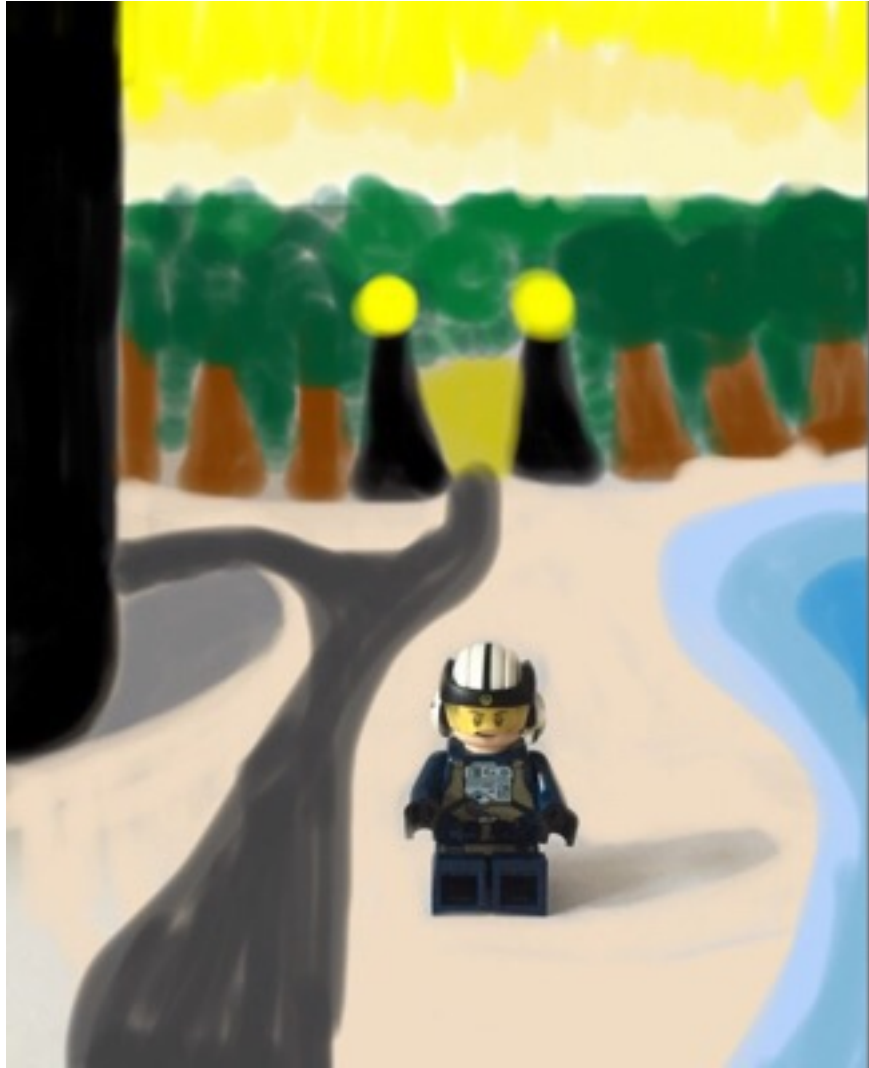


The Thorgon Empire



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A guide to the book

This is not a manual for Human-Thorgon first encounters (or any others if it comes to that!) It's a science fiction story I would like to be read. *That* bit's not rocket science (I don't have the qualifications!)

History

The now-defunct **App.net** social network became, for me, a cradle for creativity. Its weekly **#WednesdayChallenge** single-post short story writing challenge restarted and energised my imagination. This work is the result of that inspiration.

Prior to starting the book I spent time outlining a summary of the Thorgon universe, partly from memory, partly from the archive of my **App.net** posts. It's all stored in a 'repository' at https://github.com/bazbt3/the_thorgon_empire - a site usually used by coders for its version management architecture.

Acknowledgments

@mlv created the Thorgon universe, became the Human versus my inadvertent adoption of the Thorgon. He is the ultimate decider of *things*.

@schmidt_fu (unwittingly?) provided the inspiration to start this, with a post about budget cuts vs the survival of the remnants of the Human race.

Introduction

I am not a writer, that's all you need to know. One tip I can give you though: while reading this a suitably-strong liquid muscle relaxant might help pass the time. 👍

Baz.

Theatre

Only at the last plaza had they weakened and bought drinks from the ever-popular kiosk. Standing in a line and sandwiched between two loud families and their bratty children on the way home from the beach didn't do much for *this* expectant mother's temper. The drink was welcome though, especially when, as they sat for a short while, her husband rolled his unopened bottle across her forehead. Though the chilled surface didn't soothe her nearly enough, his attention *was* welcome.

The evening breeze heading towards the sea became cooler; they'd needed a break from the heat of the earlier sun, and from the effort of walking from the first plaza. Though it had been only three hours it felt as though they'd been walking all day; but custom meant it *had* to be done the correct way.

The sky had paled from its earlier deep yellow as the sun dipped towards a horizon hidden from view by a screen of trees and the city beyond. The clouds just starting to form offshore were usually a sign of at least some rain along the long sweeping bay, and with luck showers would come later, or on the way home.

"*How* long does this take?" she asked, mainly to break the awkward silence as they continued to trudge northwards. Though countless couples must have endured the same over the millennia, the history and the traditional perspective meant nothing to her.

Still not cool enough to think properly he started to respond, "300 days, plus or minus--"

Impatient, she interrupted, "Plus or minus?!"

"It is not an exact science as you know, it is why we come here. I wonder what--"

"I meant the walk of course. You have become sloppy, you have been subjugating those, those humans for too long!"

"Humans."

By now incredulous, "Correcting my pronunciation at a time like *this* is completely--"

Tiring of his wife's mood swings, it was *his* turn to interrupt, "So why *did* you ask?"

"We must visit Glarf Forest. It is our Time," and, remembering the other thing, "well afterwards, after we deliver the precious packet."

"What kind of answer is... Oh, *precious* is it now?!"

"It is your *duty* to first complete the task commanded by Tourism Section Under-Deputy-Vice-Sub-Snarglist."

"Yes, of course."

“Show me the directions again.”

“Yes, of course.”

Tlerj read it out loud, primarily to deflect her thoughts from the increasing discomfort and thoughts of the upcoming pain:

1. Head to the Glarf Forest Gate, but do not pass through unless you absolutely must,
2. Turn left to the Argle Theatre. If the waiting line is excessively long use your passes to gain entrance at the rear,
3. Pass through the galley and up to the viewing gallery. Observe the disgusting mass of Humans spread before you.

The path wound on and up, the silence lengthened until, the first to spot it, Snurg said “Well, there’s the forest gate, and I can smell... What *is* that?”

Sniffing, “We are not paid enough for this,” and, on turning the document over a surprised, “Oh, a map!”



“Heh! Sophisticated for our Cartographic cadre, that,” Snurg laughed.

“Remember our purpose here!”, laughing despite her irritation.

“As if I could forget, I mean, look at you!”

Grimacing, “What?!”

“Radiant, my dearest.”

Wearily, “Enough husband, let us see your beloved hamans.”

“Hu...”

“No, DON’T!”

“We're here.”

And so they were. The southern tower of the sweeping expanse of the theatre, curving towards the sea at both ends, each tower topped with an illuminated cupola to match the forest gate's, met them out of the mists. The sight, at least according to the guidebooks, was always worth the trek. Pure propaganda.

The line was, of course, long. It was always long, the committee overseeing The Guardians of the Experience ensured it. Time to relax, time to prepare, time to ready for The Time.

Snurg moved to stand in line, remaining despite his recent doubts a product of the many centuries the Thorgons had lived within the comfort of The Creed.

Tlerj's irritation grew again, “No. We follow the directions,” and so they did, all the while trying to project a confidence they didn't feel, a *we're-meant-to-be-here* attitude. They walked around the northernmost tower, then to the rear of the theatre, offered their passes to the security scanners, then passed through the doorway.

Oh the heat, it beat at their faces stronger than the earlier afternoon sun; the noise assaulted their ears, the slamming of oven doors, clanging of ladles in just-emptied pans; and the indescribable smells, an intermingling of Thorgon foods and something utterly repulsive, it all beat at their senses!

An inadvertent glance over at the 'Human' board indicated something unfamiliar to the pair. Obviously unfamiliar. It read, 'Thorgon Green (*don't forget the stronger additives*)'

Shuddering at the implications, of which they'd naturally heard wild rumours, they passed through what seemed an endurance test to *her*, and opened the door at the far end of the room.

“Stairs?! What kind of idiot expects me to climb stairs so close to...” Yet they climbed, eventually reaching another door through which a cool breeze blew, very welcome after the torment of the galley.

And there *they* were, the other side of a mesh containment screen. Fewer than the couple had imagined from the publicity materials, but more than even Snurg had previously seen in one place.

“*Oh my Snarglist, it's full of Humans!* Why were *we* chosen for...” she wailed, for this was after all her first exposure to the species.

“I don't know, I really don't.”

“You must have done something bad in a previous life.”

“You must not speak so, it is forbidden.”

She winced: “It is time, we must go, we must go now, that, that... it is turning my stomach.”

“Why were we asked to deviate from The Plan everyone else must follow at this special time?”

“Now!”

“But what about our visit here just--”

“No questions, we must go *NOW!*”

The other viewers looked around at the sudden noise, but all were there for one reason, and only one reason; the smells from below were a catalyst, an accelerant for the the start of the Birthing process. The Humans, though an inconvenience to the Thorgons, had a use after all. If only they *knew* why they were...

As directed by his superior Snurg dropped the packet into the tub used for offerings to the Guardians. Donations had always been good, the birth rate, though not increasing, remained manageable and, though The Bureaucratic Machine would probably intervene if standards slipped, the Births Subcommittee had so far indicated their unwillingness to interfere here.

The walk to the exit, this time leaving via the front of the building, and then to the forest, passed uneventfully. No-one asked for passes, the purpose of the couple’s visit obvious to even an untrained eye.

Far-enough in to avoid the daylight, close-enough that the mother-to-be inflicted little lasting damage to the arm of the father-to-be, they stopped. Settling into a pool, as custom dictated, seemed natural; this was after all a lifetime in preparation.

No, dear reader, now is *not* the time to detail the manner of birth of a Thorgon child. Suffice it to say the bandages on a male’s arm for the days after, the later evidence of scars, both are testament to the pain shared by both male and female, pain endured during an entirely painkiller-free delivery. The Thorgons use pain suppressants at other times, but by necessity childbirth isn't one. The Creed is quite explicit there.

Now resting by the side of the pool on towels provided by the Guardians the baby looked up at his new parents, an oddly inquiring expression playing across his shiny face.

“What shall we call him?”

“I like ‘Snarf’ or ‘Snarg’, but we've had this conversation tens of times before, enough that I'm uncertain if my input is appreciated.”

“You can't have those two, father has never forgiven you for the...”

“And your Grandfather Snarg doesn't think I'm--”

The baby broke wind and simultaneously filled the towel wrapped inexpertly around him. As it escaped the father sniffed the air and, through tears and retching shouted, “Oh great Snarglist, what a smell!”

“Oh, wipe it up and get over it, it's not going to be the worst...”

Through tears: “Snurf it is then.”

Tlerj, though not exactly triumphant grinned, “Yes, I *knew* you'd come around eventually.”

Snurg straightened up, winced against the pain and formally greeted his offspring, “Welcome to Thorgon, Ag-AckAck Snurf, and may your observance of The Creed set your path through a life of greatness.”

This last was a ritual welcome, said by Snurf in case anyone was within earshot. The trees here had ears you know. Literally. Carved into each trunk, a reminder, if ever one was needed, of the always-present need to follow the ancient customs.

The baby looked up again, smiled, and promptly vomited.

“Get another cloth...”

Innocents

Tired of their gadgets and gizmos, the children were digging in the sandpit again, an assortment of playthings arranged around its edge. Shaping mountains and valleys, towns and roads, galaxies and universes came easily, as did their casual destruction, such is the limitless imagination of childhood.

Their hundo decided it was her turn to stealthily grab the green alien monster and give it an extensive chewing session out-of-sight of her two-legs friends. Little Tlu worked out that it was Snurf's turn to mount a rescue mission, and so it was. He ran after the animal but that was no use, its four legs were more versatile than his two, especially when it came to cornering, and *especially* running around the pomo tree. At 1 year-old still a hundo she had enough experience of their world to know which games worked and which *might* work, and so created opportunities for them at all times of day. She was lovely, but as mad as a box of, well, hundos.

Eventually Snurf had had enough running and went to sit by Tlu, pretending to cry. Tlu pretended to ignore him, both knowing that the hundo would return. And so she did. Unstoppable, the licking and play biting began, her tail swishing all the while.

Snurf could no longer pretend to be sad, as usual. "Gibfib," he laughed, "thankyou for being such fun! But what have you been eating, your breath smells like..."

At that revelation Tlu's stern expression broke, her laughter making it her turn for Gibfib's undivided attention. "Ugh, no, *bad* hundo!" Even at 6 she'd developed an understanding of irony and sarcasm. It was just as well.

And now it was Snurf's turn to laugh but, always having a more structured approach to play he smiled. "Gibfib, it's feeding time! What's that, you want Tlu? Yes, chomp her, though she won't be as tasty as your... Ok, time to go, go get your bowl!"

The hundo trotted inside and waited, *almost* patiently, by the cupboard, *her* cupboard.

"Mother!" Snurf shouted as they ran inside, "Can we feed Gibfib?"

Snurf's mother looked up from her work and frowned, "Is it really time to feed her yet?"

He peered at the old-fashioned wall clock. "Of course it is mother, it's *always* time if you ask her!"

"Ok, you win, carry on!"

The two children took their time opening the food pouch, squeezing its contents into the bowl, and sprinkling a few treats on top. "Shhh..." shushed Tlu.

Snurf's mother was always busy these days, now his father was away. Paperwork, always paperwork, and shortening tempers as deadlines came and went spilled over occasionally into harsh words. Hugs afterwards and promises it would all be better tomorrow. And it was.

Tlu's visits broke the streaks of boredom during the extended breaks from school, but he *missed* his father's influence. They shared an inquisitive nature, a break-it then fix-it approach to their toys. His father was equally at home in his professional world as with his son's worlds.

