Unk, but can’t locate him among the soldiers. Unk has just spent a period in the military hospital being treated for mental illness, and now doesn’t recognize his best friend—or anyone else. He doesn’t even know his own name.

At the hospital, the doctors and nurses explained to Unk that they had implanted an **antenna** in his head that would cause him pain if he did things “a good soldier wouldn’t ever do.” They gave him a little taste of this pain, which was awful. After being released, Unk feels confused and uncomfortable in his surroundings. Unk’s platoon leader, Sergeant Brackman, orders Unk to strangle the man at the stake until he is dead. Unk follows this order, marching up to the stake according to the rhythm of the snare drum. Standing in front of the chained-up man, Unk pauses, disturbed by the man’s look of horror. However, then Unk feels a prick of pain in his head, so he keeps going.

Although the man at the stake also has an **antenna** in his head that keeps silent, he “heroically” manages to speak, repeatedly saying Unk’s name. He mentions phrases to try and jog Unk’s memory of their friendship, but Unk strangles the man until he is dead. After it is done, all the soldiers are brought to attention—even the dead man’s body flinches, but he can no longer properly obey his antenna because he is dead. The soldiers march away.

## CHAPTER 5: LETTER FROM AN UNKNOWN HERO

Unk’s formation marches to a barrack, where they stop. There are flags flying above the barracks—including the U.S. flag, the U.S.S.R. flag, and the Japanese flag. They each stand for the countries that the Martian Army will attack when the war between Earth and Mars begins. Standing in front of his barrack, 576, Unk suddenly has a faint memory of what the man at the stake told him. Unk cleans his rifle, a task he finds enjoying. After the execution, Sergeant Brackman said, “You done all right, Unk,” and Unk thanked him. Unk suddenly recalls an image of three beautiful women, one of whom his holding a cigarette. Out loud, he says, “Sell MoonMist.”

*This chapter is arguably the most horrifying in a novel full of disturbing scenes. Again, it is important to recall that Vonnegut isn’t conjuring a vision of the army out of thin air—Vonnegut himself served in the U.S. Army during World War II, and was captured as a P.O.W. in Dresden. It is easy to see how his experiences led him to create a particularly horrifying depiction of military life.*



*The moment when Unk pauses and then strangles the man anyway after feeling the prick of pain provides a crucial meditation on the nature of free will. While people like to think of themselves as acting freely, in reality most human actions are instinctive, based on the drive for survival. One of the aspects of this drive is the avoidance of pain, and this is such a powerful force that it causes Unk to murder another man almost unthinkingly.*



*The image of the dead man still obeying orders after death is particularly haunting, and indicates how little individual human lives are valued within this military context. It’s clear that they are viewed as a collective force who must obey orders rather than as individuals who deserve to live freely.*



*Due to having his memory wiped, Unk doesn’t seem to really understand what’s going on around him and is not able to think for himself. Indeed, even being told he did a good job produces little reaction—neither happiness nor horror. He has become akin to a robot.*



Another “colored” soldier, Boaz, asks what Unk just said. Boaz is only a private, but his uniform is made of a much nicer fabric than the other soldiers, almost silky. His shoes also gleam in the light. Unk says, “Dump MoonMist. Get rid of it.” Boaz laughs and agrees that they will. He asks Unk if he remembers him, and Unk apologetically says he doesn’t. Boaz says that he and Unk are “buddies,” and that the buddy system is part of how the army is organized. Boaz tries to get Unk to say more about the cigarettes, but Unk now says he can’t remember. Suddenly, Unk feels that “he and Boaz [are] the only real people in the stone building,” as if everyone else is a robot.

However, while Boaz is trying to encourage Unk to remember, Unk is suddenly blinded by horrific pain. He falls to the floor and faints. When he awakes, he find Boaz sponging his forehead with a wet cloth. Their other bunkmates look on with stern faces, clearly disapproving of Unk. When Sergeant Brackman comes over, Boaz claims that he is entirely to blame, because he was trying to make Unk remember things from before he went to hospital. Brackman tells Unk that he needs to stop trying to remember, as this was why he was put in hospital in the first place. His attempts to remember thwarted his ability to be a good soldier.

Sergeant Brackman assigns Boaz to latrine duty for a week, but as soon as he does so, he is hit by a shot of pain from his own **antenna**. He tells Boaz, “never mind,” then rushes away. Moments later, a captain arrives at the barrack for a “surprise inspection.” Boaz calls everyone to attention. Yet when Boaz himself comes to attention, he does so in a somewhat lazy, “insolent” manner. Boaz looks at the captain, and the captain immediately turns around and leaves. The truth is that Boaz carries a control box in his trousers with which he can make his squadmates do whatever he wants. Unlike them, Boaz does not have an antenna.

Boaz is “one of the real commanders of the Army of Mars.” As far as he knows, there are 800 real commanders in total, all hiding as low-ranking soldiers. The high-ranking officers are actually controlled by the real commanders. Hiding the real commanders both stifles any chance of successful rebellion and means that the real leaders will be safe during the war. Private Stony Stevenson, the man whom Unk strangled to death, was another one of the real commanders. Stevenson had become absorbed in Unk’s struggle to think for himself, to the point that he was actually helping Unk. As punishment, he was fitted with an **antenna** and forced to actively march to the stake, knowing he would be killed.

*Although Unk barely has any proper thoughts anymore, he does seem to retain glimmers of his previous identity and memories. Even if he can’t understand them, they are there. This gives a small glimpse of hope in the possibility of Unk overriding the controls placed on him and remembering who he really is.*



*It is unclear what Boaz’s motivation is for making Unk remember. Perhaps he is simply curious, because Unk’s statements are strange and don’t make sense. At the same time, perhaps he is trying to get Unk in trouble, as remembering things is clearly against the rules of the Martian Army. Yet if this is the case, it remains to be seen why Boaz defends Unk and blames himself when Sergeant Brackman comes over.*



*Boaz only has the rank of private, but is clearly secretly control in some way. This reversal of the expected hierarchy of power is significant, as it marks a crucial point of distinction between the Martian Army and traditional armies. The fact that Boaz is a black man (he’s described as “colored”) is also significant. When Vonnegut himself fought in World War II, units were still segregated and black soldiers faced significant discrimination—yet here, Boaz is in charge of white men.*



*While the doctors and nurses at the army hospital claimed that the antenna system was a sign that the Martian Army was exceptionally democratic, in reality the opposite is true. The antennae are actually a way for the true commanders to place everyone else under absolute control while keeping themselves completely immune from accountability and safe from any possible rebellion.*



Boaz is bored. He tells Unk that Unk has been sent to the hospital seven times for trying too hard to remember. Usually, it only takes a single try for a soldier's memory to be wiped for good. Back on Earth, Boaz would have been "wretchedly dependent on Unk." When he was recruited into the Martian Army, he was a 14-year-old orphan. Now, he tells Unk that back on Earth, Unk was "King." Yet the truth is Boaz doesn't know much about Unk's Earth identity. He has only heard rumors, and hasn't followed them up because a "good" soldier doesn't seek out information.

Boaz continues to taunt Unk about his status back on Earth, talking about how often Unk frequented "Hollywood night clubs" even though he barely knows what this phrase means. Boaz jokes about the two of them frequenting nightclubs together. However, while he is cheerful on the surface, inside he is terrified about losing his job. Boaz doesn't know who his superiors are. Everything he does is based on small scraps of conversation he hears while talking with the other real commanders. The suggestion that Stony Stevenson be executed was something that had just come up in conversation. But before long, Stevenson was arrested.

Like the other real commanders, Boaz is allowed to drink liquor. However, he doesn't do so, in part because he's worried about offering some to an enlisted man while drunk. If he did, he would be executed. Sergeant Brackman announces a recreation period during which all the soldiers are supposed to play German batball. However, Unk does not join them. Instead, he sneaks into barrack 12 to look for a letter that Stevenson told him about moments before his death. The Martian Imperial Commandos have set off for the moon, where they plan to start the war. As Unk retrieves the letter, he feels an unexplained sense of excitement.

The letter is a list of things the writer knows, from the extremely basic ("I am in a place called Mars") to the more meaningful ("The army plans to kill other things called alive in a place called Earth"). The list is very long, and becomes increasingly specific. It includes a warning not to trust Boaz, and addresses Unk as an "old friend." The writer tells Unk that the pain caused by his **antenna** is linked to his ability to gain knowledge, and thus can be seen as a good thing. Reading this, Unk feels a great sadness. He feels that the heroic writer has placed his trust in the wrong person, because Unk himself is not courageous enough to withstand the pain of his antenna.

