

The Thorgon Empire

Not a manual for Human-Thorgon first
encounters (or any others if it comes to that)

@bazbt3

Acknowledgments:

@mlv created the Thorgon universe a long time ago on a network lost in the mists of time

@schmidt_fu (inadvertently?) provided the inspiration to start anew

More:

[https://github.com/bazbt3/
the_thorgon_empire](https://github.com/bazbt3/the_thorgon_empire)

Theatre

"What is our gestation period?" she asked, primarily to break the awkward silence as they trudged northwards. Though countless couples must have endured the same over the millennia it meant nothing to these two.

"300 days, plus or minus."

Puzzled: "Plus or...?"

"It is not an exact science."

"You have become sloppy, you have been subjugating those, those hamans for too long!"

"Humans."

Incredulous: "Correcting my pronunciation at a time like this is..."

"So why the question?"

"We must visit Glarf Forest. It is The Time. Now. Afterwards."

"Oh!"

"It is our duty to do this other thing first, the Tourism Section Under-Deputy-Vice-Sub-Snarglist commanded it."

“Yes, of course.”

“Show me the directions again.”

“Yes, of course.”

She 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: “Well, there’s the water, and I can smell... ugh!”

Sniffing: “We are not paid enough for this.”

Turning the document over: “Oh, a map.”



“Sophisticated for our Cartographic cadre, that.”

“Remember our purpose here!”

“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...”

“DON’T!”

“We're here.”

And so they were. The sweeping expanse of the theatre’s curves, with an illuminated cupola on the towers at each end, met them out of the mists. The sight, at least according to the guidebooks, was always worth the trek.

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

“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.' Walking around the northernmost tower to the rear of the theatre, passes shown to the security scanners, and through the door.

Oh the noise, the hubbub, the heat, the indescribable smell! An intermingling of Thorgon foods and something utterly repulsive. An inadvertent glance over at the 'Human' board indicated something unfamiliar to the pair. Obviously unfamiliar:

'Thorgon Green (don't forget the stronger additives)'

Shuddering, they passed through the galley and through the door.

"Stairs?! What kind of idiot expects me to climb stairs so close to..." Yet they climbed. Another door and then a welcoming cool breeze after the torment of the galley.

And there they were, the other side of a mesh containment screen. Humans. Fewer than the couple had imagined from the publicity materials, but more than the male

had previously seen in one place.

Uncomfortably: “By the Snarglist, why were we chosen for...”

“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.”

“Why were we asked to deviate from The Plan?”

“Now!”

“But what about our visit here just...”

“NOW!”

The assembled viewers looked around, but all were there for one reason; the smells from below were an accelerant of sorts. The Humans, though an inconvenience, had a use after all.

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 are testament to the pain shared by both male and female of the species, 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.

The baby looked up at his new parents, an oddly inquiring expression on 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 Great-Uncle Snarg doesn't think I'm...”

The baby defaecated and, as males do, the father sniffed the air: “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.”

“Yes, I knew you'd come around eventually.”

“Welcome to Thorgon, Ag-AckAck Snurf, and may your observance of The Creed set your path through a life of greatness.”

Just-in-case anyone was within earshot, this last formal welcome. 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 customs.

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

“Get another cloth...”

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 too-recent laughter of his peers still rang sharply in his still-recovering ears.

An essential part of the training regime, turning off the gravity to simulate the gravity being turned off, was great fun in training, 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.

His essentially uncontrolled tumbling

oriented him 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 thought quickly. Nothing, save succumb to the inevitability of failure.

The door loomed closer.

Inviting

A deep breath, held for a moment then slowly exhaled as he looked at the gaudily-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 lacking a breadth and depth of useful familial connections. Many reasons for attendance too, from a student's burning desire to succeed, through the aforementioned family pressures, 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. Their 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 is 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.’

Despair, the weight of a world of expectations ponderously settling 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, 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?”

Foundation

A technician's cheery grin greeted the despondent candidate. "Congratulations Cadet, you're in!", a not-at-all the 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 fail."

"What?! Did I... Was 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."

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.

"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

Timmy Hadron wasn't doing quite as well as he'd imagined. The voice 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?"

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

"Breakfast?"

"Yes sir."

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

Thus Timmy's dad unwittingly set in motion a pattern that would define Timmy's son's early life.

But now: "Dad, that's too much and, do you

know, I don't deserve it. Maybe next time."

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

"Ok, but it was the push-off again, straight into the Great Attractor."

"The what?"

"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 it was.

After breakfast was tidied away by the AutoChef they tried again.

Easy when you know how.

The Desk Ornament

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.

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 theirs. 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:

“President Snurf”.