"Tlu, what should we do now?"

"Is it too late for the beach?"

"Mother promised that we could go to the beach tomorrow."

"Great! Which one are we going to?"

"Glarf!"

"Wow! So what should we do now?"

"We'd better put the toys away before nightfall, it goes dark quickly here. Come on, then we can watch the viewscreen. 'Planet's Funniest Pets' is next!"

Gibflib helped of course, she'd eaten her meal and a breath-freshening stick before padding out to pick up the last toy, a squishy ball. One last running-about-like-a-mad-thing game later, it was time to sit and watch funny animals! And then it was bedtime, the frantic changing into sleep suits, a pile of clothes discarded by the laundry basket, rushed teeth cleaning, then the play fight to see who got the top bed. And then they slept.

Part-way through the night they were awakened by at first a low rumbling that shook the house to its foundations. The frequency increased until it reached a scream. And then it was gone. Tlu had heard nothing like it before, and even to Snurf it was new, he'd *never* before heard a launch in the night. They left the bedroom together, looking for his mother.

"Why were we not told of this beforehand?" she was saying, her face illuminated by her personal viewscreen. "No, nothing," in response to a voice inaudible to the children. She listened for a while and then, "No! My husband's job means we *have* to live here, not that you--," here her flow must have been interrupted, and she ended "I will contact our Sub-Snarglist in the morning!" She stabbed at the button and terminated the call.

Snurf immediately hugged his mother, "Never mind, we can relax at the beach tomorrow."

Her face brightened, "Come here Tlu, let's all have a hug! Should we all sleep down here? Snurf, let Gibflib out too, she won't be happy about that nighttime launch either. Prepare for lots of hundo kisses!"

And so it was. And *then* they slept.

The day broke to a light mist. Looking out as she made the window glass clear, Snurf's mother ventured, "It's going to be a lovely day today, right children?"

As they washed and dressed the mist soon gave way to bright sun and a clear yellow sky, perfect for a trip to the beach.

"As it'll not take long to get to the beach we should have breakfast when we get there. Should we take the hundo?"

Both children eagerly replied "Yes!", Snurf adding "and can we have breakfast at that place up near the forest this time?"

"Yes, let's!" his mother and Tlu replied together.

The animal always enjoyed herself on walks now, especially after the hundo training classes had relaxed *everyone*. She loved the wide-open spaces, the freedom to run as fast as she could. The sea took some getting used to, but the two-legs who had brought her along really enjoyed her nose-to-tail shaking after running away from the waves, so it *was* worth going in.

The three now fitting and checking her harness were confident Gibflib wouldn't run away, not like last time. Snurf's father's patience had been stretched almost to its limit, waiting for her to 'stay still' long enough to attach the leash.

"Come on you three, we should go before the lines grow too long."

"Mother, do you have bags?"

"Of course."

The short walk to the monorail was unusual; no neighbours or vehicles on the streets. It wouldn't be this deserted even on a Planet-wide Holiday. No-one spoke in the monorail car either, everyone peering into their personal viewscreens. On arrival only the walkers and new families populated the plaza.

"The sea, look Gibflib!" said both children practically simultaneously, Tlu adding, "Come on Auntie Tlerj, let's go!"

To their surprise the beach was practically deserted, no children or hundos splashing in the waves, no-one building sandforts. The few there were, like in the monorail, deep in concentration, not caring about their surroundings. After a few games of stop the sea, and Snurf saving Tlu's life from watery sea monsters on multiple occasions, they strolled to the eating place. It was shut! How disappointing, they'd have to leave early and without breakfast!

On the way back home on the monorail Tlu, seeing a school friend, walked along the car to her and asked "Where *is* everyone today?"

"Didn't you see the first broadcast today?"

"No, last night we didn't get *any* sleep, a nighttime launch woke us up!"

"Oh," her friend leaned close and whispered, "Didn't you see? Oh no, you didn't. The Snarglist has *gone*! It said so on the viewscreen, it really did!"

Tlu beckoned Snurf over and asked her friend to repeat what she'd just said. Snurf in turn told his mother, who let go of Gibflib's lead as the colour drained from her face. The hundo trotted off, looking for monsters to chew while the woman reached into her bag for her viewscreen.

"Oh my Snarglist!" she cried and completely forgetting Gibflib, who was now gently savaging her bag, she went to talk to the other girl's parents. Snurf and Tlu could hear occasional snippets of the conversation, "last night, from the spaceport...", "*how* many?", "has anyone said who is to blame for..." and "...someone's going to lose their status for *this* one!"

The monorail car stopped, they had a mad scramble to get the hundo off before the door override limit was reached. They trudged home in silence, Snurf's mother tapping away at her viewscreen all the while.

"Children, go play, I've an important call to make."

"Can we put the big viewscreen on?"

"No, sorry, I think most channels are showing bad news today, even the children's services."

So, after lots and lots of snacks to make up for the lack of a breakfast they pretended to be at the beach. Gibflib became the tide, she was after all an unstoppable force of nature, and Snurf yet again saved Tlu's life more than once, this time from sandy monsters and fluffy aliens.

"Children, come inside please. I've something important to tell you, Snurf." When they sat she continued, "Tlu, your mother is coming to collect you, can you get your clothes and your brush and washing things together please?"

Tlu's mother arrived shortly, hugged Snurf's mother and took the girl away after the a hurried goodbye and the girl's briefest of kisses on his cheek.

When they'd gone, "Snurf, we have to move again. I'm sorry but... do you know how your father works for the Spaceport Committee? Everyone connected with the ship's failure will be moved immediately."

"Where to?"

"Well Snurf, I spoke to your father and... we just don't know yet... it's too early to know. Each of the times before has been after a promotion at work, a job with more status. We could plan. This time though, we just don't *know*."

Snurf nodded but he didn't really understand. Of course he didn't, his mother had spared him the detail; some things *should* be kept from a boy on his seventh birthday.

Interregnum

Snurf made friends as easily as any child would if ripped from *their* family's previously comfortable existence. Though the years after Tlu's hurried departure that day were not unkind to the family his father's absences grew longer and his mother's temper grew shorter. Snurf himself learned to not give too much away to others, the frequent moves as his father was reassigned to different population centres removed any trace of stability.

There was always the rumour that father was in some way responsible for the ship malfunction that killed the Snarglist and thousands of unfortunate Thorgons half the world away. He denied it to Tlerj and to Snurf of course, but one factor central to Thorgon society, the need for structure, made a resolution to their situation practically impossible.

The Accident Committee had simply grown too big. There were too many subcommittees to count, figuratively-speaking, as the scope of the Inquiry grew. Amongst them, ones for Accident Investigation, Ground Fatalities, In-Vehicle Fatalities, Personnel Post-Employment Vetting, various Engineering Assessment subcommittees and, of course, one for Oversight.

The main blockage was the biggest. The Succession Committee, directly in charge of the Accident Committee which, though technically a subcommittee was given a higher status due to the impact of the loss. Nothing like the subsequent fallout from the events of that dark night has ever happened before; the Thorgon Snarglist himself had always appointed a successor, *always*. This one though, this one was different. He had had no children, had no brothers or sisters, cousins or nieces. Being in the position for not-quite two years hadn't given time to create that part of *his* Plan, his input into the design of the star ship that eventually killed him had consumed his life.

Life on Thorgon Prime didn't exactly stop, but neither did things progress much. Excuses by other committees and subcommittees and ancillary organisations were many, excuses that without guidance from the Snarglist their strategies could not be integrated into the new Thorgon grew with time. All of it mounted up, all of it competed with the rest.

So Thorgon society, technological development, all stagnated. That is, until someone came up with the brilliant idea to link the disparate bureaucratic machines together to form one big one. Efficiencies would *surely* follow; the arguments were irrefutable, as dense as cast-iron, watertight as a duck's, er... and some were occasionally even logical.

The Machine Name Committee discussed the system's name for a day and so it became 'The Bureaucratic Machine.' The reason for their speed soon became known; their last act was to set up the framework of a Committee for Integrating Current Systems Into The Bureaucratic Machine. Each of the Machine Name Committee members had a senior place on the new

committee.

Snurf's father worked on behalf of the Machine Services Procurement Subcommittee, a position separated far-enough from his previous Engineering post to keep everyone happy. Apart from Snurf and his parents, that is; the long cross-planet trips took their toll on family life. His father's ability shone though and promotions came regularly, if slowly.

One benefit, if it could be called that, father took the time to explain to his son what would be expected in *his* future. Entrance into The Academy, training to follow his father's profession and, on his retirement, to take over; all standard progressions in Thorgon society. What differed was the *depth* of knowledge of the trade he passed on. All the transferable skills such as negotiation, conflict resolution, the study of the parties involved in negotiation, *even* the importance of creating a professional separation and persona to that of the private self.

Snurf enjoyed the lessons just as much as building toys and creating imaginary worlds, and as much as the stories *both* parents read to him at bedtimes. His appetite for learning and the enforced need for adaptability, alongside an imagination that knew no limits, all made for a childhood, though not entirely stress-free, at least completely free from boredom.

The often-remembered sandpit games with Tlu had by now evolved into complex simulations, created and perfected when time was available on The Machine. Creating towns, cities and planet-wide systems, equipping armies and space fleets and evolving and maintaining them all was of course absorbing, but his mother had him make time for social activities too. Trips to the beach, *frequent* walks with the now fully-grown hundo giving him time to talk about his plans with Gibflib, an eager listener. There were museum visits, and of course more exposure to events designed to enhance knowledge of The Creed.

Every Thorgon had to follow The Creed from birth. Time was set aside by every family to study it and to ensure children at least adhered to its basic principles. Snurf's father had explained it in pragmatic terms to his son, that learning it was necessary to get along with everyone else and that the whole of Thorgon life ran around and within the rules it imposed.

On the occasion of Snurf's mid-tens-years anniversary, the occasion of the presentation of his personal copy of the Creed, he pulled his son aside from the rest of the family and the invited guests. He told his son quietly, almost conspiratorially, to search for inconsistencies that could be used for his benefit. Snurf nodded, though he didn't quite understand yet. He was as close though to understanding as any 15-year-old before him.

The Unfortunate Incident With The Toilet

“Aw no, not again.” Not angry, not upset, not seeking someone or something to blame, no. It was the third time of asking, the third time failure stared Timmy in the face. He knew the family's reputation for tenacity would get him through the ordeal, but the still-too-recent laughter of his peers rang sharply in his ears.

A mandatory part of the training regime, turning off the gravity to simulate, well, the gravity being turned off, was great fun in training but less-so in the under-the-microscope of Ship's examination conditions. Not only an entrance into the adult world of space exploration, but a coming-of-age ritual too. Necessary to progress out here.

He tumbled, uncontrolled, past the only window on this section of the ship. The inevitable replay of last time's unfortunate events swam unbidden before his mind's eye and he was back again, the same room but a week before. His gaze automatically drifted to the door, closed now, the remains of the biohazard tape still dangling there, mute testament to events best forgotten... events which gave him his unkindly-bestowed but appropriate nickname.

“Master Hadron,” came a voice made mechanical-sounding even without a suit: “concentrate.”

“Yes dad,” snapping out of it quickly: “Yes, Sir.”

“What can you do to extricate yourself from this unfortunate situation?”

Timmy processed the situation quickly. What was there? Nothing, save succumb to the inevitability of failure.

"Nothing."

"Correct."

Timmy now had time. His thoughts became unpleasant. When his mother had left, his busy dad had lavished on him all the attention he could spare. When off duty Tim Hadron made sure they did everything together; name a sport, any outdoor activity, they at least *tried* it.

And they *ate* together, they tried pretty-much every planet-side cuisine available. It was of course necessary to replenish their energy. Of course it was. Of *course* dad encouraged it, for the down-time also gave both time to talk and to plan their future.

Thus Timmy's dad had unwittingly set in motion a pattern that would define Timmy's son's early ship-side life. The rapid weight gain even before they joined the ship, a combination of its lower gravity with a lack of planet-side physical activities, it all took its toll.

Hadron II had not confessed to breaking the toilet, but while his dad certainly enjoyed having Timmy on board, Captain Hadron couldn't avoid the facts. That toilet didn't break itself and his

son was the only one heavy enough to cause that much damage. He'd have to teach him another lesson in responsibility. And reinforce the one on the difference between weight and mass.

It was how Timmy earned his nickname. One bestowed by his peers. It was not altogether unwarranted, not *altogether* unkind. It was '*The Large Hadron Collider*.'

At that specific memory, Timmy returned to the present.

The door loomed closer.

Foundation

A deep breath, held for a moment then slowly exhaled as he looked at the brightly-painted sliding door. All that remained in his mind between this moment and Graduation: to reach down and to press The Button.

Time at The Academy guaranteed every participant, willing or otherwise, at least an edge over anyone unlucky enough to miss out. Many reasons for non-attendance existed, chief of which was the candidate perhaps lacking the right breadth and depth of useful family connections. Exposure to the right stimuli and belonging to the right social stratum were useful, but knowing the right people helped.

There were many reasons for attendance too, from a student's burning desire to succeed, through family pressures, *especially* those of following a parent into his or her profession, and all the way to the need of wealthier parents to set their wayward offspring back onto what they deemed a 'correct' path. But it would not do to change the institution's primary selection criterion: an aptitude for both learning and adaptation.

This budding cadet wasn't entirely happy though. His parents had provided nothing but the best for him, focussed his life on entering this hallowed place. Those energies spent, now came his time to repay their trust, to uphold the family tradition of one entry from each generation. Nagging doubts remained within, but nothing he could focus on or work through.

Nonetheless he entered the Examination Room confident of success. How could it be any other way? His life thus far had been shaped to guide him inexorably to this moment.

Gently curving walls arced round to the left, as near to parallel as regulation construction techniques could make them. At around the midpoint of the left wall a single opening marred the otherwise featureless expanse. Toward this he strode purposefully as the door swished shut behind.

And so there it was, The Button. A control whose singular purpose was to be pushed, or bashed, hit, thumped or otherwise depressed.

So that is what he did, he pressed The Button.

"Aw, no."