*By now the reader has perhaps realized that no character in the novel is 100 percent good or evil. Rather, most are a rather ambiguous mix of both. As a real commander, Boaz exercises cruel, inhumane levels of control over those around him. Yet he also seems lonely, and his disadvantaged background on Earth suggests that joining the Martian Army may have been his only chance of survival.*



*This passage reveals that, much like totalitarian regimes like Stalinist Russia, even those with authority in the Martian Army are not immune from persecution. Indeed, they are actually terrified of slipping up, in part because the chain of command is deliberately withheld from them (this often occurs in totalitarian regimes too). Ensuring that everyone is afraid is an excellent way of exercising absolute control.*



*Already, Unk appears to be more rebellious than the other soldiers. It is not quite clear why this is—is he more courageous, or has the amnesia not worked on him? It also seems that Unk's friendship with Stony somehow encourages him to rebel. Yet if this is the case, why was he able to kill Stony practically without blinking an eye?*



*Unk's experience of feeling that the letter is addressed to the wrong person can be read as a metaphor of everyone's ability to choose rebellion (and with it courage, morality, and the pursuit of truth and freedom) over compliance with unjust authority. Unk believes that he is not worthy to be addressed by the letter—but perhaps everyone is equally worthy.*



The letter is filled with all kinds of knowledge: “gossip, history, astronomy, biology, theology, geography, psychology, medicine.” It notes that there is only one city on Mars, which is called Phoebe. It tells Unk about his best friend, Stony Stevenson, a real commander who originally comes from England, laughs all the time, and drinks a quart of whisky per day. Stony had begun to realize that the war against Earth was doomed to fail. He wanted to talk to someone about it, and having gained Unk’s trust, he told Unk everything he knew. They shared a bottle of whisky, and Stony said that Unk was his “best bloody friend.”

The letter continues that one night, when they were drunk, Unk and Stony concluded that the person who was really in charge of the Martian Army was a smiling man who sometimes appeared accompanied by a large dog. He shows up at the real commanders’ meetings, which take place roughly once every 100 days. Although the letter doesn’t mention this, the narrator notes that the man and dog are Winston Niles Rumfoord and Kazak. They appear exactly once every 111 days. In the letter, the writer notes that all the ideas in the Martian Army originate with Rumfoord. The letter tells Unk that he should write down everything he and Stony learn, because that way even if Unk’s memory is wiped, Stony can direct him back to the letter and he will remember it all again.

The letter tells Unk that he is one of the only people on Mars to have a “mate” and a child, and that they inspire him not to give up. Unk’s mate’s name is Bee and their son’s name is Chrono. Bee is a teacher and Chrono is a student in Phoebe. The writer tells Unk that he loves him, and instructs him to rescue his family and escape, taking Stony with him. Unk has finally reached the end of the letter, and turns the page to find the signature. He is overwhelmed by how much better a person the writer is than him. However, Unk is then shocked to find it is his own signature that ends the letter.

Unk realizes that he has been writing the letter to himself in order to preserve his knowledge when his memory gets wiped out. For years, Unk has remained ignorant of the fact that the man he killed at the stake was his best friend, Stony. If he’d known the truth he might have killed himself. Now, Unk returns to his barrack, where he is informed that the war with Earth has finally started. The Martian Army is blasting the following message to Earth: “Brown man, white man, yellow man—surrender or die.”

*As can sometimes happen in a totalitarian regime, even those who are afforded special authority due to their supposed loyalty to the regime can become disillusioned. Indeed, when people like Stony choose to rebel, it can often have the most dangerous results.*



*The fact that Rumfoord appears to be involved with the army in some way—and even worse, involved with its leadership and control—provides a much more sinister angle to his character. Previously, Rumfoord had a slightly suspicious air about him, yet was morally ambiguous (like the rest of the characters). However, his presence at the leadership meetings of the decidedly evil Martian Army indicates that he might actually be the story’s villain.*



*The surprisingly sentimental revelation that Unk is the writer of the letter—particularly after he spent the whole time reading it thinking that the writer was vastly morally superior to him—contains an important message. Every person has the capacity to be a morally brave and upstanding person within them. One must then choose whether one will be brave enough to live up to this potential.*



*The fact that Unk is so determined to escape when the situation around him appears hopeless is inspiring and uplifting. His attitude suggests that even in the darkest of circumstances it is important to fight for what’s right, including one’s own dignity and freedom.*



## CHAPTER 6: A DESERTER IN TIME OF WAR

In order to get to the location where the fleet of army spaceships are waiting, the Martian Army must march six miles, crossing the northwest border of Phoebe. Eighty-seven thousand people live in the city, and everyone who lives there is in some way employed in the war effort. Unk is marching in front of Boaz. Unk is distracted; he is holding a live grenade. The pin has been pulled, and as soon as Unk lets go of it, it will explode. Boaz reminds Unk that he has arranged it so that they will both be placed onboard the company mother ship, meaning they will avoid combat. Unk throws the grenade into a nearby sewer, and all the soldiers immediately dive for cover.

Boaz forces all the soldiers to stand, but at this moment, Unk disappears on a mission to find his family and best friend. Unk's son, Chrono, is eight Earth years old. There 21 months in the Martian year, and Chrono was named after the month in which he was born. Other months are named things like "Winston," "Rumfoord," "Kazak," "**Infundibulum**," and "Salo." The month Salo is named after a "creature" whom Rumfoord knows from Titan. Salo has been stranded on Titan for 200,000 years, waiting for a replacement part for his spaceship. The ship is fueled by the most powerful force in the universe, the Universal Will to Become (UWTB).

Chrono is a talented German batball player. He is one of only 52 children on Mars, where there is only one school. No child has been conceived on Mars; Chrono himself was conceived on a spaceship which was bringing new recruits from Earth. German batball is a little like baseball, with key differences. Like everything on Mars, the game is Rumfoord's doing. Unk, now "the only deserter in the history of the Army of Mars," watches a group of schoolchildren playing batball. He doesn't know which one is Chrono, but at that moment, someone shouts Chrono's name. Unk watches as a small, black-haired boy comes up to bat.

The children's teacher, a 73-year-old woman named Isabel Fernstermaker, is acting as umpire. Before having her memory wiped on Mars, she was a Jehovah's Witness. While he plays, Chrono kisses his "good-luck piece," a little strip of metal he keeps in his pocket. Chrono plays spectacularly. He acquired his good-luck piece during a school trip to the flamethrower factory. While the manager was giving the children a tour of the factory, his leg was wounded by a metal spiral, which tore his trousers. Annoyed, the manager stamped on the spiral, but it managed to scratch him again, at which point he vengefully chopped it into pieces using metal shears. The children were dazzled by this, and Chrono picked up one of the shards, which became his good-luck piece.

*Unlike the increasingly courageous Unk, Boaz is cowardly. He doesn't feel any real sense of loyalty to his fellow men or to the army, but instead just wants to keep himself safe. At the same time, a person can hardly be fully blamed for possessing this survival instinct in such dystopian and hopeless circumstances.*



*Although Salo is only mentioned in passing here, he will become a key character later in the novel. Indeed, this is one of several instances when future events of the novel are briefly alluded to. This helps create the impression that, as Rumfoord puts it, linear time is an illusion and everything is happening at once. This, in turn, implies that everything that happens is predetermined and that free will is an illusion.*



*It is becoming increasingly clear that everything about the Martian Army—and Martian civilization itself—has been designed by Rumfoord in what appears to be a sick, megalomaniacal experiment over which he exercises total control.*



*The story of the good-luck piece might seem insignificant, but the fact that its origin is described in so much detail serves as a hint to the reader that it will come to play an important role later in the novel. Indeed, the good-luck piece symbolizes how a seemingly accidental or insignificant turn of events can be far more pivotal than anyone could possibly foresee.*



Unk marches over to Miss Fernstermaker and tells her that he needs to speak to Chrono on “official business.” Speaking alone with Chrono in his classroom, Unk tells him about what he knows, but Chrono dismisses this as “baloney.” Chrono mentions that when he is 14, he will have an **antenna** installed in his head and then his choices won’t matter anyway. Chrono claims to be the only person he knows who isn’t “full of baloney.” Unk dramatically reveals that he is Chrono’s father, but Chrono doesn’t care. He tells Unk to “go to hell” and asks if he can return to the batball game.

Unk says he wants to take Chrono in a spaceship and fly away to “some place good.” Chrono remains unconvinced and Unk begins to cry, but Chrono simply runs back to the game of batball. Chrono’s mother, Bee, is a teacher at the Schliemann Breathing School for Recruits. Schliemann breathing lets humans survive in low-oxygen environments. It involves taking oxygen pills, which on Mars are nicknamed “goofballs.” Bee teaches inside a windowless room. Her class has just taken their goofballs. They are listening to a pirated version of a popular Earth song called “God Is Our Interior Decorator.”

The 17 recruits in Bee’s classroom have just had their memories wiped and **antennae** fitted, and their “eyes [are] as empty as the windows of abandoned textile mills.” Bee’s eyes are similarly empty, as she has also just had her memory wiped. The only memory she was allowed to keep was the knowledge that she has a son, whom she is allowed to visit on Tuesday evenings. Presently, she conducts the exercise for her recruits. Bee was originally sent to the hospital because she showed her supervisor a sonnet she wrote about Schliemann breathing.

There is a knock at the classroom door. A man announces himself as a “Messenger” with a “Message for Bee.” The man, Unk, asks her if she recognizes him, and she says she doesn’t. However, she confirms that she is Chrono’s mother. In a whisper, Unk says that he is Chrono’s father, and that he is going to get her and Chrono out. He hands over a hand grenade, telling her to conceal it so that she can use it when she needs to. The recruits start yelling that Unk is a “deserter” and try to apprehend Unk. However, he points a rifle at them and tells them to back away. Realizing that there is nowhere to hide, Unk strips off his uniform and disappears into the crowd of Bee’s students; he is now indistinguishable from them.

