

## ALL KINDS OF TERRANS

“Make haste, make haste,” came the disembodied mechanical voice over the telepathocom, “Make haste! Terran time is Monday, 0812 and we have twenty Terran minutes to be at the rendezvous!”

There was a great deal of scuffling and scuttling, of opening doors and muttered curses. In the central segment of the Venturian inter-planetary vessel, the team-members hurriedly began to gather. Being Venturians, they could not be seen, even by each other – well, what was the point when telepathy was the common method of communication? So there were no lights. And no seats either, since the Venturians were bottomless.

“Oh,” groaned someone, “I wish there were seats! You would not believe how heavy this body that I’ve been assigned is.”

“Stop moaning, TY17!” commanded the unit leader, “We’re here to do a job, not for a holiday! What do you think this is – a cruise-liner on the

Helobagian Ocean? I'll have you peeling boiled Pelagians for the next Kalangian month of Gungdays! Right, let's have a roll-call. I want to check that everyone is half-way ready before we beam down."

There was a general shuffling of bodies and of luggage, a clearing of massed throats. A late-comer came running, pattering of feet against diamond-hard Venturite flooring, then a crash and bang as the late-comer bumped into the unexpected hard-light forms.

"PW34A?"

"Here, sir!"

"PW34A you are a ... hedgehoog? Is that right?" The unfamiliar word came uneasily to the commander's seven lips.

"Hooglehog, sir, That's right, sir!" came the smart reply.

"What does a hooglehedge look like then, PW34A? How will the Terrans react?"

"Sir, don't know, sir! All images were lost in the file transfer from Venturis. Could be almost

anything. But the description said something about prickles, so I've got a few of those, sir!"

"OK, let's hope you've got it right. BD77?"

"Sir! Here, sir! Macaw, sir! Bright thing, but image lost in file-transfer. Squawks a lot, it said."

"LG901?"

There was a silence.

"LG901, where are you?"

"Almost ready, sir!"

"Get yourself out here this minute, LG901, or I'll eat you for my tea!"

This was no idle threat amongst the Venturians. There was a clatter and a thump as LG901 arrived.

"LG901 reporting, sir!"

"Right, what are you supposed to be, you miserable little worm?"

"Yes, sir!"

"What do you mean 'yes sir!'?! I asked you what you're supposed to be!"

"Yes, sir, a miserable little worm, sir!" came the terrified reply. "Terran earth-worm, sir! That's what it was."

“Hmph! What do they look like – no, don’t tell me – image lost from file-transfer...?”

“Yes, sir!”

“OK, smarten up, boy! Now – YO23B?”

“Sir!”

“Well?”

“Instructions said ‘frog’, sir. Apparently a wet flabby sort of thing that hops about. No picture, sir!”

“FK98?”

“Mouse, sir! Here, sir! Along with DS19, G503, BV09 and HT65A, sir! All mice, sir! No idea what they look like, sir, but G503 came up with a design. Squeaky and timid, mice, it said. Sir!”

“Well done, G503, we’ll make a design-trooper out of you yet! OK, who’s next – PP62?”

“Here, sir. Eagle is what it said on my orders. Big and fierce and flies, sir. No clue what it’s supposed to look like, but I’ve done some research and come up with a shape that should blend in with all the other Terran creatures. Ready and able, sir!”

“Good show, PP62! Splendid work. Now...”

And so it went on. The team now mustered in the central segment comprised all kinds of Terrans – sparrows, angel-fish, stag-horned beetles, alsatians, butterflies, humans, salamanders, two-toed sloths, kangaroos. Back at Venturis, QWERTY23 had done a marvellous research job – pity about the images being lost in transfer. Still, it allowed the away-team to show some initiative – possible promotion here for a good commander.

Unit-leader HQ91 was a little worried, however: what if the shapes and forms assumed by the Venturians when they landed were nothing like the Terrans? Terrans had visual methods of communication and might spot an alien without any difficulty. The team had no doubt done its best when putting together the shapes of the Terran life-forms – but they were an unimaginative bunch. All except G503, whose imagination tended to run riot. Kingfishers, kittens, scorpions, eagles and all those things – who knows what they would all look like when exposed to the Terrans optic nerves... Maybe they would have to switch to Plan 'C':

destroy all Terran life and then scarper back to the iPV.

He consulted his Terran chronometer: 0827. Almost time to beam down.

“Right then, team, listen up! You know our mission. We beam down – headquarters has already identified a good location. Something called Skool. Skool is a gathering place for all kinds of Terrans. Only thing to watch out for when we land is a superior life-form which is known as Teecher. Headquarters have warned us that Teechers are pretty darned fierce and unpredictable: could be trouble if we upset one. Best to do what they say and then we can discuss further tactics after dark. It gets dark on Terra every 24 hours and stays dark for about 10 hours – long day, but we’ll have to get used to it. Main thing is – don’t antagonise the Teechers.

“OK, we have assumed the disguise of all kinds of Terrans, so it’s certain we’ll be able to slip in unnoticed. Skool is a busy place so there’ll be herds of hoghedges, earthworms, salamanders,

mouses and so on – no trouble, no risks. Just stay quiet and merge into the background, that’s all I say.

“Terran time 0830 – time to beam down. Teechers are supposed to get restless if their schedules are in any way upset. All ready – LG901, are you ready? Stop fidgiting there, man!”

“Sorry, sir, I just can’t help it, sir! This body just doesn’t feel right! The file says I’m supposed to be all wriggly and bendy and so on. I need to make some changes...!”

“There’s no time to change it now – we’ll just take the risk. Set beam co-ordinates for Room 21B. Engage beam!”

8:32 am. Another Monday. Start of another term.

“Great,” thought Mr MacNiece, the S1 teacher, miserably. “Wonder what kind of little sods I’ve got this term? Why do I always get the new classes?”

He sighed and pushed open the door to room 21B. “Settle down!” he shouted, out of habit.

Six rows of scared young faces looked up at him. Thirty eager children fell silent and waited for their new teacher to speak.

Mr MacNiece's heart softened. Kids, you had to like them – well, it wasn't as if they came from another planet or anything, was it?

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