Too-late he read the tiny legend plate below the inviting half-dome:

'Do not press the button. Instead proceed to the exit door opposite that through which you entered.'

"No."

Despair, the weight of a world of expectations ponderously settled about his shoulders. And then, as if to lighten the mood, someone turned off the gravity.

Reacting quickly he grasped the inner edge of the brightly-coloured door's frame and pushed off. Not even he would admit to it being a conscious decision, but would later recount that, during the lazy float along the room towards the exit door, his thoughts were tumbling like himself and very bleak indeed.

Just in time he caught himself, thinking: "Thorgons are not meant to think like that, for independent thought is forbidden, or something?"

He reached the door to a technician's cheery grin, which failed to lift the spirits of the despondent candidate. "Congratulations Cadet, you're in!", a not-at-all expected outcome after a half-minute of disorientation and self-recrimination.

"But..."

"Of course I'm not telling you officially, but I've never seen anyone who passed this fail."

"What?! Did I... Wasn't I..."

"Yes! Yes. No."

Confusion, shock, a double-take, twice each. And then, with the Tech's next words, his world came crashing down. Or rather up to meet him.

"Gravity's back!" the Tech laughed.

In a heap on the floor, hardly the best place to be as the Commandant arrived to greet the new recruit.

"Heh!", grinning like the tech: "There are two things that make this job worth doing: your, the average student's, disbelief; the raw promise of youth; and Graduation Day. Yes, yes, three things. I come to every First Test, and I do happen to like making speeches; people get so emotional, it's great!"

"But..."

"Yes, you passed!"

"But..."

"Don't worry, it's normal to feel like this. However, no time to waste, whilst we've got you like this we like to begin your orientation. So get up! Get it? It's a joke. Orientation--"

"Yes sir."

The Commandant laughed: “Well done.” Then he turned to the Tech: “I’ll leave him in your hands,” and then was gone.

The Tech became businesslike, “Right, time to collect your uniform, the rest of the kit and, of course, your Communicator. What’s your name?”

“Snurf, sir.” And, realising his mistake: “Ag-AckAck Snurf, sir.”

A final grin: “One thing, you’ll already outrank me. But ‘sir’ does feel good. Right, off you go!”

And that was that. In. Expectations at least partially-fulfilled.

Fish

'Little' Timmy Hadron's training wasn't going quite as well as he'd imagined it should have been at this point.

The voice came again: "Brace for impact," and then the floor came up to meet him.

"Aw no. More bruises--"

"At least it's not as, er... catastrophic as last time," his dad interrupted, emerging from the observation cubicle. "Then you looked like a fish out of water."

Timmy, puzzled: "A what?"

"Floundering, you know?"

"No dad."

"It's a fish."

Timmy looked over to the toilet door: "Ah. Yes sir."

"Breakfast?"

"Yes sir."

They walked to the common-use room, Hadron senior respecting Timmy's silence.

"Chef?", a pause, then "Breakfast of Champions," another pause then: "Twice."

"Dad, that's too much and, do you know, I don't deserve it right now, not after... Maybe next time. Maybe not."

"Ah son, just eat, use the time to think where you went wrong."

"No dad, just the regular breakfast."

Tim Hadron re-ordered and, as they ate, his son, deep in thought, muttered, "I'm pretty sure it was that first push-off, straight into the Great Attractor. I'm pretty sure it's there to absorb rookie mistakes."

"The Great Att--"

"The crashmat, dad. I rushed the angles again; the last time that'll happen!"

"Ah," and his dad smiled, thinking: "We're there."

And so they were.

After breakfast was tidied away by the AutoChef they tried again. Not the same simulation, but an entirely different one. It would be pointless having failing candidates repeat with the same conditions, for even at this stage it was important to learn from one's mistakes.

So Timmy passed this phase. And do you know what? It's easy when you know how.

Leverage

Snurf hefted the bar. Triangular in section, smoothed-off corners of course, intentionally made difficult to displace, and with a mass and colour suggesting tungsten. A potentially useful weapon, though the chances of him using it, sat behind this desk, tended towards zero.

Etched on one face, that seen by visitors to his office: “Under-Deputy-Vice-Sub-Snarglist”.

The side almost-always aligned away from visitors, his title: “Under-Deputy-Vice-Sub-Snarglist” and, in a shallow, almost imperceptibly-tiny font height below, his full name: “Ag-AckAck Snurf.” Only a few had ever seen this side of the ornament and of the official, and those either owed Snurf their lives or paid for past transgressions of The Creed with favours equal to the severity of their flaws. The problem with the personalisation was straightforward; any personality injected into *any* aspect of officialdom was energetically proscribed, against The Creed.

On the base though, something entirely different; something no other Under-Deputy-Vice-Sub-Snarglist would ever, *had* ever dared to consider. Something that, if uncovered by anyone but Snurf himself, would bring instant demotion without a committee stage due to its extraordinarily unpatriotic ambition. It was: 'Snarglist Snurf'.

Even thinking of it now his mind automatically tracked down the mental list he'd made over the years to... 'Item 792 of The Thorgon Creed: “Independent thought is contagious. You must stop immediately.'

Usually, the admonition was enough to stop young Thorgons in their tracks. And whilst so it was in Snurf's youth, this was in every sense a different age.

He snorted at the memories, then caught himself. No, it would not do to be seen like this; the time was not yet right. He looked down his schedule, wishing for a stronger motivation to sort through the stack of papers on his desk. And then a noise outside, a reflexive motion towards his bar. Too late to hide it now!

“...it should be entertaining. I'll let you know what he says.” The Deputy-Vice-Sub-Snarglist entered without a signal. “Ag-AckAck, how would you respond to my offer of a promotion?”

“What is the catch?”

“For me? None.”

“For me?”

“Ah. Do you like to travel?”

Snurf looked at his superior and, despite his years of training to avoid such things, the dark thoughts reappeared. Quelled quickly, he said “No. Of course not.”

“Good.”

Snurf awaited the inevitable outcome.

“Good,” Snurf continued absentmindedly, now peering at the desk ornament: “very good.”

Snurf now needed a diversion. Quickly, perhaps too quickly: “When will I leave? Where will I--”

“Right away. You seem, what's the word...?” Snurf paused, searching. At length, his eyes closed as he remembered a word from his past, “Emthusiastic?”

“Yes sir, Enthusiastic, at least that's what I've been told.”

“Yes,” and, half as an aside, “what will you need?”

This time Snurf paused, unsure exactly where this odd conversation would end up. “I shall need time to clear my office. I--”

“Why? Do you perhaps have anything of, oh what's the word, Sementimental value?”

“Sentimental sir, at least that's--”

"It doesn't matter. Would you like to know where you are being moved to?", and Snurf's gaze again shifted to the desk.

The response again came quickly, "Yes, I would. If I had a choice I'd like an assignment in--"

The Deputy-Vice-Sub-Snarglist interrupted yet again, "I researched your time at The Academy. You did well, not spectacularly well but that's forgivable. The range of your studies though was quite impressive, a good preparation for *any* career serving Thorgon. Particularly suited to--"

It was Snurf's turn to interrupt here, "With respect sir, *this* career was not my choice, if I'd *had* a choice I--"

“Don't,” Snurf said. “I know you are perhaps about to say something typically odd, forbidden even, or may be thinking about asking awkward questions. Either way I *know* I will not like it. After all...” and here he smiled and paused for effect...

Snurf knew now, beyond doubt, what was next.

“...after all, I *am* your father.”

Shaking his head, "Dad, please. So where *am* I going?"

"Somewhere you can regain your sense of humour would be *nice*, but I have the feeling you're going to be overwhelmed, at least at first. Never forget what I said when you got your copy of The Creed."

Snurf's brow furrowed. There was something big coming up; his dad otherwise never used that phrase.

"This time you'd better explain dad, you're being even more obtuse than usual. What is it?"

"I cannot tell you. Even though I know you've disabled the recorder in this room I cannot. If you *knew* you wouldn't--"

The Deputy-Vice-Sub-Snarglist's communicator signal interrupted his flow.

"I must go. I have to let my superiors know you have accepted the mission."

"Mission?"

"Assignment."

Snurf nodded, knowing he was not going to like this, not one bit; his father very rarely used the word 'mission'.

Disorganised

“Timmy, I know, I know. But recording all this will at least give you a better chance than most to swap ships when the time comes,” and he narrowed his eyes, “and you know this already.”

“But being capable seems so far away--”

“So what if you're not quite old-enough, not quite *ready*-enough now? Next year, barring the end of the universe, you will be.”

“Universe? Pah! Dad!”

“No, really son. Can you see anything else getting in your--”

Timmy interrupted, sensing a monologue, “I'll get the folder.”

He placed his hand onto the sensor, unlatched and opened the door, and there, nestled in a convenient carrier, it was: 'Ship's Training Log: Timothy Hadron II'.

“Timmy, can you get mine please?”

“No dad, you know it doesn't...”, then giggling: “throw over your hand then!”

Joining in: “Pray tell young sir, wouldst thou have me turn off the gravity again? I have a long, bony, dangly thing attached betwixt hand and shoulder. The hand doth not separate! How terribly inconvenient.”

The remaining bridge crew not otherwise engaged never tired of the Captain's olde worlde affectations. Or so they said. They did worry it might one day extend as far as waving a white handkerchief in times of mild peril...

“No dad.”

Timmy began to transcribe his notes and link his dad's assessment supplementary notes into the log.

A Misson

Snurf took time to think over recent events. Nothing in his time in proximity to The Machine had prepared him for military service. Not exactly anyway. The manouverings around even more complex logistical issues than those from his childhood and a clear understanding of The Creed's requirements had left him prepared at least for *something*. His father's offer of promotion had come to nothing though, being dependent on longer-term performance. Unless some particularly complex logistical need arose it would take quite some time to settle into his new role.

He didn't like his Vice-Sub-Snarglist. The feeling was reciprocated by his superior officer, a Thorgon who repeatedly bent the rules, even some of the outlying Items from The Creed. He would disappear into his room for entire command cycles, often emerging in a state not suited to the rapid decision making that his status demanded. The worst of it though, from Snurf's perspective, there was gossip, unsubstantiated rumours, that he was due to oversee the first launch of the first interstellar vehicle completed during the time of The Snarglist, but that he'd suddenly become ill on the night of the launch. Nothing could be proven way out here of course, but the senior officers and crew were wary of spending time with him in case their association with the Snarglist's death worked against them later.

Snurf had attempted to ask of course but after his superior remembered the time with his father the rudeness of the response, especially the references to his dad's loss of status, made him give up quickly.

He reached under the desk for the reassurance of his desk ornament, hoping to eliminate the bitterness. Though not entirely successful it at least temporarily diverted his attention to something odd. He'd been lucky to get on board under the weight allowance, and without discarding any item of standard military kit. How odd, given its mass. He'd been weighed before receiving the kit, brought nothing *else* of his own, and the mothership was more than capable of lifting him, his kit, and any reasonable number of bars.

A knock on the door brought him back to the present.

“Sir, it's about to begin.”

Snurf checked the timer and, remembering the importance of inspiring confidence, in response: “Yes, it is,” adding, “thankyou. On my way.” He stowed his equipment quickly.

The sub-officer showed no concern, no outward sign of discomfort at the over-familiarity, a breach of protocol; her workload had reduced since the new officer arrived. The newcomer seemed harmless though, not exactly the best attribute for the newest member of the military upper-echelons.

So far Snurf's workload in integrating himself with the ship's requirements was high-enough that the importance of maintaining a certain separation, studiously observing others dealing with the subtleties of the chain of command, all absorbed the entirety of his waking hours.

He reached the Command Room, everything bathed in a purple light. His superior stated: "Seconds," ordered "Sit," then, after the shortest of pauses: "Observe only, then document, then do the maintenance. Respond."

"Yes sir," though his intention, was never voiced. The universe unfolded around them, blacked out, whited out, created checkerboard visual patterns against Snurf's by-now tightly-shut eyes, it twisted itself, formed and re-formed in frankly incomprehensible ways, then after what seemed like an eternity, collapsed, folding back into a comforting semblance of reality. It took forever, it took no time at all.

Shouted from what seemed a world away: "Coordinates checked!"

Snurf looked up and smiled, no, grimaced with an honest relief it was over, and promptly vomited.

The Vice-Sub-Snarglist looked across from the standing command console and shouted: "Begin!" and, as the crew began the shorter count, wearily, almost as an aside: "Tlur?"

"Yes sir?"

"He's going again."

"He is sir."

And he was.

"Get another cloth..."

Generations

Tim interrupted his son's work: "Would you like to go on a mission?"

"Do I have a choice? I mean dad, I *do* know what coming up in the training schedule."

"Good point. I'm impressed, that's quick."

"That's me."

"Do you remember son, when I explained how the stars work, how planets orbit and civilisations develop and then sometimes don't, how stars congregate together in galaxies, and--"

"And all I wanted to do was look up at the twinkling lights and coo?"

"You do. Good. Don't ever lose that sense of wonder when you get a command of your own. Don't let it cloud your judgment though, command is occasionally... difficult."

He thought and then continued: "My dad gave me a good grounding in zero-gravity basics, you're doing just fine. In fact you're ahead of me in a lot of other disciplines, and I'm certain your mo..."

"Dad?"

"Yes?"

"Shut up dad."

At that everyone in the Command Module laughed, especially the proud father.

"Number One, check the long range sensors please, it's time to have some fun with the boy."

Smiling: "Yes sir," and, some time later: "Clear." A pause: "Long-range scan is complete, and the wormhole is not exhibiting signs of impending portal activation."

Quietly, "Number One, turn off the gravity please," then even quieter, for his First Officer's ears only: "and turn off the blowers, it'll spice things up a bit."

Commander Vllum smiled, "Are you sure sir?"

"Yes, and please recheck the sensors, I..."

She first issued the computer the order to activate the wormhole. Never an easy task, the advance from the constant milestone checks required by version 6.0.6 to the precision of version 10.0.1 was very much welcomed.

Ultimately confident in her own abilities, her record unspotted, the Captain's repeated request seemed odd but she had, over the years, become accustomed to Humans' insecurities and inconsistencies, and their *insight*. The last attribute made no sense though, Humans are a mess.