*Chrono’s cold and unsympathetic reaction to Unk’s revelation shows the devastating impact that living in a totalitarian society can have on people, including children. It is not that Chrono doesn’t know about the horrible future that awaits him—he just seems numbed by its inevitability. The only source of joy he has is batball, and thus this is the only thing he wants to do.*



*Again, Chrono seems to have resigned himself to his fate and is skeptical that Unk can offer him an escape. Given Rumfoord’s prophecy about Constant and Beatrice having a child together, it’s clear that Chrono’s mother, Bee, is actually Beatrice. This further confirms the inevitability of fate in the novel, as it seems that Constant and Beatrice were predestined. On another note, it is perhaps important that many of the names in the novel—Helmholtz, Fernstermaker, Schliemann—are German. Vonnegut himself was descended from German immigrants, but he also ended up fighting against the Germans and being captured and imprisoned by them. In this sense, Vonnegut seems to be aligning the Martians’ cruelty with that of the Germans during World War II.*



*The fact that Bee wrote a sonnet—even one about her banal job—indicates that her personality has not been entirely erased, as she was a poet on Earth. Like Unk’s recollection of MoonMist Cigarettes, the sonnet Bee wrote suggests that there is potential for her to override the controls that have been placed on her.*



*Unk’s rescue mission seems doomed to fail considering that every single person on Mars has been brainwashed into remaining loyal to the military regime. Indeed, like the real commanders who hide in plain sight among the soldiers, perhaps Unk’s only option is to pretend to obey while really attempting to execute his rebellion.*



Bee places the grenade in the same spot where Unk put his rifle and tries to calmly resume teaching her class. She knows that if she doesn't focus on her work she will be put in hospital again. However, as she watches Unk, she realizes that he has not ingested a goofball and that he will thus soon pass out from lack of oxygen. This will reveal Unk as the odd one out without Bee having to do anything. Calmly, Bee thinks about a little girl dressed in white and wearing a white pony. She is confused, wondering who the little girl is.

Unk wakes up to find that he is on the bunk of a spaceship. Someone has put his uniform back on him. He throws up. Looking around, he reasons that he seems to still be on Mars. A dog barks, and he hears a man shout, "Kazak!" A man (Rumfoord) comes in and greets Unk, asking Unk who he is. Unk thinks it must be Stony, but when he guesses this, Rumfoord laughs and says that he wishes he could see Stony again. Rumfoord notes that Unk's regiment are currently going into battle, and asks if Unk is embarrassed not to be among them. Rumfoord tells Unk that the military police brought him there, and Unk starts to cry, realizing that he has been "defeated."

Rumfoord is "commander-in-chief of everything Martian." He tells Unk that the most tragic love story of all time happened on Mars, and then proceeds to tell it. The story begins with an Earth man volunteering to be recruited as lieutenant-colonel in the Martian Army. Although the recruit does not yet have an **antenna** installed, he is so loyal to the army that he is afforded a lot of freedom on the spaceship as it headed to Mars. However, the crew of the ship explains that the recruit is not allowed to enter one particular room, which contains "the most beautiful woman ever taken to Mars," insisting that he will not be able to prevent himself from falling in love with her.

The recruit wants to show off his own self-discipline, and thus he sneaks into the woman's room while the rest of the officers are having a "drinking party" and forces himself on her while she is "weak with terror and sedatives." The lieutenant-colonel feels bad, and his feelings become even worse when he realizes that he recognizes the woman as someone he knew back on Earth. Overwhelmed with guilt, and having learned that the woman is pregnant, the lieutenant-colonel attempts to make her love him. He tries over and over, but it never works.

*Bee does not necessarily want to obey the commands of the army—however, her confusion and desire not to be put in the hospital again paralyzes her, such that she actively inhibits Unk's plans. This again reiterates the difficulty of asserting free will in the face of external control.*



*This passage confirms that Rumfoord has been in control all along. Yet the fact that he appears to have rescued Unk—or at least, has not let him be put back in the military hospital or die from lack of oxygen—indicates that he may have plans for Unk other than sending him to die in the war with Earth.*



*One of the questions raised in this chapter is whether it is better to voluntarily pledge loyalty to a regime like the Martian Army or be forced to do so. Again, this hearkens back to Vonnegut's own decision to voluntarily enlist in the military rather than be forced to do so. Of course, those who do voluntarily pledge loyalty in this case are often given extra benefits and freedoms. Yet if the price for this is one's own dignity, is it really worth it?*



*It is heavily implied that the lieutenant-colonel is Unk and the woman is Beatrice. Rumfoord's story indicates that Unk raped Beatrice, yet this isn't really dwelled upon—perhaps because The Sirens of Titan was written in 1959. Such casual treatment of rape speaks to the era in which the book was written, when sexual violence against women was often framed in a dismissive, casual manner.*



While Rumfoord is telling Unk this story, Boaz appears at the company mother ship, having been searching for Unk in Phoebe. There, Boaz spots Rumfoord and Unk. Boaz says that they must “catch up,” because the soldiers won’t want to go into battle without a mother ship. Rumfoord says that they should want to anyway “for the privilege of being the first army that ever died in a good cause,” but when Boaz asks Rumfoord to explain what he means, Rumfoord dismisses the question and tells Unk and Boaz to start up the ship. Rumfoord then tells Unk that the woman from the story had been married for many years on Earth, but that when the lieutenant-colonel met her on the spaceship, she was still a virgin.

*Again, the dramatic revelation that Beatrice was still a virgin despite being married to Rumfoord is perhaps surprising to a contemporary reader, but would likely have different implications for someone reading in the 1950s. It's possible that Beatrice's virginity may have cast doubts about Rumfoord's manhood and dignity, since having sex with a woman is a stereotypical marker of masculinity.*



## CHAPTER 7: VICTORY

Rumfoord is the author of one of the only “intelligent” commentaries on war ever produced by the human race. His 75,000-word *Pocket History of Mars* summarizes the war between Earth and Mars so perfectly that nothing else has ever needed to be written about it. The book is written in a very matter-of-fact tone, listing details such as that the war lasted 67 Earth days, and that 461 Earthlings and 149,315 Martians were killed. By the end of the war, every Martian is either killed, wounded, captured, or missing. Mars’s entire civilization is destroyed. The last Martians who attack Earthlings are the elderly, women, and young children.

*It might seem somewhat surprising that the Martian Army suffers such an absolute defeat, considering how tightly controlled it was portrayed to be. Of course, it was also vastly outnumbered by Earth's forces. The fact that the Martians essentially have no chance of winning makes the horrors to which the Martian soldiers were subjected even more tragic.*



The Martian Army is thwarted by the fact that without their real commanders, the soldiers become completely inept. They also lack proper weaponry. The Martian space ships are automatically piloted, with only two buttons, *on* and *off*. However, the *off* button doesn’t do anything—it was installed to bring the soldiers peace of mind. The war began when the Martians claimed control of the Earthling moon, which had less than a 100 Earthlings on it at the time, most of whom were researchers. The Martians make dramatic threats, but the actual actions they take are rather pathetic.

*While the system of hiding the commanders among the low-ranking soldiers stopped any rebellion from taking place, it ultimately thwarts the Martian Army. This is because in addition to imposing discipline, military leaders should also provide strength, inspiration, courage, and guidance.*



The Earth army, on the other hand, deploy nuclear weapons, destroying the moon’s habitability for 10 million years. One of the nuclear bombs misses the moon and takes out all 15,671 Martian Imperial Commandos instead. In the middle of the war there is a 32 day “lull” as the Martian Army travels across the space between the two planets. There is no element of surprise regarding when the Martians will arrive. When they do, they make the mistake of scattering all over Earth, leaving them completely vulnerable. The only Martian victory of the entire war is the capture of a Swiss meat market in Basel.

*Although the war is clearly tragic overall, elements of it are darkly humorous. For example, the image of the Martian Army taking 32 days to even reach Earth while the Earthlings patiently await their arrival—knowing exactly when they will be there—is comically absurd. This is an example of how being overconfident in oneself while underestimating one's enemies can be extremely detrimental.*



The Martian Army is slaughtered both by Earth soldiers and ordinary civilians. After the massacre, a Martian scout ship promises that more attacks are on the way, which leads the Earthlings to preemptively strike Mars, erasing the entire city of Phoebe. However, no one is left on the planet at that point. The Martian ships approach Earth, carrying ordinary civilians (including the elderly and children). The “elaborate suicide of Mars” was designed by Rumfoord, but is technologically executed by Salo. Salo is a messenger from the planet Tralfamadore, which is located in the Small Magellanic Cloud. Compared to Earthlings, the Tralfamadoreans are an ancient species with highly advanced technology and intelligence.