His mind automatically tracked down the list 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.

Leverage

“...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:

“No. Of course not.”

“Good.”

Snurf awaited the inevitable denouement.

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

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

“Right away. You seem, what's the

word...?" Snurg paused, searching. At length, his eyes closed: "Emthusiastic?"

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

"Yes. Now," half as an aside: "what will you need?"

This time Snurf paused, unsure exactly where this odd conversation would end up.

"Just you."

"I shall need time to clear my office. I..."

"Why, do you have anything of, oh what's the word, Sementimental value?"

"Sentimental sir, at least that's..."

"Don't," Snurg said. "After all..." and here he paused for effect...

Snurf knew, beyond doubt, what was next.

"...I *am* your father."

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.”

“But...”

“So what if you're not quite old-enough now? One day, barring another Thorgon visit, you will be.”

“Thorgons? Pah! Dad!”

“No, really son, they were here. We only just...”

“I'll get the folder.”

Apply handprint, turn the handle, 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. 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 started to transcribe his dad’s notes into the log.

A Misson

The Thorgon 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 complex logistical issues 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 naught though, being dependent on performance. Unless some particularly complex logistical need arose he'd...

Snurf reached under the desk for reassurance. He'd been lucky to get on board under the weight allowance, and without discarding any item of kit. How odd, given the mass of the desk ornam...

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

So far Snurf’s workload was high-enough that the importance of maintaining a certain separation, studiously observing others dealing with the subtleties of the chain of command were...

He reached the Command Room, everything bathed in a red light. His superior opined: “Seconds,” then, after the shortest of pauses: “observe only, then document, then maintenance. Respond.”

“Yes sir,” though his intention, was never voiced. The universe unfolded around them,

twisted itself, re-formed in frankly incomprehensible ways, then after what seemed like an eternity, collapsed back to a comforting reality.

Shouted from what seemed a world away: “Coordinates checked!”

Snurf looked up, smiled 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?”

“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 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. 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 m..."

"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: "Ok, the wormhole is not exhibiting signs of impending portal activation."

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

The Wormhole

Commander Vllum smiled: “Are you sure sir?”

“Yes, and please recheck the sensors, I...”

“Yes sir.”

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 the Humans’ insecurities and inconsistencies, and their insight. The last attribute made no sense, Humans are a mess.

Conciliatory: “Of course sir, I’ll check the sensors again.” So she did. Some time later: “Unless our entire sensor field is faulty there are no signs of any disturbance in the gateway.”

Unspoken, the knowledge that the happened on the other end of the wormhole was at best a guess, a balancing of probabilities for even the most accomplished 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 space had been easily repulsed.

She turned off the gravity. The viewscreen shifted focus, 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."

Evil?

“We will take what we require then destroy your transport. You have a choice: our transportation or the eternity of space.”

At that the Thorgon 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 Tenet, his Adherence. 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: "Order their assembly in a surface module, close, contain, cut its side away, extract only the living."

"Good, good. One thing. The metals, energy stores?"

"No need. We... you planned this 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?"

"And, Ag-AckAck..."

"Sir?"

"When it's done, fix the 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, have you no redeeming qualities, can we salvage nothing of value?!"

'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, private or of planetary significance. The readout stared back.

"Human, it is time."

Conscious of his responsibility to his ship and its inhabitants: "Yes. Do it."

The Thorgon mother ship shifted position, almost imperceptibly at first, and in the manner of an immovable object resisting an irresistible object with a slightly unequal but

certainly opposite reaction to itself... 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 hours to recover from.

Tlur pretended to examine the airlock remote readouts.

Debrief

The post-attack phase of Thorgon conflict had no element of command- or crew-level self-congratulation, no feeling of relief.

Indeed it was expected that, unless external and unexpected aggression caught them unawares, superiority in numbers and tactics would prevail. Minor variations in 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; his father obviously knew what would...

At that a strategy began to form, but he would need help.

"Tlur?"

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. 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: “Order their assembly in a surface module, close, contain, cut its side away, extract only the living.” 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.”

“Indeed. Implement your plan.”

“For the letter.”

He nodded, resigned to the inevitability of this onslaught.

“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 erect containment then

cut open the side and collect all the living beings. Once done, net the near-range area for debris before 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 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 mother ship.

“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 entertaining for him by his subordinates, and let the crew perform.

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

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 mother ship and 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 his 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 honesty was a revelation. At an age at which boundaries were routinely tested... of course he did, 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: 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, suddenly, as the disparity between his momentum and the ship's leisurely change of direction, 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 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 V!lum had no answer, which was in itself remarkable. Always the voice of reason, 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 started, all the lights came on at once.