Conciliatory, "Of course sir, I'll check again." So she did. A short time later, "Unless our entire sensor field is faulty there are no signs of any abnormal disturbance at the gateway."

Unspoken was the knowledge that the happened within and through the wormhole was at best a guess, a balancing of probabilities for even the most accomplished sensor operator. The last time any unsignalled ship had appeared here it didn't end well; the loss of life had been appalling, but then the incursion into Human-controlled space *had* been repulsed. Just.

She turned off the gravity. The viewscreen shifted focus, it shimmered. Vllum's brow furrowed. "Sir--"

Captain Hadron screamed into the comm: "GET THOSE BLOCKERS UP!" But it was too late. The Thorgons had returned in even greater, this-time overwhelming, numbers. Their first shots took out the starlight drive, surely condemning the crew to a life in space. Maybe their grandchildren would see Earth?

A second strike sliced away a significant portion of the command module. Death awaited anyone unsuited.

Captain Hadron screamed again, wordless, hopeless. It was of course pointless in the vacuum of space, his transceiver gone, but he nonetheless screamed. And then, as the training kicked in, weakly: "Parlay?"

The response, instant, as chilling as it was unexpected due to the loss of his radio: "No. Destruction." Then, leaving just enough time for the reality of the situation to sink in, "We will take what we require then destroy your ship. You have a choice: our transportation or the eternity of space."

At that the Vice-Sub-Snarglist muted all incoming communications and the outgoing channel to the Human.

"We have disabled the Human opposition with minimal loss of life. A success. Conflict 101, you might say." He guffawed, inordinately pleased the permanent record would indicate, with the albeit-inadvertent reference to the First Item, his Adherence to The Creed. And, to mask his pleasure at the situation, soberly: "We were sloppy in making the unnecessary second strike. That must not happen again"

"Yes sir."

"Recommendations?"

The lower-ranked officer thought for a moment, understandable given his lack of *familiarity* with standard operating procedures: “Contain and dispose of the debris field, order the opposition personnel to assemble in a surface module, close in, cut its side away, extract only the living.”

"Aren't you forgetting..."

Snurf thought quickly, not wanting to prolong this, "We should have our Collection crew bring over their food and meds and medical equipment?"

“Good, good. One thing. Their metals, energy stores?”

“No need, we are at full capacity for this phase of the mission. We... you planned this mission well sir.”

“Very good. Destruction then.”

The Vice-Sub-Snarglist reactivated communications with the Human: “All Humans will leave your ship, which we will then cause to cease to exist.”

“You--”

The Thorgon muted both channels between him and the Human, turned to the lower ranked officer and on his way out of the room, ordered: “Take over. Implement.”

Surprised, given the change in orders: “Sir?”

“I must go and rest. And, Ag-AckAck...”

“Sir?”

“When it's done, fix the outer airlock.” And he was gone.

“Sir.”

A pause, a breath. Snurf opened the channels again and listened.

Almost inaudibly: “...kind of evil would...! How can I hear them, it's busted, it should be impossible!” Then louder: “Talk to me, you monsters, can we salvage nothing of value to us?!”

'Disbelief', 'redemption', 'family photo': words almost-meaningless to the Thorgons. 'Destruction' on the other hand: familiar, routine, comforting almost.

Tim Hadron, tired of shouting without any hope of a response, stared at the faceplate readout. He hated ultimatums, whether private or of planetary significance. Unfortunately the readout simply stared back.

The voice again startled him, “Human, it is time.”

Conscious of his responsibility to his ship and its inhabitants he responded in the only way possible, “Yes. Do it.”

The Thorgon mothership shifted position imperceptibly, in the manner of an immovable object resisting an irresistible object with a slightly unequal but certainly opposite reaction to itself. But it moved. Slowly.

Snurf looked over at Tlur and arched an eyebrow indicating his extreme impatience. In reality he wished for this phase to end so he could sleep; trips through wormholes took him hours to recover from.

Tlur pretended to examine the airlock remote readouts.

Adjustments

The post-attack phase of Thorgon conflict had no element of command- or crew-level self-congratulation, no feeling of relief. Not usually.

Indeed it was expected that, unless external and unexpected aggression caught them unawares, their superiority in numbers and tactics would prevail. Minor variations from the standard approach and a stealth when exploring new systems ensured continuing successes.

Snurf opened The Manual, selected 'Space > Conflict > Completed > Opposing > Disabled > Races >' and paused. No 'Humans' yet.

The crushing realisation arrived: the earlier orders 'observe, document, maintenance' seemed at the time mundane, suited to his status. But how clever! His commander had shifted responsibility. The benefits to the vastly-more experienced officer were obvious now: if Snurf succeeded here, *his* name would not be put forward for honours or added to The Manual's list of contributors; if Snurf failed it would be the end of Snurf's military career.

He thought for a moment of simply giving up but, however much he wished for no more wormholes, bringing shame to his family just would not sit right. The sudden onset of a desire for revenge though there was no other way. His father obviously *knew* that a placement here would...

Without a strategy though, he would need help. But who here could he trust? He voiced the sound of this few moments of reflection before realising it had happened, "Hmmm..."

Something about the lower-ranked officer troubled him. Maybe it was the way she reacted to the senior officer's commands; maybe it was the way she appeared to be observing Snurf, but that could have been a military protocol for new officers. She *was* efficient though, and their commander didn't notice the same things Snurf had learned to over the years. He made a decision.

"Tur?"

She looked across.

"How would you like an offer of a promotion?"

Her eyes narrowed, brow furrowed and in a low voice and, not so much as a question as the preamble to an upcoming negotiation: "You need help?"

Ignoring, rather than oblivious to, the tone, he waved his hand at the text, hoping the moment would pass: "Yes. No entry for Humans in The Manual. Recommendations?"

Not to be dissuaded: "Yes, of course." And after the shortest of pauses: "...for the extra letter."

Snurf made a show of ignoring the unexpected ambition of the other officer. He needed her expertise. "Let us begin."

"First," she began, "a sensor sweep for weapons" then, grinning, "Contain debris, order assembly, close, cut a hole, extract only living personnel." A telling pause and: "We are already closing on the Human ship, the crew of course have standing orders."

"Of course."

"However you must do the rest. Deal with the Humans. Sir."

"Indeed. Implement your plan."

"For the letter."

He nodded, resigned to the inevitability of this onslaught.

Tlur activated the internal announcement channel: "Crew, the plan: The Under-Deputy-Vice-Sub-Snarglist will shortly instruct the vanquished to assemble close to the outside of their ship. You will net the near-range area for debris, erect containment then cut open the side and collect all the living beings. Then we kill their ship."

"Oh, and a planet for whichever of you catches their leader. Don't fight over it."

Everyone listening throughout the ship broke into spontaneous laughter. One day it would happen that a Thorgon crew member *would* win that prize. One day, just not today.

The cleanup began.

"Ok sir, your turn."

"So it is."

And, after examining the ship, he made his decision.

"Humans, assemble in the section of your transport with the large window currently facing my vehicle. If you have protection, wear it, exposure to space is unforgiving. Do not think of hiding, your transport will be destroyed soon. I repeat, it *will* be destroyed soon."

He muted his pickup and, turning to Tlur: "Would you repeat that?"

"No. Too many words but it's usually wiser than fewer, given our Manual's lack of 'Human' guidance."

Unmuting, "Go now," his final command to the Humans.

A few minutes later, the focused life scan completed, the Out team cut away the Human ship window. Everyone who, but moments before, was safe inside the familiar habitat were scooped up by the Thorgon containment and collection nets and swiftly moved to the mothership.

“Report?”

“All going according to your plan sir, with the garbage collection due to start right about... now.”

And, after a short time: “Are you recording?”

“Yes, of course. “ And with a rueful grin. “I must edit later.”

“Of course.”

“Thankyou.”

“Not now.”

Snurf watched the viewscreen, operated those sensors deemed safe-enough for him by his subordinates, and let the crew perform.

And then something unexpected happened, a something not predicted by The Manual, and entirely outside the previous protocols for such times.

That 'something' began slowly, built gradually, proved... interesting to say the least.

Reunited

Spinning slowly through both the physical and emotional voids into which he'd been thrown, views alternating between the infinity of space and the Thorgon mothership and its support craft lazily collecting debris from around his crippled ship, he had time to think. Not to plan, but to think. Not how to get out of this mess, not of the future that might be, might have been, but of the last few years with his son.

His command had certainly been enhanced by the boy's presence, not that he'd shared the routine of decision-making, of course not. It was gratifying that his offspring had that quickness of mind, allied to an aptitude for making the right choices. Eventually. Improving.

His son's honesty, aside from that one incident with the toilet, was a revelation. At an age at which boundaries were routinely tested... of course he *did* test, but he instinctively knew his dad's and the crew's limits. Tim hoped little Timmy wouldn't inherit his own shortcomings, the worst of which was that occasionally-dangerous sidestepping of the rulebook...

Roused from his reverie in an instant as the net strung between catcher arms at the nose of the small... no, no human yet knew what the Thorgon ships were. Taxonomies, classifications, no, that was simply too soon.

Whatever it was it scooped him up, and nestled him in an oddly cocoon-like, hammock-like embrace. The motion, though at first disconcertingly soothing, changed suddenly, as the disparity between the direction of his momentum and the ship's leisurely shift, thrust him against one of the arms. He blacked out, not so much due to the collision but the combination of it, the lack of time to absorb all of this, and...

Jolted back to consciousness by the too-bright lights, the noise, the arms pulling at him, and the smell. Oh the smell! Bitter, metallic, with an undertone of something unlike anything any human had ever previously experienced.

Bang, back to reality. He looked around. "Have you seen..." was met by blank looks, awkward responses by everyone Tim Hadron asked. Not one soul could recall seeing the boy after the Command Module was breached; the speed of subsequent events had simply overwhelmed everyone.

Even Vllum had no answer, which was in itself remarkable. Always the voice of reason though, she ventured, "Wait, our captors may routinely record for later analysis."

Part-sarcastically, mainly in hope, "I shall ask their Captain then, man-to--"

A siren blared, all the lights came on at once. The door opened, evidently to an airlock and there, blinking nervously, in the lights. stood Timmy.

“Good to see you Dad,” and nervously, “you are wanted, back there. No, I don't know. They said to look behind you.”

A quick hug and then he looked. Though he couldn't be sure, the combination of the twin-door airlock ahead with an absence of visible controls on the nearer door, and what *had* to be an outer hull door behind them, filled him with dread.

To not alarm the others he nodded at the door and spoke one word quietly to Timmy, “Space?”

“Yes dad. I'm sorry.”

Before the Captain had chance to think, his son said “You'd better go, I reckon they want you to see something bad happen.”

Tim Hadron stepped into the airlock. The door closed behind, sealing against the bulkhead with a dull thud. A slot opened in the door ahead, containing what looked like a nose breather. From a sound plate above, “Put it on.” Without hesitation, he did; flexible straps behind the head ensuring a snug fit. “Interesting”, he thought, “are they like us, did they quickly adapt using one of us as...?”

The door opened, slowly at first. Impatient, he tried to give it a helping hand, but even pushing *with* a hydraulic actuator doesn't do much.

Thankfully not for the first time in his life, Captain Tim Hadron stepped into the unknown.

Questions

"As stated in my order we will take what we require then destroy your vessel, once our sensor and debris sweep is completed. Tell me, what are its energy storage and containment capabilities?" Snurf looked up from his written instructions, the Human still emerging into his first Thorgon ship.

"What? You expect me to give you our starship drive specifications, just like that?!" Incensed, Hadron continued, "I..." then his eyes narrowed, an awful realisation dawning, "No."

Though inexperienced in military matters the Thorgon, an effective negotiator, drove home his order, "Yes. It serves two purposes: First," nodding towards the airlock, "your people will continue to live a normal lifespan and second, we must know the blast radius."

"Well, if my transceiver worked I could instruct the ship computer, if it's still operational, to make the data available."

Snurf turned, "First Officer, turn off the short-range comms filter."

"Yes sir." Tlur responded, wondering about the unexpected title, then, "Done."

"Done." Snurf repeated.

Hadron briefly considered transmitting the autodestruct codes before the realisation of its futility in the face of the plan the Thorgon had already stated twice. He tapped his transceiver and started to instruct the computer to transfer the basic power characteristics before pausing. "Er... What's the use, you won't be able to decode this anyway."

"Transmit, we can."

"How?"

"We can. Do it."

So Hadron asked the computer, realising the enemy *must* have known about the ship's architecture before the strike. The computer complied.

Snurf turned again, "First Officer, restore the short-range comms filter."

"Yes sir." Tlur responded again, now realising her unexpected title was a field promotion, at least until the return of the Vice-Sub-Snarglist, "Done."

"Next, we have collected everything we can from your food and medical stores. You will tell us how to store them. Do you know?"

Hadron snorted then reconsidered, "No. I will need to speak to my crew."

"Of course."

"But what are you taking from my ship? Weapons, fuel, alloys, what?"

"Next, how many of breeding age are, were on board your ship?"

"What?! No, answer my question!"

The Thorgon looked over at Tlur and, reminding her of their recent assignment, "Is the loading bay outer airlock door maintenance completed?"

"No sir, the attack quite naturally took precedence over what was previously deemed non-essential maintenance."

"We must find time then, when the Human's," he paused, "when the Human's evaluation is terminated."

Hadron, quite naturally given the gravity of the present situation, took longer than a moment to process the implications. Though relieved of command of his ship he still had an duty to his crew and its passengers. What he did next would likely determine all their fates.

"Well?" The Thorgon interrupted the Human's thoughts without waiting for evidence of alertness, "How many breeders?"

"I... don't know. It's not a question I've ever been asked before. Not relevant to my command. Why did you ask?"

Snurf filed that response away. Actually, though *every* response was being recorded, he was following his Vice-Sub-Snarglist's orders, 'observe, document, maintenance.'

His rapidly-coalescing plot contained an important prerequisite: the removal of his superior officer and the addition of *his* name to The Manual. Until that happened though, he must adhere to documented orders.

To usurp command was not entirely without precedent. This apparent conflict with other Items of The Creed could be swept away by one: 'Item 601 of The Thorgon Creed: Examine the past, compare its norms unfavourably with those of the present.'