Even in its broken state, Salo’s spaceship outranks all Earth spaceships to a significant degree. Even more significantly, Salo is in possession of a supply of the Universal Will to Become (UWTB). The Rumfoords’ butler, Earl Moncrief, earns a fortune off of the misunderstanding and fear of ordinary, “servile” people. He orders his agents to disassemble Martian spaceships, before reassembling them. The new ships are powered with UWTB. Rumfoord, meanwhile, believes it is vital to introduce a “plausible” new religion to the end of the war. He creates a narrative that the “virtually unarmed saints” who pathetically attempt to attack Earth do so in service of a wider goal—to bring the people of Earth together.

Bee and Chrono are on one of the very last ships to leave Mars, and manage to land in the Amazon rainforest without being attacked by the Earth army. Meanwhile, after Unk and Boaz press the on button of their ship, they don’t go into battle but to the planet Mercury. This is because Rumfoord engineered their ship to take them there on autopilot, wanting to ensure that Unk was safe in the war so that he could play an important role in the new religion. Unk and Boaz are both bored on the ship, as there is little in the way of entertainment. Boaz attempts to control Unk using the box in his pocket, but Unk informs him that he removed the box the previous night while Boaz was asleep.

During the war, Rumfoord and Kazak materialize on Earth twice, and both times tickets are sold to the event by Marlin T. Lapp, a “showman” Rumfoord befriended. During one of these materializations, Rumfoord speaks grandly about a new religion, which is called The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent. Its flag is blue and gold, and its motto is “Take Care of the People, and God Almighty Will Take Care of Himself.” The religion’s main teaching is that “puny man” cannot have any impact on God, and that luck is not a manifestation of God’s will. Rumfoord tells people that they should follow the religion because he can perform miracles—specifically, the miracle of predicting the future.

*The notion that Rumfoord engineered the entire Earth-Mars war for his own purposes might seem ludicrously evil, but is actually reflective of the tragic reality of warfare. Throughout history, the wealthy and powerful elite have started wars to advance and defend their own interests. Conflicts could be sparked by something as petty as interpersonal conflicts, with millions of lives lost as a result.*



*The example of Earl Moncrief earning a fortune from the war shows how it’s always possible to profit from the brutality and devastation of war. While Moncrief is not a member of the elite class himself, his proximity to elites seemingly enables him to take advantage of the conflict and make money from it.*



*The spaceship that is running on autopilot with fake on/off buttons is another metaphor for the illusory nature of free will. Human existence gives people the impression that they have control over their own actions, but in reality this isn’t true. The illusion of choice may provide reassurance, but this reassurance can evaporate when it becomes clear that it isn’t substantial in reality.*



*On the surface, the idea of founding a religion around the notion that God is “utterly indifferent” might not seem so sinister. Many atheists, agnostics, and even some theologians argue that if God exists, it is highly unrealistic to expect that God cares about humans. This is due to the unimaginably vast nature of the universe as well as time, of which humans are only the tiniest component.*



Telling a strange “parable” about Malachi Constant, Rumfoord asks if anyone could possibly believe that luck is “the hand of God.” He promises that next time he materializes he will bring a version of the Bible edited so that it is “meaningful in modern times.” Meanwhile, on the spaceship headed for Mercury, Boaz watches Unk sleep. He knows he could kill Unk or reestablish control over him, but he realizes that he more than anything he wants a “buddy” and not to feel alone. Boaz suddenly bursts into laughter at the absurdity of his and Unk’s situation. He throws his old control box on the floor, saying he doesn’t want it anymore.

*Boaz’s internal conflict comes to a rather moving end. Throughout the novel, he has struggled between self-interest (wanting to maintain his position of power) and his desire for human connection. Finally, the latter wins out, setting a pattern for the kind of character arc that becomes common throughout the rest of the novel.*



## CHAPTER 8: IN A HOLLYWOOD NIGHT CLUB

Mercury sings “like a crystal goblet,” with half of the planet stuck in an eternal day and the other in eternal night. There are creatures who live in Mercury’s caves and who are nourished by the planet’s singing. These aliens reproduce via “flaking.” They don’t have sex differentiation, or any real childhood stage. They cannot cause each other harm, and they only have one sense: touch. Their communication is limited to two phrases—“Here I am,” and “So glad you are.” They exist in beautiful patterns on the phosphorescent walls of the cave, and on Earth they are called “harmoniums.”

*At this point the novel takes a decidedly surreal, almost abstract turn. The description of Mercury’s strange, beautiful natural landscape is a stark contrast to the pointless horrors of the war between Earth and Mars.*



When Unk and Boaz approach Mercury, it almost looks like a densely populated, civilized planet. However, this is just an illusion. Unk cries, thinking about Bee, Chrono, and Stony. He thinks about the name “Malachi Constant” but doesn’t know what it means. Unk and Boaz’s automatically-driven ship has trouble landing on the planet’s surface, and they descend into “inky blackness.” The ship keeps descending in “lurches,” until eventually the two passengers can see a yellow light coming through the window. The ship has successfully landed inside one of Mercury’s caves.

*Again, the surreal nature of this passage almost conjures a kind of dream sequence. While everything that happens to Unk and Boaz is real, they are so far from human civilization that it seems like it isn’t. In attempting to exert free will and desert the Martian Army, it seems as though Unk and Boaz have underestimated the potential dangers and bizarre experiences that could be in store for them on Mercury.*



Astonished by the sights outside, Boaz exclaims that they have landed “right in the middle of a Hollywood night club.” However, despite how pleasant the landscape outside seems, it is actually a “vacuum,” and when they open the door it immediately causes their lungs to start bleeding. They shut the door immediately. However, after loading themselves with goofballs and holding their ears and noses, they venture out, exploring the area where the ship has landed. They notice the harmoniums, but find them “ghastly.” They remain in a state of disbelief about their situation; Boaz suggests they go out of the cave and attempt to communicate with the people living in the (illusion of) skyscrapers above.

*The fact that Boaz and Unk have descended into a cave and are now experiencing delusions about their situation, falsely believing there is a civilization above, links this passage to Plato’s Cave, a famous philosophical parable. The story distinguishes between those who believe in the delusions of the material world versus those who seek to know the truth of reality via philosophy—a distinction with a clear connection to the novel, and particularly to Unk’s experience in the army.*



However, while the ship was able to descend into the cave on autopilot, going back up is not as easy. Trying to move, the ship emits a screaming sound, and it becomes clear that it is wedged inside the cave. Each time the ship moves a little, it overheats and shuts down, and falls back onto the cave floor. Boaz exclaims that it's hopeless. However, at this moment Unk looks out the window and notices the harmoniums are spelling out letters to make a message. The message reads, "IT'S AN INTELLIGENCE TEST!"

*Again, the message being spelled in harmoniums (as well as the very existence of the harmoniums themselves) gives this part of the novel a dreamy, surreal quality. Yet the message indicates that Unk and Boaz have not been released from the clutches of Rumfoord's elaborate scheme just yet.*



## CHAPTER 9: A PUZZLE SOLVED

The narrator notes that "the best-selling book in recent times" is Rumfoord's revised version of the Bible, followed by a cookbook purportedly written by Beatrice, then Rumfoord's *Pocket History of Mars*, then a children's book named *Unk and Boaz in the Caves of Mercury*. On Mercury, Unk and Boaz read messages of hope spelled out by the harmoniums. The messages are written by Rumfoord, who arranges the harmoniums himself. It takes three Earthling years for Unk to notice Kazak's footprints in the cave. By this point, Unk and Boaz have been living on different levels of the cave and rarely interacting. They split up after about a year on Mercury, when Unk has a brief psychotic break and attacks Boaz for calling a completely average-looking harmonium "cute."

*One of the motifs repeated at the end of the novel involves a very small number of people stranded on an otherwise rather deserted planet and still choosing not to interact with one another. Indeed, Unk and Boaz's experience suggests that being in such close proximity with just one other human is almost too much to bear, and that it can lead to insanity and rage.*



Having spotted Kazak's footprints, Unk decides to follow them. Boaz sleeps in a "home vault" with a door on it to protect him from the adoring harmoniums. Boaz feels sorry for Unk, who he believes has gone insane, and is pointlessly denying himself the company of the harmoniums. Before they stopped speaking, Boaz would tell Unk, "Don't *truth* me [...] and I won't *truth* you." It meant that Boaz didn't want to hear the truth about the harmoniums or any other truth that would make him upset. Reciprocally, Boaz doesn't tell Unk the truth that Stony Stevenson is dead, and that Unk killed him. Boaz talks to the harmoniums, speaking to himself on their behalf and addressing himself as "Uncle Boaz."

*Continuing the connection to Plato's Cave, Boaz is insistently choosing to believe in the illusions presented by his new life on Mercury—namely, that the harmoniums love him and are all the company he needs. His request for Unk to not "truth" him shows that he is deliberately avoidant of the truth. Unk, meanwhile, continues the determined search for truth that he began on Mars.*



Ever since he first entered the **chrono-synclastic infundibulum**, Rumfoord discovered that he is "crazy about good music." Now, Boaz is putting on a concert for the harmoniums, having finally learned how to do so without killing them, as harmoniums can easily be killed by a "lethal overdose of music." Unk, meanwhile, thinks about Stony, dreaming that if they were to be reunited they would be unstoppable. Unk believes that the people who live above the caves in the "skyscrapers" want to prevent him and Stony from finding each other. He believes it is these people who are writing messages with the harmoniums, whom Unk hates.

*While Boaz has clearly gone insane on one level, Unk's mind is not entirely intact either. Indeed, he has become paranoid and conspiratorial, believing that people who live above him in skyscrapers (who in reality don't even exist) are deliberately conspiring to keep him and Stony apart. This reflects the paranoia he experienced under his earthly identity of Malachi Constant.*



Then, suddenly, Unk sees a new message spelled in harmoniums, one that explains simply and clearly how to escape the caves. He rushes to tell Boaz, who doesn't react with joy. Instead, Boaz says that two messages he saw recently now make sense. One said, "BOAZ, DON'T GO!" while the other said, "WE LOVE YOU, BOAZ." Unk warns that this is a "trap." He asks that Unk give him some time to think about whether he wants to leave, explaining that while Unk may not like the harmoniums, Boaz loves them, and they love him. At this moment, Boaz remembers he left the tape recorder turned on and playing music to the creatures, and rushes to turn it off in a panic.

Unk, meanwhile, tries to find a way to turn the ship upside down, because this is what the message the harmoniums spelled told him to do. Unk manages to successfully do so, and at this moment Boaz comes in weeping, carrying the bodies of dead harmoniums. Boaz asks if they should divide their supplies (there is enough to last 500 years), and Unk is shocked to hear that Boaz is planning to stay in the caves of Mercury. Boaz explains that he is to blame for the deaths of the harmoniums, because he got too excited about the prospect of his own freedom and forgot about them. Boaz was never able to be good to other people, but he is good to the harmoniums, and thus wants to stay living among them until he dies.

## CHAPTER 10: AN AGE OF MIRACLES

Back on Earth, rain falls on a graveyard in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, where the bodies of dead Earthlings and Martians are buried next to one another. There are many such graveyards all over the world. In death, the men are "brothers." The graveyard is next to a house of worship which is now part of the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent. Unk stands in the graveyard, finally back on Earth. He is 43, and the only thing keeping him going is the hope of being reunited with Stony.

Meanwhile, Rev. C. Horner Redwine stands in the pulpit of the empty church. Rumfoord has prophesized that a "weary Space Wanderer" will arrive naked, and there is a yellow rubber one-piece outfit waiting in the church for him to wear. Everyone is waiting excitedly for the Space Wanderer to arrive. The door of every church and home belonging to Rumfoord's religion has a doll hanging on it called a Malachi. The doll is hanged by the neck. During Redwine's sermons, he identifies himself as no more "a germ on a flea on your [Rumfoord's] dog," and the congregation follow suit in identifying themselves as such.

*Here, the harmoniums more obviously come to stand in for the role of God. It's debatable whether Boaz is wrong to commit to the belief that the harmoniums love him, even if it might not be true.*

*Considering the situation he is in, he can hardly be blamed for doing so—though this means further distancing himself from the actual person he is with, and from the possibility of escaping to freedom.*



*Depending on one's perspective, Boaz's decision to stay on Mercury is either ludicrously tragic or strangely moving. While the idea of staying alone on a planet filled with aliens who barely communicate might fill most people with horror, perhaps Boaz has achieved the best anyone can hope for in life: a peaceful existence defined by reciprocal love.*



*There is dramatic irony here in the fact that Unk doesn't know Stony is dead—and that even worse, he killed him—whereas the reader does. This makes Unk's existence at this point in the novel even more tragic.*



*While the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent may have initially seemed harmless and even progressive, this scene shows a much more sinister side. The fact that followers hang dolls called Malachis indicates that part of Rumfoord's reasons for founding the church involve an elaborate desire to get back at Constant, although it is not yet clear why (particularly considering Unk/Constant has suffered so much already).*



Redwine walks down from the pulpit and out of the church. Outside, he sees a spaceship, and near it, the naked Space Wanderer. Overjoyed, he runs back into the church and rings the bell to announce the Space Wanderer's arrival. The sound of the bell petrifies Unk, who retreats into his ship. He doesn't know that the war with Mars is over, and believes that the bell has something to do with battle. Unk tries to fly away, but the on button doesn't work. Instead, the cabin fills with yellow smoke, and the spaceship breaks down.

Leaving the spaceship, Unk sees a crowd of people, all of whom have "handicapped" themselves in some way. They are all members of Redwine's congregation, and like many other people on Earth, they are "happily self-handicapped." There is a firetruck present, and the firemen turn on the hose in celebration of Unk's arrival. Unk is baffled, but forces himself not to be afraid. Redwine gives Unk the yellow suit to wear, which fits him perfectly. When Redwine tells him that he is on Earth and Unk exclaims "Thank God!" Redwine is puzzled, noting that thanking God is nonsensical when God doesn't care about Unk.

By this point, the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent has three billion followers worldwide, and a formidable "disciplinary arm." Redwine warns Unk not to say anything that implies he is especially favored by God, because if so "the friendly crowd out there [...] could turn ugly quite fast." When Unk finally greets him, the Congregation ask him his name and what happened to him. Unk says he doesn't know his real name, and explains that he was "a victim of a series of accidents," adding, "As are we all." The crowd erupts in applause. Immediately, a banner is unfurled displaying these words.

The fire engine drives Unk to Newport; on the journey, onlookers throw flowers at the passing truck. Rev. Redwine is also on the truck and sits ringing the bell, which has a Malachi attached to it. Unk is delighted to be back on Earth, breathing oxygen, and surrounded by so many people who love him. People keep asking what happened, and he simply replies, "Accidents!" In Newport, the Rumfoord Estate is surrounded by crowds of people. Bee and Chrono are also in Newport; Bee is sitting in a booth outside the estate, selling "genuwine, authorized, official Malachis" to the crowd.

*One of the curses of Unk's (the Space Wanderer's) existence in the novel is to inhabit many different identities. Crucially, none of these identities are voluntarily chosen by him, but rather imposed on him by other people—another example of the erosion of free will by external control.*



*Whereas traditionally religious believers tend to like to feel that they are particularly blessed or favored by God, in the case of the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, the opposite is true. Believers delight in being handicapped because this reinforces their faith in the randomness of the universe and the apathy of God. (Of course, this doesn't exactly make solid logical sense, but it serves to reinforce the book's satire of religion.)*



*Whether deliberately or by chance, Unk manages to deliver the exact news the crowd wants to hear. The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent is a hilarious satire of religion because it essentially delivers the opposite of what religions are supposed to do. Whereas most religions promise to provide meaning and a sense of being loved by God, this church does the precise opposite.*



*Unk may have spent the past few years on a relentless mission to find truth, but he has still not internalized some quite obvious realities. These include the fact that he shouldn't trust the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, which is controlling and using him in the same way as he was used by the Martian Army—albeit under much more pleasant circumstances.*



Though now relegated to a humble concession stand, it is clear to everyone around that Bee belongs to a “nobler” class. The hawkers must stop selling five minutes before the materialization takes place, and this point in time is announced by a whistle. Chrono tells Bee they have eight minutes left until the whistle blows. Chrono is 11 now, “foul-mouthed,” and officially classified as a juvenile delinquent. However, Rumfoord has told the legal staff of the Church of the Utterly Indifferent to relentlessly defend Chrono, and thus he has escaped serious punishment. Bee lost her front teeth when her Martian spaceship crashed into the Amazon. Both she and Chrono have golden skin, resulting from months spent eating only roots in the rainforest.

Bee and Chrono were inducted into the Amazonian Gumbo tribe before being lifted out by Rumfoord, who then gave Bee the “lucrative” concession stand outside his estate. He also paid for Bee to have gold tooth implants. Next to Bee’s booth is Harry Brackman’s booth. Brackman is the only survivor of the Battle of Boca Raton, in which he received terrible injuries. The whistle comes, telling the hawkers that they must stop selling. All the shutters of the stands close at the same time, such that the stands end up forming a kind of tunnel. Every person running a concession stand is a Martian survivor; being granted these lucrative positions was a gesture of gratitude from Rumfoord.

Chrono cleans his nails with his good-luck piece, which he still has from his time on Mars. Like most of the Martian survivors, Chrono feels pretty unexcited about the Space Wanderer’s arrival. Most of the survivors basically support the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, but they believe they’ve already done enough to help foster the church’s success. Now, the moment all the believers have been waiting for arrives: the Space Wanderer pulls up to the estate in his firetruck. At the same time, Rumfoord and Kazak materialize.

Even the harshest critics of Rumfoord have to admit that he never claimed to be God, and even announced that he was “so far from being a relative or agent of God” that his presence made it impossible to communicate with God at all. Automatically, Brackman’s hand goes to touch the place where his **antenna** used to be; he misses receiving the antenna’s signals. Rumfoord’s voice booms out from the estate, requesting that the Space Wanderer be brought to him. Brackman reluctantly suggests they go get a look, but Bee is unsure. Before being conscripted into the Martian Army, Brackman’s name was Francis J. Thompson; he had been a member of the U.S. Army stationed at Fort Bragg.