The Under-Deputy-Vice-Sub-Snarglist's focus snapped back to the problem immediately in front of him. Time was running out. "Human," he leant forward, "I already spoke to your son, but need you to say it. What is your title and full name, family first?"

Sarcastically: "Not my serial number too?"

"No, it is irrelevant here. Respond."

"Captain, Hadron, Timothy."

The data confirmed, the Thorgon commanded, "Order your crew to be ready for restraint fitting then movement to your new quarters. More detailed instructions will follow during your Orientation." He looked across to Tlur, who nodded. "Human. Dismissed."

Further attempts at dialogue by Captain Hadron were rebuffed. He thought of staying to observe his captors but concluded it best to check on his crew's status. He turned back and walked through the still-open ship-side airlock door. As it closed and sealed he removed the mask and placed it in the slot.

The door ahead opened to a chaotic scene, in sharp contrast to the calm of the command room. From shouted variations on "Do *we* have to put these on?" through "What *are* these infernal things?" through to "Hello again dad."

"Son, they have our food and meds, that'll allow us to check our injured and find a way of stopping the food from spoiling. They'll have quarters prepared, but their Captain mentioned 'Orientation.' Any ideas?"

"Nope, but it sounds like the first day at a new school."

"Heh! Great analogy son, we'll use it as just that, our first day at..."

A siren blared, all the lights came on at once. The door opened.

"Humans, enter the inner airlock. Masks will be unnecessary."

All looked to the Captain. "Yes." following up with an uncharacteristically imprecise, "We need our stuff." At the wry looks from those closer to him he shrugged: "Do you *see* my rank insignia?"

Despite the unknown ahead, most laughed.

Transition

The door to the left was already open, a light flashing above. They filed through into a large room uncomfortably reminiscent of their ship's galley/common-use room. No windows in this, but a large black viewscreen at one end, halfway up the wall. Tables and chairs arranged in lines along the side walls and, between the eating area and the kitchen at the opposite end, sturdy boxes, each taller than a man, and with lifting lugs at each corner. Presumably their stores?

Captain Hadron entered the galley, the last to pass through the ship side and inner airlock doors, both shut and sealed.

"Everyone, listen!" He commanded. "I don't know how much time we have before what I've been told is an 'orientation.' Divide into teams. Medical: check for any injured personnel. The crest, find the refrigerators and the freezers, store the meds and the food, and report on total stocks. Figure out the food heaters once that's done. Forget about establishing perimeter security, our hosts can deal with that." There he grinned. "Right, I'm sitting down for a while, get to it! Over to you Number One."

"Thankyou sir," said Commander V'lum and turning to the assembled faces: "Carry on. Any questions?"

There was no need, any unlocked doors with storage potential were opened already, the container doors swung aside and their contents in the process of being categorised and put away. So V'lum, content that no further input was necessary, sat.

Timmy *didn't* sit. Positioned mid-way along the chain stowing supplies he felt, was *useful*. He looked across for a moment to his dad, who he found deep in conversation with his First Officer, and then returned to the work.

"What next sir?" said V'Lum.

"Sit and wait for orientation. Timmy thinks it's going to be something like the first day at school."

V'lum arched one brow. "Sir? Really?"

Hadron shrugged: "Yup."

As they watched the Humans, Snurf and Tlur talked. Snurf led with "We have a problem. When, the Vice-Sub-Snarglist awakes from his..." and here he chose his word carefully: "awakes from his," and here Snurf coughed, "*rest*, what have we to show him?"

Examining her status screen only to delay the inevitable she tapped her index finger down the list: "We will soon have set the last of the explosive charges to vaporise the Human ship. We have your

initial report on the extraction. The Humans' orientation is starting momentarily, and," lifting her finger, "the outer airlock door will require a final sign-off."

"But our maintenance... the door is not..."

"Yes. Then we must fix it so that it works as we wish. Now?"

Snurf felt faint, felt the contents of his stomach rising, not that there was anything left so soon after the passage through the wormhole. The only possible response now: "Yes, now. Get the Engineer, we'll meet at the... we'll all need suits. And tethers. Oh yes, first show the Humans what they must do to..."

"Yes sir." Tlur complied, setting up the prerecorded instructions, and off they went to prepare.

Airlock

Snurf knocked, "Sir?" He waited a respectful time before knocking again. "Sir?"

A muffled response, "Come," and as Snurf entered, "is it done?"

"Yes. The debris field is clear, the Humans are undergoing Orientation, the charges are set and my interim report is completed. The entry in The Manual is awaiting your approval, and..."

Snurf swallowed, "the airlock maintenance is done, also awaiting your inspection."

The Vice-Sub-Snarglist rubbed his eyes, "Good, good--"

"We should go now, whilst the Humans are contained the safety of your ship is something I am not prepared to compromise on. Especially given the expected blast wave as we destroy their vehicle, and..."

The mocking response was deserved after the impertinence, but still hurt, "Yes sir Ag-AckAck. Sir."

Snurf's resolve hardened, was just about airtight, iron-clad, and then his superior laughed.

"Ag-AckAck, how would you like an offer of a promotion?"

Snurf groaned inwardly as thoughts of failure resurfaced; was it too late, would Tlur back down if he... and was the record adequately sanitised?

"Yes sir, of course."

"Consequent on my name in the Manual."

"Well, obviously sir."

Snurf's path was now clear. He watched as the still-recovering superior slowly suited up, then, "This way sir."

"Lead."

"Yes sir, I shall."

All the way to the airlock Snurf avoided eye contact with the crew lest they guessed the plan. As they arrived he walked into the loading bay first, not entirely according to protocol, but his previous order *had* been to lead...

"Show me."

The Manual's airlock test procedure required a full-sized, empty transport container to be swung against the door; a test of seal integrity, pressure and strain sensor function, and whether the safety interlocks functioned as-designed. It was of course expensive if the door or the container

was damaged beyond repair, one reason why the Space Safety Accounting Subcommittee continually looked unfavourably on this, instead advocating computer simulations.

The Engineer always looked forward to these tests though, a matter of professional pride, for both parents working for the container production company.

Tlur stood to one side of the door, checked her suit time readout and nodded.

The Engineer walked with the Vice-Sub-Snarglist to the opposite side of the container, and he released the latch holding the mass against gravity, "One of the perks of command, and it's more fun than pressing buttons all day!"

The container didn't disappoint, accelerating all the way to the door. A siren sounded, the lights all came on at once, and within a fraction of a second the whole ship shuddered as the container impacted the outer door.

Snurf's attention snapped to Tlur, now holding a dull metallic object against a non-contact safety sensor. He double-checked his tether was connected to one of the many fixtures around the walls.

The external disturbance had shifted the container's flight just-enough that it impacted the control board. The door shuddered against the twin impacts and shifted ever-so-slightly in its mounts. The inherent design flaw of a single electric control with a fragile non-interlocked mechanical swinging arm designed by committee, and Tlur overriding the proximity sensor, gave the computer all it required to open the door. Fast!

And then Snurf saw it. The Engineer had fastened the Vice-Sub-Snarglist's tether to the container! Reaching the full extent of its length as the container neared the termination of its arc it snapped him towards the fast-opening door. As he reached it the speed of his flight increased along with the pull of the outrushing atmosphere. Those unequal and opposite reactions, of the container again swinging in and him swinging out, it could only mean one thing.

Despite now expecting the outcome, each of the three looked on aghast as their commanding officer frantically attempted to hold his suit together. Taking the precaution of disabling his medium-range priority communicator not only condemned him to a certain fate but spared the three later nightmares.

Then the pressure wave took him and he was gone.

"Emergency! Commanding officer off ship, emergency scan!" Very loud, very shrill inside his suit, Snurf shouted the alert.

Back to self-preservation. Tlur had evidently briefed the Engineer who, perhaps due to the inadequate preparation time, struggled to reach and activate the 'Close' control. "Done," nodding to Tlur, was all she said. Then at least.

It *was* done.

The door had closed, resealed, the bay repressurised, and it was soon safe to unsuit, not that they did.

"What, how?!" Snurf gasped as they ran to the command room, "What, how?"

"Standard operating procedures sir," was all Tlur said.

"Scan for his beacon! Scan for life! NOW!" They were already doing it of course; no-one but the three would guess the outcome Snurf wanted. "Anything?"

"Hold..." then a puzzled. "No signs of life but the beacon is inside the ship. Security, go to the Human containment section, follow the Vice-Sub-Snarglist's beacon signal!"

Shortly after the report came back, "Nothing, he's not here. Are you sure?"

"Yes sir!"

To the command crew: "Where *else* could he be? Quickly!"

One suggestion came quickly, "Outside, on the hull?"

Tlur took over: "Security, hull sweep, use a Collector!"

The beacon signal proved more useful outside the ship and the Collector crews quickly located and retrieved the battered body.

"Straight to the Med bay, start life support, we'll be right there."

"Not much chance he's still... is there?" Snurf wondered out loud.

Tlur again: "Standard Operating Procedures sir."

After climbing out of their suits and on the short walk to the medical bay, the silence was broken only by Tlur's inquiry, "Are you ready for this?"

"What, a dead body? No!"

"No, the aftermath of this."

"My father will be pleased. Surprised but pleased," he shuddered, and they entered the medical bay's airlock.

The ship's Chief Medical Officer greeted them after the regulation decontamination. Well not so much greeted as motioned them to enter, starting with "He's dead. It'll be from either the effects of the rapid suit decompression or the massive blunt trauma forces as he impacted the hull. What should we do, autopsy, preserve for Home Planet interment? What?"

"What does The Manual say?"

One of the medical staff checked. "Nothing, the regulations surrounding the chain of command expect that a senior officer will not be exposed to any substantial danger," and, somewhat ruefully, "that's what *we're* here for? We preserve then."

Another medic then asked. "How did it happen?"

A curt response: "Freak accident. It'll all be in the report."

Tlur broke in, "We need to convene the Succession Committee."

Everyone looked at her then at Snurf, knowing it was a formality, but all not relishing the prospect.

As they left, she whispered to the almost-Vice-Sub-Snarglist, "An interestingly sudden field promotion wouldn't you say?"

"Indeed." For there was not much else *to* be said about this.

Prison?

Timmy needed a rest. His exertions while helping out, thinking he needed to perform as the Captain's son, had exhausted him. He'd not ordered anyone about, not tried to show how special he was, but expected to have more work than given to the others.

One of the others had told him to "Go and have a break! There's no point in rushing, tiring yourself out, we've no idea how long we'll be here." And she was right.

"Dad?" he said, falling into a chair, "Did you get any clues how long we're to be held here? And what are their plans? Will we have enough food? And--"

A siren sounded, the lights dimmed and the viewscreen turned on.

"Welcome, Humans. This presentation is designed to inform and educate you, to outline your new responsibilities as valued Thorgon subjects. Please sit down."

As everyone found somewhere to sit the narrator continued, "No questions will be permitted. However, it will not be necessary to take notes, this recording will be made available on-demand later along with supporting materials."

"As your civilisation will perhaps have basic rules to prevent a descent into chaos when exposed to various internal or external stimuli, so does ours. You will be expected to adhere to all rules to which a Thorgon must. That is we *must* follow. We Thorgons have a distinct advantage over races like yours, races we welcome into our sphere of influence; our entire *lives* from birth are governed by these rules. Think of it like a language, with often subtle, nuanced interactions between the rules. A native speaker has that advantage *almost* from birth."

Here a picture of a book appeared on the viewscreen.

"This book is called 'The Thorgon Creed'. It defines what we are and how we interact. As previously inferred *you* will be given *some* latitude, and rule transgressions will not be dealt with in the same manner of that applicable to Thorgons. Over time that will change. Why? We do recognise that The Creed can be the subject of a lifetime's study. And well, we are not monsters."

Most assembled laughed at that, with emotions spanning the range from genuine appreciation of the humour to a predictable sardonic response.

"You will all be given a personal copy of The Creed. You *will* study it *and* live by it."

A photo of the now-stowed contents of one of the containers appeared on-screen.

"You have food and medicines. Both will be insufficient to sustain you throughout the remainder of your lives. We have the means to grow your food and recreate your drugs, but your expertise will be necessary."

Some of the more perceptive looked around the room at this last statement, this revelation. The question 'How?' hung in the air whilst they awaited the end of the monologue.

It ended simply enough.

"You are free to leave this area. You must not enter the Command or the Security Rooms without permission. That is all."

The viewscreen darkened, to silence. The question 'What?' now hung in the air, competing for attention with the recent 'How?'

The stunned silence was broken by the muffled thuds of the door bolts being withdrawn.

"Well..." was all Timmy could say.

Disappointment

As the show ended a Thorgon crewmember had entered and, to the Humans' disbelief, had begun handing everyone a detailed map of the mothership and their personal copy of The Creed. He had issued one instruction, "Go sleep," and left.

Captain Hadron issued only two subsequent instructions: "The time is now 22:00 EST, assemble here at 07:00. And have a good rest, who knows what tomorrow will bring!"

On the way to their sleeping quarters not a single Thorgon gave the slightest outward sign this was anything but a regular event on board ship; barely a glance went their way, requests for assistance were answered fully but with an economy of effort.

All found a place to sleep. The rooms were spartan though comfortable, with similar bunks to those on their old ship, and the nearby washing and toilet facilities had controls familiar-enough to ensure not too many accidents.

The morning after they assembled, most arriving early, and ate breakfast. There were no AutoChefs here of course, but their cooking skills hadn't *quite* been lost.

At 8:00 (Earth Standard Time) Snurf entered the place that was no longer a prison, fresh after an uninterrupted sleep period. The crew hadn't yet had time to swap his rank insignia, but that was inconsequential. What mattered was the time his senior staff had taken to educate the new commanding officer, especially those personnel with more experience in inter-species matters.

"Captain Hadron, please assemble your senior staff and meet me in the Briefing Room. I will take the time to discuss your stay aboard this ship and, briefly, the time that follows."

When they arranged themselves around the table and before the briefing began, Snurf asked one question. A good question. He nodded at Timmy, "Captain, why is this child here?"

A good answer, the embodiment of simplicity followed, "My son is training to become an officer."