*In this passage, Vonnegut lambasts the connection between religion and commerce. The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent is clearly a way not only of increasing Rumfoord’s social power, but also of making money.*



*Rumfoord’s decision to grant the Martian survivors concession stands as a gesture of gratitude shows how selfish and sinister he truly is. He has essentially created an entire empire over which he presides and from which he profits. Rumfoord moves different figures around within this empire while pretending that he is acting in a gracious manner.*



*Another aspect of Vonnegut’s satire of religion involves the role of spectacle in enhancing religious belief. Rumfoord’s materializations and now the ceremonial arrival of the Space Wanderer are all forms of pageantry that have nothing to do with the way the world actually works, but captivate people in a way that increases Rumfoord’s power over them.*



*The ingenious trick of Rumfoord’s religion is that the less he claims to think of himself as God (or as having any relation to God), the greater he grows in the esteem of his followers, and the more his power increases. Meanwhile, Brackman’s longing for his antenna indicates that people can come to crave being controlled, as it relieves them of the responsibility of having to make their own decisions.*



The International Committee for the Identification and Rehabilitation of Martians had had difficulty finding Bee's original identity. They made a number of guesses, each of which were wrong. Now, Bee reflects on how Rumfoord abused, manipulated, and used the Martians to his own end. She wonders if any of their lives would have been better without Rumfoord's interference. She says she hates him, and Brackman comments that it is the "privilege" of Martians to hate Rumfoord.

Unk waits outside the Rumfoord Estate, communicating with Rumfoord's voice, which is being blasted through horns positioned on the estate's walls. Unk admits that he remembers some things about the estate. Rumfoord asks if Unk would be able to recognize his mate and child, then demands that Bee and Chrono be summoned. Now, seeing Rumfoord for the first time, Unk notices that he looks terrible. Rumfoord is a strange color, and his smile is no longer charming, but scary. Unk realizes that he has an important role to play in the ceremony taking place, so he stays quiet and smiles pleasantly. He feels convinced that a positive future awaits him on Earth. However, he knows he needs a friend, and longs for Stony.

Rumfoord climbs up onto a catwalk that is part of a scaffold constructed at the front of his mansion. At one end of the catwalk is a large copper beech tree affixed with "gilded rungs." Rumfoord ties Kazak to the bottom rung and climbs the tree. He addresses the crowd, his voice still being blasted through the horns outside. Bee, Chrono, and the Space Wanderer stand together awkwardly. None of them are particularly happy about their reunion, and Chrono even kisses his good-luck piece and wishes his father would die. Addressing the crowd, Rumfoord suggests they thank the completely apathetic God that none of them are like Malachi Constant. The Space Wanderer looks at the crowd and wonders if Stony is among them.

## CHAPTER 11: WE HATE MALACHI CONSTANT BECAUSE...

Rumfoord gives a sermon about the repellent awfulness of Malachi Constant. He explains that Constant did not earn his fortune, and used it to demonstrate that humanity was greedy, selfish, careless, and immoral. Rumfoord emphasizes that luck is not the will of God, and actually has nothing to do with God. Rumfoord then calls on the Space Wanderer, asking him yet again to tell the crowd about what happened to him. The Space Wanderer repeats his line about being a victim of a series of accidents. The crowd is silent, not for lack of agreement but because they are totally rapt and do not want to miss a signal word the Space Wanderer says.

*Bee is one of the first characters to have a clear-eyed view of the wrongs committed by Rumfoord. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that she used to be married to him (even though she doesn't remember this).*



*At the beginning of the novel, Rumfoord's smile seemed charming and reassuring. However, now that the truth of his character has been revealed, he is shown to be the villain he really is. Even worse, he is a villain who smiles through the evil he is perpetuating, suggesting a total lack of empathy for other people.*



*The strange and elaborate conclusion to this ceremony, in which Rumfoord addresses the crowd from the top of a ladder-tree, demonstrates how far Rumfoord's frightening megalomania has gone. He seems all-powerful now, with everyone else present under his complete control.*



*By this point it has become abundantly clear that Rumfoord resents and even despises Constant/Unk/the Space Wanderer because of his unexplained luck. Yet why Rumfoord is so offended by the idea of luck still remains unclear. Rumfoord's good fortune is, of course, a form of luck itself—he happened to be born into the American elite, ensuring a life of money and power. However, he clearly does not interpret his life this way.*



Rumfoord asks if the Space Wanderer would like to reveal the name he was given at birth, and then reveals that his name was Malachi Constant. The crowd absorbs this shocking news, reflecting on how they treated the Malachis, which many believed did not deserve to be hanged. Rumfoord announces that Constant will momentarily be placed in a spaceship heading for Titan, where he will live in peaceful exile from Earth. Constant's first fear is that he won't be able to walk to the spaceship properly with everyone watching him. However, Rumfoord—having read Constant's mind—assures him he will be fine. As Constant walks, he is shocked to find that he is receiving signals through his **antenna** for the first time in years.

A microphone dangles in front of Constant's face, and Rumfoord asks if he has anything to say to the crowd. Timidly, Constant says he doesn't understand anything that's happened to him. Rumfoord replies that if Constant feels he has been treated unjustly, all he has to do is name one good thing he's done in his life. Constant racks his brain, and eventually says, "I had a friend." Speaking about Stony makes him feel overwhelmed with happiness. Rumfoord asks if Constant remembers performing an execution on Mars. Constant has tried to suppress the memory, but says he thinks he remembers. Rumfoord informs him that the man he killed was Stony.

Constant weeps and climbs up the tree ladder. At the top, Rumfoord tells him to wait, as Bee and Chrono will shortly join him. Rumfoord then reveals that Bee's actual identity is Beatrice Rumfoord. The crowd murmurs in shock. Rumfoord invites the crowd to hate Beatrice just as they have been hating Constant. Once Beatrice reaches the top, she tells Rumfoord that she doesn't remember anything about her time as mistress of the estate, but that it makes her proud anyway. She finds humanity disgusting and is proud to distance herself from it. She and Chrono then board the spaceship. On board, they find the ship a mess, with empty liquor bottles, clam shells, and even a bra lying around. On the wall someone has written *Bud and Sylvia* in lipstick.

## CHAPTER 12: THE GENTLEMAN FROM TRALFAMADORE

Titan is the only moon in the Solar System with an oxygen atmosphere. It also has a pleasant temperature and three seas and three seas, which are each named after Rumfoord. Although it is unclear why, the spirals of Rumfoord, Kazak, and Titan precisely coincide, such that while Rumfoord and Kazak only materialize on other planets temporarily, they are permanently materialized on Titan. They live on an island there, in a "flawless reproduction" of the Taj Mahal, which Rumfoord has humorously named *Dun Roamin*.

*Perhaps the ghostly signals that Constant feels in his antenna are a reminder—either symbolic or literal—that he is now firmly back under Rumfoord's control (although it is debatable whether there was ever a point at which Constant escaped this control in the first place). Indeed, the reminder that Rumfoord can read Constant's mind reiterates the frightening totality of his control over everyone around him.*



*The surprisingly moving and tragic assertion Constant makes in this chapter illustrates one of the most important motifs of the novel: the value of friendship. When thinking of moral acts, friendship might not necessarily be the first thing that comes to mind. Yet in Constant's mind, his friendship is the only redeeming thing about him. Of course, the question remains; can Constant be blamed for killing Stony?*



*While most of Beatrice's knowledge, personality, and memories have been wiped away, her aristocratic haughtiness remains. Whether this is comforting or disturbing is up to the reader to decide. Yet there is certainly something comical about the fact that, even if she remembers nothing else, Beatrice remembers the disdain she feels for those she considers inferior to her.*



*This passage confirms that Rumfoord exists in multiple places at one time. While he only exists on Earth once every 59 days, and on Mars every 111 days, he is always on Titan, due a sort of physical fluke. He has thus, somewhat strangely, ended up making a home there.*



The only other person on Titan is Salo. He is 11 million Earthling years old. His skin is the color of a tangerine; he has three legs, and each of his feet is an inflatable sphere that becomes a suction cup when deflated. He has no arms and three eyes, with a round head that hangs “on gimbals.” His voice is something like a bike horn, and he speaks 5,000 languages. In 483,441 B.C.E. Salo was telepathically determined to be the most handsome, healthy, and morally upstanding being on his planet. The government on Tralfamadore, a kind of “hypnotic anarchy,” was celebrating its 100 millionth anniversary.

Thousands of years ago, Salo is nominated to carry a message from Tralfamadore across the universe. It has been prepared by a sort of Tralfamadorian equivalent of a university, and is sealed in a lead wafer, submerged in water, and clamped around Salo’s neck. He is strictly instructed not to open the message until he reaches his destination. Titan, where he is stuck, is still 18 million light years away from the place he’s going. Once he gets there, he is supposed to learn the language of its beings and then translate the message for them. As a Tralfamadorian, Salo is a machine, and thus follows these orders without question. Indeed, he has internalized the instruction not to open the message as “the very core of [his] being.”

Salo is stranded on Titan due to technical problems on his spaceship resulting from a missing part that is no larger than a can opener. Without it, the spaceship can only travel comparatively short distances across the Solar System. Once stranded, Salo sends a message about his problems back to Tralfamadore, which takes 150,000 years to arrive. While waiting, Salo makes sculptures, grows daisies, and watches the activities of Earthlings. One day, while watching, he finds a message on Earth’s surface written in Tralfamadorian, in what the Earthlings called Stonehenge. The message reads, “Replacement part being rushed with all possible speed.”

After that, Salo receives four further messages; the first is the Great Wall of China, the second is Emperor Nero’s Golden House, the third is the Kremlin, and the fourth is the Palace of the League of Nations. Each assures Salo that he is abandoned, and one tells him to prepare to be able to leave at a moment’s notice. Yet Salo also knows that not every message is carried out; often whole civilizations implode before they can build the structure that contained a message for him. Salo hasn’t told Rumfoord all of this, for fear that Rumfoord will be horrified that all of human history exists only to deliver Salo his missing part. Salo loves Rumfoord, not in a sexual manner—as he is a machine—but in a different way.

*One of the surprising twists of the novel is that Salo ends up emerging as the most sympathetic character of all. The reason why is surprising is because—as indicated here—he is so strange and different to humans that it is almost impossible to imagine him existing.*



*It is significant that Vonnegut uses the word “machine” to describe Salo, rather than “robot.” Robot arguably conjures a more specific and less lifelike image of a cold, artificial form of intelligence. The word “machine,” however, lends itself to a wider variety of meanings. Human and animal bodies are, after all, often symbolically likened to machines. While there is definitely something inorganic and artificial about Salo, he is perhaps closer to humans than what most people imagine when confronted with the word “robot.”*



*The activities Salo pursues while waiting to be rescued also do not seem like the kind of things that a machine would do. Indeed, part of what makes Salo so sympathetic is that he pursues activities that not only seem human, but especially creative and tender.*



*The fact that each of these famous landmarks—as well as human civilization itself—purportedly only exist in order to send messages to Salo is one of the most spectacular satirical twists in the novel. It forces the reader to ask themselves what they would think if they learned that the entirety of human history only existed as a tool for another species to complete a single task.*



According to Tralfamadorian myth, the beings that preexisted the machines that now live there were organic, and obsessed with the idea that “everything had a purpose.” Not only this, but they ranked different purposes, and felt humiliated and horrified when they had to perform a role for a purpose that wasn’t high enough. When this happened, they invented machines to do this role for them. Eventually, the beings assigned the machines they’d built to learn the purpose of the beings’ existence. The machines concluded that the beings didn’t have one, and in horror, the beings slaughtered each other. Before long, they gave this job to the machines, too, and almost instantaneously all the beings were dead.

Salo watches as the spaceship containing Constant, Beatrice, and Chrono descends onto Titan. He has made a sculpture garden of two million life-size sculptures of humans. Salo is fascinated by the boundless human appetite for entertainment. Along with the sculptures, he has become skilled at daisy-breeding, and now grows daisies so large they weigh more than one ton. Salo inflates his feet as he goes to greet the newcomers. He calls Rumfoord “Skip” (which Rumfoord dislikes) in order to establish a sense of intimacy between them. Searching for Rumfoord, Salo looks into Rumfoord’s pool. At the bottom are statues of the three sirens of Titan made by Salo.

Kazak runs toward Salo, but immediately Salo notices that something is wrong; Kazak looks poisoned. Suddenly, Kazak lights up with Saint Elmo’s fire, an electrical discharge that makes a creature look like they are on fire, when they actually aren’t. Salo then spots Rumfoord, who has a “band of dematerialization” running through him, meaning a strip of him is completely missing. Weakly, Rumfoord explains, “Sunspots.” A storm on the sun has affected the **chrono-synclastic infundibulum**. Sunspots have made Rumfoord and Kazak ill before, but not like this. Rumfoord snaps irritably at Salo, and Salo is horrified.

Irritated, Rumfoord suggests that he and Salo “drop this guise of friendship.” Salo is heartbroken, and tells Rumfoord he thought they really were friends; however, Rumfoord replies that they are just using each other for their respective purposes. Salo lists all the kind things he has done for Rumfoord. He is grieving through his noisy suction-cup feet, which further irritates Rumfoord. Miserable, Salo says that if he could cry like an Earthling, he would do that instead. Rumfoord mentions that the replacement part Salo has been waiting for will arrive imminently. He then projectile vomits.

*This passage is particularly fascinating to read from a contemporary perspective. Although computers and other forms of advanced machine existed in 1959, these technologies were nothing like what exists in the present day. Yet here Vonnegut indirectly expresses many of the same fears that people are voicing about artificial intelligence and automation today. Will machines enhance human life, make it seem meaningless, or even cause its extinction?*



*While it is Salo who is technically the unfeeling “machine,” he is much kinder to Rumfoord than Rumfoord is to him. Salo treasures his relationship with Rumfoord. This indicates that it is actually Rumfoord who is cold, cruel, and machine-like, in the sense that he only cares about himself and isn’t capable of making genuine connections with others.*



*The fact that Rumfoord’s illness is caused by sunspots links his fate to the myth of Icarus. According to this myth, a man named Icarus was able to fly after making himself wings from feather and wax (which is comparable to Rumfoord’s ability to travel through time, thanks to the chrono-synclastic infundibulum). However, when Icarus flies too close to the sun—an act of hubris—his wings melt and he dies. This parallel perhaps suggests that a similar fate will befall Rumfoord.*



*The horrifying cruelty with which Rumfoord treats the kind-hearted, innocent Salo is almost too much to bear. It confirms Rumfoord as the villain of the story and Salo as its surprising hero. Despite the fact that Salo only appears at the end of the novel, he is purer and nobler than all the other characters, and is thus quickly established as the book’s most sympathetic character.*



Salo realizes that Rumfoord now knows that he was personally being controlled by Tralfamadore, and that this has likely upset him severely. Now, Rumfoord shouts that the Tralfamadoreans have used him like a “potato peeler.” This was one of the aspects of the future that Rumfoord denied even to himself, refusing to believe it was true. Rumfoord rudely belittles Salo for being a machine. Despite being deeply hurt, Salo resorts to groveling. However, at this moment Rumfoord informs him that very soon, an explosion on the sun will blow his spaceship out of the **chrono-synclastic infundibulum** and all the way out of the Solar System. Salo is horrified, but Rumfoord insists that he doesn't pity him.

Rumfoord tries to hide the fact that he is crying. As a parting wish, he demands to know the contents of Salo's message. Salo hesitates, but Rumfoord insists “in the name of our friendship.” Meanwhile, Constant, Beatrice, and Chrono have finally arrived on Titan. They are each leaning against one of Salo's statues. The statue Beatrice is leaning against, entitled “Discovery of Atomic Power,” depicts a young, seemingly noble student of physics. Beatrice hasn't noticed that the statue has a large erection. Meanwhile, Chrono is leaning against a statue depicting a Neanderthal family committing cannibalism.

Constant announces that he will never allow himself to be used for someone else's purposes again. It is the same speech he has made again and again over the 17 months it took his family to travel from Earth to Titan. Beatrice is not angry with Constant, only disinterested. She and Chrono maintain their deep bond, but neither of them feel any affection for Constant. Chrono spots a creature rowing a “gilded rowboat” in the distance, near Rumfoord's palace. The creature is Salo, who is rowing for the first time and isn't very good at it. When Salo pulls up, Chrono threatens him with his knife, while Beatrice picks up a rock with which to smash his head.

Salo tells them they are welcome to kill him. He says he wishes he was dead. He tells them that Rumfoord is dying and that he wants to see them, but never wants to see Salo again. When the family find him, Rumfoord makes an effort to speak to them warmly. He greets Beatrice as “wife,” Constant as “Space Wanderer,” and Chrono as “German batball star.” Rumfoord tells them that he is not dying, because, from his “**chrono-synclastic infundibulated**” perspective, everything always remains and everything that has ever happened is still happening. He then tells them that everything that has happened on Earth has been “warped” and controlled by the Tralfamadoreans.

*On some level, it is perhaps understandable that Rumfoord is so furious about being used. It arguably makes sense that he reacts with such devastation to the realization that his entire civilization is akin to a “potato peeler” for the Tralfamadoreans. However, Rumfoord seems less concerned about the way the Tralfamadoreans treated humanity than he is about he was treated personally—it seems he egotistically wanted to be the exception to the rule.*



*Salo's attempt to memorialize important moments in human history has produced some rather comic results. Yet in a sense, it is only arbitrary human norms that define an erection or cannibalism as inappropriate topics to be celebrated. After all, they are as much a part of human history as the discovery of atomic energy—and who is to say that they are less noteworthy?*



*The sweetness and innocence of Salo compared to the human characters again paints humanity in a rather poor light. It is obvious that while Salo comes from a highly intelligent, wise, and good-natured species, humans tend toward ignorance, megalomania, and aggression. This further complicates the moral dilemma surrounding the Tralfamadoreans' use of humans for their own ends.*



*The kindness that Rumfoord shows the other human characters toward the end of the novel arguably indicates that he is not entirely evil. At the same time, his cruel treatment of Salo, which has made Salo so miserable that he is suicidal (quite a feat for a machine) is difficult to forgive. It is clear that Rumfoord feels a species-based sense of loyalty to the other humans, yet the novel suggests that this may be harmful in its own way.*



Rumfoord then points at Chrono and explains that Chrono has the part that Salo needs. It is the good-luck piece. He explains that he asked Salo to show him the secret message he is carrying across the universe, but because Salo is a machine, he can't disobey his orders. An electrical spiral envelops Rumfoord; he acknowledges that this is the end, and in parting says he has done his best to serve Earth and hopes that now that Salo's message can resume, the Tralfamadorians will leave Earthlings alone. He asks to be remembered as "a gentleman of Newport, Earth, and the Solar System," then says goodbye and disappears with Kazak forever.