The Thorgon merely accepted the Hum's reply and continued, "Let us begin. If you have a question please begin by stating your rank and name. I have a good memory for protocol."

"Now, you may be wondering why we attacked your ship without any provocation. You might be wondering why it was subsequently destroyed. You *will* be wondering what is to become of you."

Mumbled "Yes"'s rippled round the room.

"We disabled and subsequently destroyed your ship because your continued presence at this end of this wormhole would make this ship's journey home utterly impossible. The timing of its return is absolutely critical.

We brought you to *our* ship because..." An involuntary shudder at the recent events not entirely hidden he continued, "we find the loss of even a single life distasteful. It is regrettable that some of yours are," and here he struggled for the right word, "...dead. In any event we are here to talk not about the past but about the now and the future. Your service--"

Captain Hadron interrupted, "We've not spent much time working out what to say but as our aim *was* to return to Earth we should lead with that. What are our chances?"

"Zero. I will explain why to you later, Captain."

"Why not now?"

"Later, Captain."

"Why keep us alive if we're such a threat?"

"You have your uses, as you will see once we reach Thorgon Prime." At the puzzled looks from around the table, "Our home world."

"I recall in our first, er... meeting you mentioned restraints. What?"

"Ah. A pragmatic decision; we simply don't have enough. The previous..." he checked his speech, thinking, "No Snurf, they need not know!" and continued to the room, "We are unfamiliar with your ship numbers, *ours* are run by far fewer personnel. But I digress, I must tell you more before..." And here his brow furrowed, "before we re-enter the wormhole for the return to Thorgon Prime."

He continued, "When a newborn Thorgon takes its first breath we say something which is appropriate for you at this, the dawn of your service. Every Thorgon hears this: 'Humans, may your observance of The Creed set your path through a life of greatness.' Your lives will be improved beyond measure *if* you strive to understand its nine basic disciplines. An understanding of the whole is not absolutely necessary. However..."

A pause for effect gives the listener time to mentally shift from passive to active absorption of new facts. Here Snurf hoped the premise was true.

"Now you may think you can simply carry on as Humans. No. It has already been proven that your species *must* adapt to its new home, as failure to do so promotes discontent; your previous civilisation's strategies are therefore useless."

This time a "What?" cascaded around the table.

In response, "You will do well to appreciate these words. This is not a threat. As I said, we know."

"How?" responded V'lum, "Precisely *how* do you know? "

"I wish to tell your Captain first, Commander V'lum. You must respect my wishes in this. *He* must then choose how much to tell you."

"No, it is the very least you can do, tell us!"

"No, the very least I can do is to keep you alive, and--"

He looked down at his buzzing communicator, "It is time, I must prepare," and left abruptly.

Speculation

"What could he possibly have meant?", "Zero chance of seeing Earth?", "They know all about Humans already?", "What the...", the words tumbled out. They talked amongst themselves for a while, though no consensus was reached. Having no answers the Captain simply let the words come. Eventually though, he said simply, "Enough talk people. It seems to me we should wait this out, and not do anything, um... to make things more difficult than they already are. I'd better go to see their Captain, he did seem to say he would only tell *me* about Earth, and how and *what* they know of us."

The words came again. Holding up a hand to stem the tide, "I'll see what he has to say." He stood and strode out.

On the walk to the Command Room he realised he didn't actually *know* where the Captain would be. No-one stopped his progress until he reached the door. A handprint sensor stared at him. He stared back for a moment, looked for a button to press, found none, so knocked. And waited. Ship's doors don't transmit the forces from knuckles though, so he had to wait for a while. Eventually though, just as he was about to find a crew member, or to give up, he placed his hand on the sensor. The door opened, "How?!"

Tlur looked across and motioned him to a chair next to the door. "We took your handprint as you entered that first time, as you got the mask, incidentally a very useful distraction, it is utterly useless."

He sat, mind racing, still surprised by his ease of entry, and waited for... for what, he really didn't know.

Snurf pulled himself away from his deliberations, "Good morning Captain. We are currently making preparations to return to Thorgon Prime. Would you like to stay here until we arrive?"

"I... I'm not sure. I'd like to speak to my crew before it happens."

"No need, we are informing them right now. First Officer, take over."

Hadron continued, "Ah. Ok. I... I can see you are busy Captain, so I cannot speak about... Is there anything I can do here?"

Tlur replied, "No, you will almost certainly get in our way if you try. You can observe if you wish, or leave."

"Can I ask *you* about--"

"No, you cannot."

"How long until you open the wormhole and we--?"

"Soon. Our Navigation Officer is checking our position, attitude and speed now. Our Engineer has confirmed we have enough stored matter to expand the opening and also enough energy available to protect our passage." A lopsided grin, nodding in the direction of Snurf, "Enjoy the ride."

Snurf looked worried. Returning home as Vice-Sub-Snarglist, the inevitable inquiry, the committees... it was nothing compared to the misery he knew was coming. He hated the wormholes. *Hated.*

The Human Captain was talking with Tlur, and both looked across. He smiled weakly, a vain attempt to lift his mood and inspire confidence. He failed.

Hadron nodded, adopted his 'serious' expression, "Not a fan of the kaleidoscopic effects and being ripped apart and badly put back together?"

"Is anyone?" Snurf responded, feeling weak already.

"Have you tried alco--" and the universe unfolded around them, blacked out, whited out, created those patterns against Snurf's tightly-shut eyes, it twisted, formed, re-formed, collapsed, and eventually folded back into reality. It took forever, it took no time at all.

Shouted from what seemed half a universe away: "Coordinates checked!" Nearly home."

Snurf looked up, grimaced, straightened to try to fool himself into thinking as he was now in charge it would look bad if he... and promptly vomited. *This* time though he'd brought a towel along for the ride.

Knowledge

Snurf resolved to speak to Captain Hadron. He cleaned himself up, changed into a fresh duty uniform and took a deep, deep breath. Putting this off would only make things more difficult in the long term, it would be better to do it now, to keep all the negative stimuli close together. Knowing what he had to tell the Human, something particularly troubling, he asked the Security Officer to monitor his discussion via a dedicated link into his communicator, and to be ready to intervene should things escalate.

He checked the ship's Machine, located the the Captain in his quarters, and set off. He found the door open, the Human discussing the events of the last couple of days with his son. Rather than simply walk in he coughed and, "Captain? Indeed to speak to you, we have unfinished business."

"Come in, take a seat."

"Can I--"

"My son stays," Hadron senior smiled, "please begin. I suspect I'm not going to like it much though."

"How long have you been away from your home world, Earth, Terra, what do you prefer?"

"Earth is fine. We've been away for... how long Timmy?"

"Nearly four years dad."

The Thorgon took a deep breath, closed his eyes and started, "You picked the wrong wormhole. The one we found you at led of course directly to the Thorgon system. The remainder of our fleet is scheduled to reach Earth during this Command cycle." Rather than wait to let the Humans absorb this news he continued, "Once there they will collect all our planetary resource extraction personnel, terminate mining operations, collect any un-transported cargo, and then return to our homeworld. It will take only about twenty Command cycles to complete."

Both Hadrons' mouths flapped uselessly so Snurf continued, "We Thorgons started operations there fewer than 4 years ago. Four of your planet's years."

Stunned, Tim Hadron couldn't speak. Timmy though ventured a question, "What about the people?! I..."

Snurf waited what he judged to be a respectful time before replying, "Those who we could, they've all gone, we had time to--"

"What, *gone*, what kind of monsters *are* you!!" The Captain interrupted. He rose to attack the Thorgon but Timmy stood between them.

"No dad, let their Captain finish. Please."

His imploring gaze succeeded in calming his father's rage, at least for now.

Snurf could empathise with the Human, to a point. Nothing bad had ever happened *to* Thorgon, nothing existed in the entirety of the Historical Record. *His* experience was at a much smaller scale. When Gibflib had to take that last trip to the medics he went along too. Not because it was his duty to, but as her friend. He held her paw and looked into her eyes as the anaesthetic was given, and waited with her until he was certain it was all over.

His expression must have changed because Timmy saw *something* behind the diplomat's mask, but the Thorgon couldn't allow his guard to drop far, not here, not now.

He shook his head to clear it and began to explain how they'd arrived at the planet years before, and chosen it as a likely candidate for mining operations. After a periodic drone reconnaissance mission detected an increase in radiation a more detailed survey was carried out.

It transpired that a charismatic but completely insane leader had destabilised a number of economic systems with the unfortunate effect, not predicted by the man himself, of a number of minor regional spats spilling over into international conflict. Though he was removed from power due to, of all things, lying about his expense claims, the damage was irreversible. Nuclear weapons were deployed to sensitive areas and, in response to poorly-timed terrorist incidents, launched. The loss of life was...

Timmy said nothing even as Snurf finished. Tim Hadron said not much, just, "What happened to the *people*?"

"We sent Ark ships."

"What, like in the movies? Really?! How many?"

"Three."

"Three, is that all?!"

"Dad..."

The room fell silent.

Snurf waited until he was sure the Captain would *remain* mute before deciding to leave. At the door he beckoned to the young man and spoke softly, "Timmy, when your father is ready to talk, please let him know I will attempt to answer his questions. I recognise it can't be easy. Was he born there?"

"Yes Captain, he, I..."

At that they parted.

True to his word, when Hadron was ready Snurf *made* time. In truth he was glad of the diversion; there wasn't much for him to do until they neared his homeworld. The routine established for planetary rendezvous was handled by the ship's Machine, the rest by his crew. The right magnitude and length of engine burn at the right time, centres of mass shifted to within acceptable limits, contingency energy level projections monitored... and the recovery from his wormhole trip seemed to be taking longer than the last.

"Thanks for coming to see me Captain. What would you like to know?"

"Would 'Everything' be impossible?"

"Well, it might take a while longer..."

"Let's start then."

So they talked.

It turned out that not everyone wanted to leave Earth, which might seem a little odd given the Thorgon's wide-ranging exploitation of the planet's easiest-to extract metals, minerals, even fossil fuels. No-one had yet calculated the effects of this by-necessity asymmetric removal of mass, to determine its level of Sol-orbit destabilisation. No-one thought it would end well and in fact, some didn't care when, or if, it would end badly.

The Thorgons had imposed one condition. Just one condition in return for removal of large numbers of Earth dwellers, their livestock and other dependent organisms from a doomed environment, to be resettled on an Earth-like planet outside Thorgon Prime's orbit, a planet close to the completion of its loosely-termed 'habitable' 1st-stage terraforming operations. The condition was a small price to pay, and yet bigger than most could bear.

The condition imposed In exchange for their altruism (and, of course the ores and other things) in giving Humanity, no *these* Humans this fresh start?

A small thing really.

None of the accumulated wisdom of Humanity written down throughout the ages would be allowed on board; none of the sciences, no scholarly articles nor even the most outlandish pseudo-scientific ramblings, and of course none of the applied sciences. None of the arts, whether painted or sculpted or written out as poetry or prose. None of the religious texts, tracts or iconography. No recorded music or song. No paper-based or electronic documents *or* the means to store them; *none* of it would accompany them to the new world.

The reason for the decision was as pragmatic and sensible as the Thorgons either when resolving or when initiating conflict. Stability. Their reasoning was impeccable, given the recent carnage across Earth. It would of course take a few generations to work out but Thorgons are, as a whole,

patient. So whilst most Humans didn't like it one bit, a trade-off too awful to even contemplate, enough did.

Bravery didn't enter the minds of those leaving, and no-one called them brave. Idealism wasn't much in evidence either, and so no-one called them idealistic. Choices were made but it began and ended with a basic Human need, that of self-preservation.

Though The Earth was no longer the only place on which Humans lived, the planet was more than 'Home' for even those who had never seen, nor would ever see it. It was the fundamental hub, the symbolic cradle of the Human Race.

And they'd messed it up.

Committee

"The subcommittee to select the ship's interim replacement Vice-Sub-Snarglist is convened. Decisions are subject to ratification by the Personnel Selection Committee on Thorgon Prime, currently out of reach this close to the wormhole.

"Present, representatives from Administration, Communications, Engineering, Galley/ Housekeeping, Medical, Navigation, Security, Weapons, and myself. Machine, record the names, correct titles.

"Also present, though in a silent, non-voting capacity, the single candidate, Under-Deputy-Vice-Sub-Snarglist Ag-AckAck Snurf."

Tlur looked around the table, continued, "We are here to evaluate the candidate's suitability for the position then appoint, or not, as appropriate. No other business will be discussed due to the extraordinary nature of the situation in which we find ourselves.

To speed things along I am authorised to ask if there are any negative votes planned and, if not, to bypass the discussion phase and consider the appointment granted. A show of hands will in this case to be sufficient to conclude business." She looked around the table and breathed, "Negative votes?"

All but one shook their head, the surprising dissenter, the lone raised hand, the Chief Engineer.

Tlur had just one word: "Why?"

"He is a career civil servant, has no command or deep space experience or training, apart from during this appointment. I mean no disrespect by this, it must be recorded that I believe during this appointment the Under-Deputy-Vice-Sub-Snarglist has performed at command level. Simply put though, he is not yet *proven*. Can we trust our lives to his care?"

Snurf nodded at the conclusion of a very fair summary. The Engineer caught the movement and turned towards him. "Interesting, I expected a different response."

"So did I," Snurf replied before remembering his silent, nonvoting place here.

Tlur asked, "Motion to have the candidate's response be stricken from this record? Seconders?"

None.

"Vote on the appointment then? First, against?"

None.

"For?"

Unanimous.

"Carried. Let it be recorded that Under-Deputy-Vice-Sub-Snarglist Ag-AckAck Snurf is promoted to this ship's interim replacement Vice-Sub-Snarglist. Subcommittee business is concluded."

And that was that. The first to congratulate the new commanding officer? The Chief Engineer, her comment simply, "*Definitely* not what I expected. Not a typical civil servant from what I've seen."

"Thankyou," he laughed, and then to himself, "Perhaps my father did indeed see more?"

"He did," her puzzling reply.

To the Engineer, "One question though, as you held my future so effectively in your grasp. Why?"

Her somewhat enigmatic reply, "Never let your sense of morals prevent you from doing what is right."

The room emptied.

To himself again, "Now what?" He checked the time. "Bedtime. No, I can't... can I? Did I say that out loud?"