Just at this moment, Salo comes racing over, shouting "Skip! The message! I'll tell you the message!" However, he then realizes with a start that Rumfoord is dead. He then immediately begins to chastise himself for being such a terrible machine, full of weaknesses and flaws. Salo lays the message on Rumfoord's empty chair, explaining that he is no longer really a machine anymore because he managed to disobey his most important command. The message is a single dot, and Salo explains—to the air where Rumfoord used to be—that the dot means "Greetings" in Tralfamadorian.

Having announced this, Salo races away and kills himself by disassembling his parts and flinging them all over. Chrono walks among the scattered parts and thinks about how he always knew that his good-luck piece belonged to some other, superior being, because this is how good-luck pieces work. He feels happy to play a small role in the broader story, and drops his good-luck piece among Salo's scattered parts, certain that everything will ultimately work out.

## EPILOGUE: REUNION WITH STONY

Constant and Beatrice both live to be 74 years old, and die within 24 hours of each other. Before Constant's death, he lives inside Salo's spaceship, which Constant never tries to fly because it's too complicated. However, he does manage to find the place where the good-luck piece fits into the spaceship. During his years living on Titan, Constant passes the time by trying to put Salo back together, at first hoping Salo might agree to fly Chrono back to Earth. Constant and Beatrice themselves aren't very eager to go back. However, when Constant reaches 74, Chrono is already 42, and is thriving in his life on Titan. He lives in the nests of the Titanic birds, and even speaks their language.

*Rumfoord's myopic loyalty to his own kind ends up being perhaps his greatest sin—whether to himself or to Earth, he is unable to extend empathy to others on the basis that they are different for him. Of course, Rumfoord is also arguably lying when he claims he did his best to serve Earth, considering he created a whole Martian Army to attack Earth in an enormous war.*



*Here Salo faces a terrible dilemma, feeling that he has failed as both an organic being and as a machine. The fact that the message he is carrying is so simple highlights the absurdity of the whole mission, and thus also of human existence. Again, the reader is forced to question how he or she would feel if he or she learned that humanity only existed to serve such a mundane and seemingly insignificant goal.*



*In the end, Chrono and Salo both provide glimpses of hope. Whereas Salo shows that—even as a machine—it is possible to betray one's orders in the name of love, Chrono shows that humans don't have to be so egotistical and hubristic to want to be at the center of the universe.*



*Again, just as Boaz and Unk decided to live separately after a year on Mercury, so do the strange family made up of the surviving humans on Titan choose to have distance from one another. This could be interpreted as a representation of how difficult it is to love other people even when there is literally no one else around. At the same time, it is also arguably a product of the bizarre and distressing circumstances under which the humans on Titan find themselves living.*



Constant almost never sees Chrono, although he occasionally hears him, and sometimes he finds shrines Chrono has made. Constant tidies up the shrines, and feels respect for “what his son [is] trying to do with religion.” Beatrice lives by herself in the Taj Mahal replica. Once in a great while, Chrono comes to see her, and they have fights about civilization that end with Chrono ripping off his clothes and screaming. After this happens, Beatrice signals for Constant to come and comfort her. Beatrice is beautiful, though likely somewhat insane.

Beatrice is writing a book called *The True Purpose of Life in the Solar System* which rejects the idea that human existence was controlled by the Tralfamadorians to help Salo complete his mission. Sometimes she reads parts of the manuscript to Constant, as she does now. Constant isn’t really listening. Instead, he is focused on the pool, which is covered in slime. He has never figured out how to clean it, and now the sirens of Titan are hidden by the gross mulch on the water’s surface. Beatrice says she has an idea, and goes to look at the portrait of herself as a little girl, dressed in white. She concludes that the worst possible fate a person could have would be to never be “used” for any purpose.

Constant attempts to drain the pool and sweeps the courtyard while he waits for the water to recede. As he watches the water drain, he suddenly realizes that there is a sound missing—the sound of Beatrice’s breathing. She is dead. Constant buries her body on the shore of the Winston Sea, in a spot free of statues. An enormous flock of birds appears in the sky, all of whom silently witness the “funeral.” Chrono appears, wearing a feather cape. He thanks his parents for giving him the “gift of life,” then flies off.

Back at the palace, Salo comes to greet Constant and thanks him for putting him back together. Constant admits he thought he’d gotten it wrong when Salo remained silent, but Salo explains that he couldn’t decide if he wanted to wake up. He has now decided to continue on his mission, seeing as he’s already gotten this far. Constant says that Beatrice died, and that he misses her. He explains that he only fell in love with her one Earthling year ago, when he finally realized that “a purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved.”

*It is curious that Constant frames Chrono’s decision to live as a bird and make shrines as a religious practice. In the West, religion is strongly associated with human civilization, although in other parts of the world religious belief has much more to do with the natural world. Perhaps it is in one of these latter traditions that Chrono is practicing his new “faith.”*



*Beatrice’s rather pointless book could be seen as a satirical gesture toward the pointlessness of all literature. After all, it might seem ludicrous that Beatrice is writing a book that almost certainly no one except her and Constant will read, but perhaps there is no real logical reason behind any decision to write a book, other than some (inexplicable) urge.*



*The strangely poetic scene of Beatrice’s funeral and death viscerally conjures what it would be like to live on a planet with only three other humans, such that it would be possible to hear someone die simply by the sound of their breath ceasing.*



*The detail that it took until their final year together for Constant and Beatrice to fall in love can be interpreted as a commentary on humanity’s needlessly stubborn resistance to falling in love, which often takes the form of self-inflicted harm. (The fact that Constant once raped Beatrice is obviously a good reason for her not to love him, though some readers at the time of the book’s publication may not have thought this obvious.)*



Salo offers Constant and Chrono a ride back to Earth. Constant explains that Chrono has joined the birds, but that he himself will accept the ride. During the journey, Salo worries that bringing Constant back to Earth was a mistake. Constant asks to be dropped in Indianapolis, which concerns Salo, because it is not a very hospitable environment for “a homeless old man.” However, Constant wants to go there because it was the first place that a white man was hanged for killing a Native man, and this is the kind of place he belongs. Salo makes grieving sounds with his feet. He tries to reassure himself by reminding himself that Constant has some money and clothing, which he took from Rumfoord’s palace.

Just before they reach Earth, Salo hypnotizes Constant, implanting a soothing illusion in his mind that will appear when he dies. The spaceship lands at three a.m. in the middle of the Indiana winter. Salo lets Constant out and directs him toward a bus stop, telling him the bus will come in about ten minutes, and that he can ask the driver to take him to a hotel. Constant assures Salo that he is “warm as toast.” Salo feels snow on his face. They bid each other goodbye, and Constant walks over to the bus stop, while Salo gets back in his ship. Because of the snow, the bus is two hours delayed. By the time it comes, Constant has frozen to death. However, as he dies, he experiences the illusion placed in his mind by Salo.

The illusion is that Constant is reunited with Stony Stevenson. A diamond-encrusted spaceship lets Stony out, still wearing his Martian uniform. He invites Constant into the spaceship, telling him it will take him to “paradise,” where “everybody’s happy forever.” Stony says that Beatrice is waiting there for him. Constant is shocked that he is being let into paradise, and Stony replies, “somebody up there likes you.”

*It is intriguing that Constant’s experience living on Titan (as well as the other bizarre events that have taken place over the course of the novel) has instilled a sense of justice in him, particularly regarding the genocidal history of the U.S. Indeed, the idea that Indianapolis is a symbol of justice is clearly meant somewhat facetiously. At the same time, as the book has shown, justice often emerges in unlikely places.*



*Salo’s final act of kindness and generosity means that the novel has a somewhat happy ending, albeit a bit of a tragicomic, bizarre, and bleak one. On one level, this could be interpreted as a final comment on the meaningless brutality of life, such that the only thing a person can hope for is to die in the midst of a delusion. However, perhaps the message is actually that the best a person can hope for is to receive an act of love before death.*



*Again, this ending is tragicomic and bittersweet. Constant’s arrival in paradise and reunion with Stony is only an illusion. Yet Stony’s statement—“somebody up there likes you”—is actually true. That “somebody,” however, is not God. It is Salo.*





## HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

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Seresin, Indiana. "The Sirens of Titan." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 23 Dec 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

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