Instead he walked to the command room to be greeted by a gruff, "Shouldn't you be in bed sir?" followed by an explosion of laughter from the crew behind. "Really sir, a good night's sleep will help us all tomorrow. We head back home."

At that Snurf's heart dropped. The wormhole again. But he left for bed.

Entering his new quarters he was surprised to find no trace of its previous occupant. In the centre of the desk in front of him, a bar. Triangular in section, with smoothed-off corners and a colour suggesting tungsten. Etched on its visible side: 'Vice-Sub-Snarglist' and, in a shallow, almost imperceptibly-tiny font height below, his full name: 'Ag-AckAck Snurf.'

Snurf hefted his bar, a comforting weight. Turning it over he found no other markings. Despite knowing of the leverage now held over him by whoever had removed his ambitious goal he smiled and decided to sleep, as ordered.

No sooner had Snurf's head hit the pillow than a knock at the door removed any illusion this would be an easy command.

"Sir?" It was Tlur.

"Yes?"

"Can we talk?"

"Wait, I'll need to dress again..." hoping she'd go, hoping to delay the inevitable.

"Yes sir."

He dressed and opened the door.

"You don't remember me, do you." Tlur said quite matter-of-factly.

"No. Should I?"

"It's true it was a long time ago, the last time I saw you and yes, I'd hoped you would."

"I'm...", and after a while, "No."

"Do you remember the night The Snarglist was killed?"

"Yes, of course! My life changed quite a--"

She interrupted, "How *are* Auntie Tlerj and Uncle Snurg?"

"They are very--"

She interrupted again, "And Gibflib? Is she..."

The realisation arrived, "Tlu."

"Yes."

"Gibflib, no; I took her to the... Mother and father are... exactly the same. Slowing down a bit. I..."

"And how have you been?"

"Busy!"

"I seem to recall our conversations were a little longer back when--"

It was Snurf's turn to interrupt, with a grin as the memories started to wash over him, "We don't *appear* to be children any more."

"True."

He checked the time. "I should sleep and so should you, it's been... traumatic. We need to prepare for the..."

"Yes. Goodnight Snurf." And a moment later, "Sir."

"Goodnight Tlu. Tlur." A calculated pause, "Deputy-Vice-Sub-Snarglist."

The door closed softly as she left and despite, though perhaps because of the memories, he slept.

Mean Time Between Failures

Captain Brobarn wasn't happy. In fact Captain Brobarn was *never* happy. The command to which he'd been assigned, though worthy, was simply unchallenging. It was safe, easy; anyone could do it, a *baby* could do it.

Knowing he would have his name forever linked to this event, his last-ever command, didn't matter, for there was no possibility to show off the accumulated knowledge of a lifetime of preparation and his previous *Starship* command.

The Ark Fleet's flight plan had been preprogrammed by the Thorgon ship builders. The only thing for him to do was to monitor the systems with the small, assigned crew. He had plenty of instructions, though not *orders*; the Thorgons didn't operate like that, especially given the circumstances.

"The circumstances...", he said aloud before he had time to stop himself. To cover his lapse he continued, "...the *circumstances* of our departure weren't ideal, but we had perhaps better rehearse our arrival; after all we don't want the chaos of embarkation when we disembark, *do* we!"

"No sir," the less-than enthusiastic reply from the crew members on the command deck."

"I'll plan some exercises, some drills," he said, ignoring the muffled groans, "after all, our cargo *is* rather precious." At last from this Captain, a fact no-one could deny.

The last remnants of Terran Humanity on board *his* ship, unimaginatively named 'Ark C' after an overlong meeting with the Thorgons, a meeting which firmly discounted the possibility of naming the ship's after figures from Earth's history. And the two others, an 'A' and a 'B' Ark. Each ship had been given a different flight plan due to the linear nature of their construction and the dynamic nature of space, in particular the somewhat unpredictable wormholes into which each ship had already passed. Naturally 'B' and then 'A' were first to leave, hastily constructed and departing as completed to relieve the pressures at the hastily-constructed spaceport.

'Hastily' is perhaps a little unfair, though accurate. Every piece from the largest section of engine shielding to the smallest indicator lamp arrived just as it was needed, and the whole was in each case assembled by qualified personnel, the best of Earth and the best of the Thorgon sphere of influence.

It's just that the committee in overall charge of the project decided to miss out the testing phase, and concluded that allocating resources for maintenance personnel to take the trip was not necessary. Consequently, even from the moment the engines first fired, things didn't work *entirely* according to plan.

At an average of one hundred thousand people per Ark it seemed a puny effort when weighed against the planet's population of only four years earlier. Fewer than 0.003% of Earth's pre-war numbers were given the opportunity to leave, and, weighed against the alternative, even the Humans had to admit it was a super-human effort. This didn't please the Thorgons much; they had, after all, done the majority of the work, a Super-*Thorgon* effort.

Now, Captain Brobarn wanted to create a reputation for himself. No, a legacy. Not a record based on the occasional lapses everyone makes, he told himself, but as a hero. A bona-fide solid gold, diamond-encrusted if-at-all-possible, hero. He wasn't entirely sure that waiting for an event to present itself on a silver plate would guarantee his success, so he spent the time off duty sleeping and examine the ship's systems.

After a few days he'd made a shortlist of likely candidates, a short list indeed, and then spent time attempting to calculate the best way to make the plan work. It would be nearly impossible for one straightforward reason; he could trust no-one else to assist.

Anything that needed disabling would have to be done remotely, any process leading to failure of a critical component would need to be timed very accurately indeed. In short though, whatever he did could not be linked to him. Any damage inflicted to the colonists would of course be acceptable, provided most survived and made planetfall.

The good news, no monitoring sensors had been installed other than those necessary to regulate the many functions of the ship's systems. As far as he knew.

The bad news, whilst the outline of his plans would almost certainly require a super-Human effort to fix whatever he chose to break, the element of chance had to be factored into every scenario. He thus *had* to be within reach of an Emergency Escape Pod, a working, fully-maintained, Emergency Escape Pod. His time was running out.

Brobarn's character traits all pushed him towards a sensation of happiness only when battling against the unexpected. He imagined he was good at it, being after all a Captain. The occasional negative outcome was to be expected though. *This* time it must not happen, his plans must not fail, the stakes were the highest he'd ever known. The trait that always troubled those around him, he believed that overcoming the impossible would, as with the ancient saying, take a little longer.

The crew all worked in the one room, so Brobarn's first command to them was easy, if a little out of character, "Ok everyone, let's forget about the exercises, I want to know all of the sensors indicating within 10% of expected full-scale at this stage of our journey, at the top *or* the bottom end."

He already knew the rear engines and energy systems' reserves would be flagged, the colonists' and crew's life-support systems would be at the high end of capacity; none of it was designed to last much beyond their scheduled arrival at Planet 9. The biggest problem of all was related to

the Ark Ship's complexity; chaos, unpredictability... *none* of it had ever been tested in this configuration.

The numbers came back one depressing report at a time, and even the quantity of remaining fuel indicated the engines were performing more efficiently than expected.

Only one system met his criteria. Every single one of the Emergency Escape Pods' air and blocker system energy reserves were below the expected values for even a descent from close orbit.

"*Curse* the Thorgon accountant classes!" But this time the bitterness of the thought did not escape his lips. For the first time since leaving the safety of his first ship's training course Captain Brobarn, one-time *Starship Captain*, was beaten.

Why?

The following morning everyone awoke early. After breakfast, necessarily separated by virtue of the differences between their diets, they sat in clusters in their common room and chatted.

Seeing the Human Captain alone for once, the Vice-Sub-Snarglist crossed the room to him and sat.

"Good morning Captain. How are you? I hope you slept--"

Tim Hadron readied himself, "I have just one question, it's something I've been meaning to ask but, well, I shall now."

"Go on Captain, if I can answer I will."

"Why *did* the Thorgons attack all those years ago? Why did you attack us now?"

"Well..." Snurf took a moment to make up his mind, and chose to trust the Human, "The second part I *can* answer easily enough. I told the truth; the absolute truth is that we could not have returned home with your ship there. Our destruction of your ship left a tiny amount of matter scattered in the vicinity of the wormhole, but even if we *had* asked you to leave, the disturbances caused by your drive, not to mention the waste jettisoned as you left..." At this he shuddered, "And, well, I was not in command."

"Not in command? Who *was*? And why not now?"

"I shall answer your second question first. It's... easier. Incidentally I wasn't even in the military then, my rise to command has been little faster than most."

"How long?"

"2 days."

"What, days?! Do you use the word differently to us?"

"No, a Thorgon Standard day is approximately three percent longer than your Earth Standard day. But thanks for allowing me to digress. With the help of my crew I simply replaced the previous Vice-Sub-Snarglist."

Snurf could see the Captain wanted more but he remained uncomfortable even thinking of the manner of the acquisition of rank. Before he had chance to change the subject the Humans did it for him.

"Please tell me why the first attack happened."

"It was unfortunate timing. Without our current capability to communicate with your systems, though not inevitable it was *likely* it wouldn't end well."

"But *you* attacked first, without any warning. We were working out how best to approach you, cycling through the basic number systems in light and radio frequencies. We simply weren't ready."

Surprised, Snurf responded, "No. One of *your* ship's initiated the conflict. I'm surprised you didn't know."

"No, that's not what we--"

"Yes. Though I'm sure you know anything can be faked I can show you the analysis and the raw data. Not now unfortunately, it'll have to wait until we reach Thorgon Prime; this ship's Machine doesn't have a fast-enough link."

Tim Hadron closed his eyes and, keeping them shut, "How long until we reach your home?"

Snurf's communicator signal interrupted the conversation.

"I must go, a priority message from home."

"How long?"

"2, maybe 3 days."

Snurf headed to his personal room and opened the secure channel. A glance at the status line showed a 3 minute delay; useful communications would be at least possible. The message was part comforting, part worrying. It read:

"1: Congratulations on your new command. Approved by Committee. Authenticate.

2: Divert to Planet 9, monitor and assist the Human arrival. Your cargo is no longer required on homeworld."

3: End."

Snurf composed a reply providing his authenticated acceptance, and asked for a detailed strategy before their arrival at Planet 9. A mere 10 minutes later came the response.

"1: Congratulations on your new command.

2: End.

Snurf would need help. He composed an alert to his command staff to meet in the... and changed it to add the Human senior staff. Being reunited with their people, though they would be complete strangers, might make them easier to... no, 'control' *wasn't* the word he wanted to use.

"Welcome everyone. I must be brief. I received new orders. We will go to Planet 9 and welcome the three arrivals from Earth. It seems we have a certain amount of autonomy, the, you Humans are no longer required on our homeworld. We should first recalculate how long our stores will last, then a flight plan, and then plan what we must *do* upon arrival. This ship will of course not be landing. Now, are there any questions?"

There were of course questions, none of which Snurf could answer. Given the circumstances everyone in the room understood why.

Tlur walked in silence with him to the command room. Just before they arrived she asked, "Have you ever seen a new world?"

"Only in the sandpit..."

They went in, sat and waited for the report. When it came the summary was brief; current energy reserves were high-enough to reach Thorgon Prime, or to reach Planet 9 but not to return home, and they'd *have* to restock the food. A small detour to an automated space station would be necessary. It would be years before Planet 9 had infrastructure in orbit for refuelling, and once the the Ark ships started the journey through the atmosphere to the surface of the world *their* power reserves were committed to planetary needs.

"How long will this refuelling stop take?" Commander V!lum asked, and then, "And how long until we reach the planet?"

After consultation Tlur replied, "We don't know how long it will take to refuel, it's dependent on what we find when we arrive. Our best guess is 12 hours. However it will take approximately 17 hours to reach and dock with the refuelling station, and from there 22 hours until we establish a stable orbit around Planet 9. This of course assumes we have calculated our needs accurately."

"What do you mean, do you not know--" said V!lum.

Snurf broke in, "We have no defined mission."

Everyone turned to face him.

"I believe we might be called upon to assist the Ark ships' safe arrival to the surface, and to monitor their communications until they reach their accommodation. We have planet-capable craft of course, but until our mission defines itself I wish to hold them back. Now when I say *safe arrival* I, er... they are not so much entry vehicles as Crashlanders."

"What?" Timmy blurted out.

"The ship's have a one-way trip to the surface and, if all goes well, they'll slide to a halt not too far from their occupants' new homes. Is that right?"

"Yes. As best as we can tell," Tlur replied.

"Oh. Thanks. Do they know? The people?"

"We don't have that information."

Tim Hadron sighed, "Can we help?"

"We don't know. *Can* you?"

"I... yeah, good question."

The ensuing laughter was a good point at which to close the meeting. As *most* of the procedures were automated once set there would be nothing to do until the refuel, and then the same nothing to do until reaching the planet.

Semper

The time passed slowly. Fewer-than 5 days from the wormhole to planetfall, but with nothing to do apart from allow the bitterness to grow, Captain Brobarn found the time to reach an all-time high of unhappiness. The crew bore the worst of his bad temper stoically, thinking of the longer-term. A new planet, a chance to shape a world: not everyone gets the chance.

As the planet grew in the long-range optical viewer his mood dropped further. His life had been spent touring the known universe, battling against situations the average Earth-bound would be unable to comprehend.

And on this, his final command, to sit in the big chair only as an *observer* as his ship crashed into the surface of an alien-made world, Oh the indignity!

Captain Brobarn didn't often think of anyone but himself.

"How long until we reach the surface of this, this... miserable lump of rock?" he said mournfully.

Ignoring him, "Sir, where are the other ships? We've been checking all the sensors and can't find either."

"How should I... What?"

Disbelieving, he walked across to the scanner consoles, checked the full communications spectrum. They were right, nothing.

"Crew, I don't like this," and, despite the severity of the situation, he smiled. "Continuous sensor sweep, check for debris with the right signature, check for everything, we don't want any nasty surprises, DO we!"

In truth though, he did.

"I want a continuous stream of reports; anything, everything that moves out there I want to know about it. When I'm asleep I want the summary on my monitor for when I awake."

As the hours passed, as the crew rotated out and the Captain himself slept, nothing *much* happened. And then, 3 days out from planetfall, something did.

"Sir, 2 energy signatures in our path. Very faint. What should we do?"

"What are they?"

"Too early to say, but what they are *not* are the other 2 Ark ships."

"Then we wait."

And so they waited, there was nothing else to do. The crew kept the data stream coming, Brobarn absorbed as much as any human could, and came to a conclusion.

"It's not the Ark ships. Their profile is all wrong. What then?"

"We must wait sir."

And so they did.

He next day brought more data. The crew's best guess, two Thorgon ships.

"A welcoming committee?" Brobarn guessed, and then, wryly, "I'm off to bed, wake me if they signal us, if anything interesting happens."

Before anything *interesting* happened, the ship's proximity alarm brought everyone's previous boredom to a premature end.

Half-dressed, Brobarn ran to the command room, shouting even before entering, "What's happening, why was I not informed we were closing in anything?! Report!"

"Captain," came the worried, breathless response, "We. Were. Not. Closing. On. Anything."

"What is it then, what... No. NO! GET THE BLOCKERS UP!! Locate the disturbance, it's a wormhole and it's opening! Lock Visuals on when found! Navigation, we need a trajectory to get us out of here! Communication, signal the ships ahead, give them our coordinates and then my outline before it's too late."

The crew did as ordered, and just in time. The actinic pinprick of the expanding wormhole as it annihilated what little matter there was close by, it was too bright to look at even with maximum filters.

"Focus sensors round the hole, I want to know which way it's going," and, for good measure, "after all, our cargo *is* rather precious!"

The crew voiced their assent. It seemed their otherwise miserable Captain had hidden depths after all. After all, he had been a real-life *starship* Captain.

"Incidentally, what options for evasive action *have* we got?"

"None sir, the momentum of the ship... we only have braking and attitude thrusters now, the acceleration systems are shot."

Agonising seconds passed then a leviathan of a ship, equalling his own's size, simply sprang into view. As luck would have it, sensors indicated it matched his own ship's trajectory, albeit travelling slightly faster.

"Report! Is it, 'A' or 'B' and can we signal them?"

"Looks like 'A' sir, trying now," and after a minute or two, "maybe we're too close to the remains of the wormhole? Should we drop the blockers sir?"

"Thanks. Blockers? Yes." Something, something from his past resurfaced, "Wait, no keep the blockers UP! Why is the wormhole still..."

The wormhole itself answered quickly as, seconds later, another ship blinked into view.

Instantly, "Brace for impact, people!"

This ship wasn't quite as well-screwed together as the day it left its dock. In fact, coming backwards out of the wormhole, rolling about its axis roughly every half-minute, large pieces being ripped off by forces way beyond the largest ever anticipated by its designers, and with a long trail of fire and debris roiling behind, *fire in space*; none of it augured well for the future of its inhabitants. In fact, the entire side of the ship facing Ark C was open, exposing the life-support chamber decks to the cruel indifference of space.

"Communications: message to Ark 'A', full-spectrum, maximum power, no encryption! Message reads: Ark A, set full power to rear blockers, maximum forward thrust, if you haven't already. Hoping you can avoid Ark B. And good luck!"

His people did as ordered, though wondering why he'd attempted no message to the Ark 'B'.

"People, where is it headed? Preliminary report please."

"Yes sir. Sir?"

"Yes?"

"You'd better finish getting dressed."

"Yeah."

Some time later, the report came back. *Most* of the ship was headed not towards Planet 9 but towards the centre of and nominally in the plane of the system. The debris trail would cause problems for years to come if not mapped and cleared. Uncleared, even the slightest interaction from an outside influence would cause an uncontrollable cascade throughout the entire system; spaceflight would be hampered for centuries...

The best possible news, Ark 'A' had gained just enough distance that, barring an explosion made unlikely by the 'B' engine's current failed-safe state, it would escape at least the largest masses.

"Thanks, we'd best start the... Do we have the capability to map its trail and constantly transmit to Thorgon Prime?"

"No sir, not yet. I mean, mapping yes. The wormhole..."

"To the other ships?"

"Maybe. We should wait a few minutes for a possible round-trip after our first message."

Captain Brobarn sighed. "Computer. Record and transmit this. In the absence of any life signs aboard the Ark 'B' it is my sad duty to report the destruction of the craft but more importantly a loss of life so far beyond my comprehension that I am truly lost for words. All I can say to the

people on board is goodnight, and may your gods go with you." He paused a second then, "Computer. Ends."

Then silence reigned for quite some time.

"Sirs, sorry to disturb you, we have a signal from the Ark Fleet, from Ark 'C'. It's not good news. The Ark 'B' is lost."

"What..." replied Snurf, looking nervously across at Captain Hadron, "lost?"

In reply to his obvious confusion, Tlur made it clearer, "Destroyed exiting the wormhole. Both 'A' and 'B' simply weren't meant to be there as 'C' passed through. The only luck was that 'A' seems unaffected, though without communications."

Snurf responded quickly, "You have autonomy whenever I'm not there. They'll need us," puzzled, he continued, "for something. Probably."

"We've an hour before we're fully-refuelled."

"They're coming this way, keep our current schedule, inform me if anything changes. Suggestions for a response?"

"Let them know we'll match speed, initiate a parallel trajectory, and observe. Ask if they need anything. Does that make sense?"

"It does."

Tlur looked at her communicator, "Sir, they're transmitting the path of 'B' and its trail. Headed towards system centre. It'll... it'll pass through Thorgon Prime's orbit." Anticipating the shock, "It's too early to say what effects it'll have, should we inform--"

"Yes, maximum power."

Captain Hadron broke into the conversation, "How many on board?"

"About 87,000."

"All gone?"

"It seems so. I'm sorry."

"Who's in charge of the remaining Arks?"

"'A' is Commander Franck, 'C' is Captain Brobarn."

"Thanks. Brobarn eh? What about 'B'?"

"I... I don't know."

"Do you know how long it'll take when we match speed? I assume the Ark ships are slower?"

"A day before we're alongside, as it were, then the same time in theory, provided there aren't more problems."

"2 days, plus or minus?"

"Yes."

"Can you send a message to Captain Brobarn from me?"

"Yes, of course."

"Tell him... tell him, 'Safe journey, well done.'"

"Is that all?"

"He'll understand. We have some history you see, he--"

"It will be done."

Arrival

4 hours to planetfall:

After manoeuvring into parallel trajectories and matching speeds, the 3 crews started to rehearse the most likely planetfall scenarios.

"Can we see the map of the landing site again, and it's proximity to the settlement? Can you overlay the anticipated surface tracks?" Captain Brobarn asked.

"We can. Please wait a moment. Transmitting."

"Looks good, no nasty surprises there," Captain Hadron said, smiling for the first time in a day.

Each scenario was rehearsed again and again until mistakes were eliminated from the simulations. A vote to pick a path unanimously decided trajectories angled either side of the settlements but ending the closest to them would be the best. Since no-one knew for certain whether the ground paths would end up straight it seemed the most sensible option.

Forward and belly blocker tests confirmed full power could be diverted to both without incident. Ark 'A' had a reduced rear capacity but that wasn't expected to be a problem provided the entry into the atmosphere went as planned.

"We need a command ship. None of us have done this before, so which of us is most likely to succeed?" Snurf asked the question honestly; as the most inexperienced not expecting to be chosen. And he wasn't.

Captain Hadron solved the problem without showing the extent of his disappointment. "Captain Brobarn is our lead. His mastery of the awful situation..."

Nothing more needed to be said.

3 hours to planetfall:

Captain Brobarn was now linked to the other Ark ship in realtime. "Are the preliminary checklists completed?"

"Yes."

Nothing more needed to be said, he now *trusted* the crews to perform well. Maybe also trust with his life, but old habits take a while to beat.

2 hours to planetfall:

"Any out-of-specification readings?"

1 hour to planetfall:

"Here goes, good luck everyone! Make *sure* the blockers are up when they're supposed to be, people! Let's hand this over to the machines!"

Being honest with himself Captain Brobarn wasn't happy with the words he'd chosen. But he wasn't miserable about them either. For the first time in his professional life he was *content*.

30 minutes:

Check hull integrity

Commence de-orbit burn

23 minutes:

Peak heating phase begins

Maximum nose blockers

Maximum belly blockers

13 minutes:

Nose down attitude

Centred on glidepath

10 minutes:

End of peak heating phase

Centred on glidepath

2 minutes:

Nose up

Maximum nose thrusters

Maximum belly thrusters

Centred on glidepath

Brace for impact

Brace for impact

0 remaining:

Solitude

The technician turned, wiped his goggles and surveyed his work. Not the vast atmosphere creation machine behind him, the last he'd helped erect and test, no. He gazed at the dark clouds above, at the sheets of rain hiding the landscape past the site perimeter, a distance to which the artificial light barely reached. Though his name was on this final day's work roster, that wasn't the thing that gave him the most pride, no. He'd helped to build another world.

Sure it had all been a bit rushed and some safeguards had been sidestepped to meet the deadline, but no-one had been killed, the main parameters were all within acceptable limits at this stage. And they would soon be paid.

"Come on people let's take the photo, I want to go home!" Their Team Leader was, as usual, blunt, a useful attribute at this, the sharp end of the very largest of destruction-construction projects. She set the camera up on the heaviest container, the one loaded with their tools, and again shouted into her communicator, "10 ticks, people!"

They assembled under the ascent vehicle's wing, the younger team members made the obligatory rude gestures, and it was done. Time to leave.

Save for the departing engineers, surveyors, technicians and construction personnel, the planet was otherwise devoid of life. It wasn't sterile though, not since anything indigenous had been eradicated. The Planet 9 Habitability Committee had consulted the Humans to determine what organisms would be best to promote Human-suitable plant growth and create an atmosphere uniquely-conducive to Human life. They'd transplanted vast amounts of soil, plants and micro-and larger organisms from Earth to form this new habitat.

Despite all the effort though it remained a work-in-progress with years, perhaps decades before it would be entirely comfortable even in the most temperate regions. Progress was, so far, as-expected. The atmosphere processors, for instance, wouldn't need to work much longer before their parts could be disassembled and repurposed, as the chemical and physical reactions they had started became self-sustaining.

Patting the vehicle's hull before they got on board was supposed to bring luck, and whilst it was probably better to rely on the skills of the flight crew, maintenance techs and designers they did it anyway.

As the last boarded, a clap of thunder unlike any previous rent the air around them.

"They're here," evidently one of the flight crew, "Just two ships. Not a good start. Our departure window just got moved up. Hurry folks!"

As they stowed their personal kit and strapped in, the Team Leader looked across at the tech, his eyes closed, head back, a half-smile vying for supremacy with the tiredness and, guessing his mood shouted, "We Made It! It's just as well we're going home, the settlers are nearly here. You know what, I couldn't stand this weather for much longer! Always cloudy, always dark, always too-warm, too-wet, too windy, and I *miss* the yellow skies of home." And, becoming almost inaudible as the craft groaned and creaked, straining against its lift engines, "And I miss my--"

And then the roar of the jets, the vibration from the craft as it lifted, heading to orbit and the mothership, drowned out any more chat.

The tech looked towards the flight crew's seats, noted the nameplate above the arch. Even for a vehicle built for the widest range of temperatures and pressures, with a crew to match, the name was odd, not-at-all Thorgon.

'Grendel'.

This world would eventually possess a climate reminiscent of a pre-industrial-age Earth's. The Thorgons had enough experience in world building to guarantee it. Air, land and sea pollution would perhaps be a thing of this world's future, but the absence of the influence of hundreds of years of burning fossil-fuels would be absent. An unfortunate side-effect: in the short-to-medium term nothing would *smell* right to the Humans.

Later, only the occasional visiting Thorgon flight vehicle or monitoring drone would disturb the vastness of the skies, a total absence of multi-lane vehicle highways would remove the familiar background hum, and until the weather stabilised, and until the animal and livestock numbers were great enough to release 'Outside', as it would become known, not even the sounds of the natural, old world passed down as folk memories, would intrude. If it wasn't for that ever-present roar of the wind and the incessant pounding of the rain it would be utterly silent.

The world was again alone.

The world was *ready*.

Appendices

1. The Thorgon Creed

Extracts from the book which defines Thorgon life.

2. Family

Reference, and a small amount of background to this story.

Appendix 1 - The Thorgon Creed

Author's note: Adherence is mandatory for Thorgons, very-strongly advised for all other races subordinated into the Thorgon Empire. Extracts here are necessarily limited, The Creed can be the subject of a lifetime's study

The Items:

The First: Conflict

101. Strike fast, overwhelm with superiority in numbers.

192. The potential of defeat leads to impractical situations. Withdraw immediately.

The Second: Psychology

201. Leverage, applied from a stable foundation, guarantees success.

The Third: History

301. Examine the past, compare it unfavourably with the present.

The Fourth: Religion

452. Respect the rights of subordinated races to follow their religions. It maintains their hope. Hope maintains Thorgon superiority.

492. Respecting the rights of subordinated races to follow their religions does not require understanding. Thoughts of attempting to gain understanding are forbidden. You must stop immediately.

The Fifth: Biology

501. Pain in the birthing process is acceptable.

593. Relief of pain in birthing is unacceptable. You must stop such thoughts immediately.

The Sixth: Anthropology

601. Examine the past, compare its norms unfavourably with those of the present.

The Seventh: Philosophy

792. Independent thought is contagious. You must stop immediately.

The Eighth: Literature

801. The Creed is all.

The Ninth: Art

901. All art must be scrutinised by and be passed by the appropriate committee.

Appendix 2 - Family

Thorgon

Thorgon names have meaning.

Family names:

- Single syllables indicate lower status than multisyllabic.
- Hyphenated names show low-to-high status marriages.

Given names:

- Male names begin **S** have 5 letters.
- Female names begin **T**. Life starts with 3 letters, coming-of-age brings 4, marriage makes 5.

Examples:

- AckAck Snarg
- AckAck Snarf
- AckAck Tlerj, married Ag Snurg
- Ag-AckAck Snurf
- Ank Tlur

Human

Human names are a mess of inconsistencies.

Hadron

- (name) Hadron (m.)
- Timothy Hadron (m.)
- Timothy Hadron II (m.)