



# THROGS NECK RIDGE

Sometimes You Don't Get What You Want

Avery Shepard was a cargo pilot on his last run. All he wanted to do was to drift off into space and never be heard from again. What he got was a war and Throgs. The Throgs were Earth's best allies. One of the first races humans encountered, they were more loyal than dogs. Not to mention the fact the Throgs loved to fight. They lived for it. And in what turned out to be a hostile and violent universe, you couldn't ask for someone better to have your back.

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**T**he Banshee jumped into the Narathu system without any advance warning from Galactic Defense Command. GDF Intelligence completely missed this one. Despite the fact Narathu was deep in the disputed area. It didn't take them long for them to destroy the two light cruisers in orbit around the primary colonial planet in the system. It was a routine operation. Laser blasts lit the stars in a symphony of colors. At least one cruiser crashed into the surface. Streaming through the air as a bright red flaming comet, burning up brightly, flashing across the night sky. To be honest, GDF didn't expect the two cruisers to put up as much fight as they did. They were there mostly for show, to keep the colonials happy. GDF was depending on ground forces for defense.

The small silvery-grey Banshee landed quickly. Hunt, engage, annihilate. It was a standard Banshee procedure. Only with the entire 5<sup>th</sup> Army in residence, it wasn't going to be as easy as the Banshee high command assumed. The Throgs in the 5<sup>th</sup> Army weren't going to give up an inch of the planet unless it was covered in Banshee dead. The Throg strategy wasn't simply to make them pay for every inch of ground. It was to make them pay for it and then make them pay again. They didn't have much trouble achieving this end.

As the story spread, every Throg on this side of the galaxy was desperate to join the heroic resistance fight. To be included in the glory and the eventual songs of valor. For them, it was a cultural imperative. No Throg wanted to be left out of the fray. It was perfect fighting terrain for the lizard-like Throgs. In the thick plant life choking the planet, the air was filled with wild, primitive screams. Calls unheard on Earth for over a million years. Desperate cries and great cheers of victory. Shouts heard even in the backwater colonies of Ghorani V.

### ***Ghorani V Prime Spaceport***

Avery Shepard sat back in his deeply cushioned G-couch. Comfortably sitting in Docking Bay 54, his hands resting behind his head. The quiet, cramped room smelled of ozone and the vague spicy odor of tired electronics. Automated drones unloaded the cargo from the *Anne Bonnie*. It was Shepard's last contracted delivery. He checked the downloaded mail awaiting him on his arrival. Carefully reading the material from the last outpost he visited, he grunted in disgust and then threw the datapad across the cockpit. Avery barely noticed the sound of the unit smashing against the bulkhead and the rain of broken glass and components landing on the floor.

Ghorani V was one of the most remote outposts of humanity in the inner rim. It was nowhere, near nothing, and not even on any minor trade routes. Still, it had a contingent of SDF forces resident and they needed to be supplied. The universe was a violent and unpredictable place. So everywhere there were humans, they needed protection. Even as far away as places like Ghorani V.

This is where Avery Shepard came in. It was a lonely existence, but you could make good money shuttling equipment and supplies to remote locations. He's already made the run to Ghorani V a hundred times. The Harbormaster once threatened to name bay 54 after him, since he used it so frequently. He simply gave the Harbormaster one of his patented looks.

Outside in the docking bay, Avery could see a group of Throgs milling about. He knew they didn't call themselves Throgs, but like most humans, he couldn't even come close to speaking their language. So, humans just called the Throgs. They didn't give the impression of being insulted by the phrase. Throgs were only guaranteed to be offended when you called them cowards. Their appearance would have

made many a B-movie filmmaker pleased. Especially those who like to put humans in the same stories as dinosaurs. They were astonishingly similar to some of the creatures from the early Cretaceous time period. Only the Throgs knew how to use weapons. Throgs made up a massive percentage of the Galactic Defense Forces, manning outposts across the sector. Culturally, they were noted for solving great issues of political importance through gladiatorial combat. Typically, the losing opinion was eaten. Although with all their cunning and guile, they'd never even come close to building spaceships. They'd never even visited any of their three moons until humans came along. So, they needed us just as much as we needed them. A few people even called the GDF Fleet the Throg taxi service or UberThrog. Fleet didn't much appreciate the joke.

It certainly wasn't unusual to see them on distant colony worlds like this one, only Avery wasn't expecting one of them to saunter aboard uninvited. The Throg was headed straight for his ship. He went down to the airlock to meet it. The Throg's arms were considerably smaller compared to a human, but its extra-large head exuded a dangerous ferocity and its mouth was all teeth. Avery Shepard had no idea what it could possibly want, but he was pleased to discover it spoke English.

His voice had the typical Throg vowel slur and hiss to it. English was a tough language for creatures without a lot of lip flexibility. Try saying 'oh' without moving your lips. The creature did, however, have a deep, resonant tone which would have made James Earl Jones proud. "Greetings friend, we understand you do not have a flight assignment at the moment."

Avery's answer was brisk, almost unfriendly. "That's right." He turned away, assuming the conversation was over.

The Throg wasn't even affected by the humans' unaccommodating nature. "We wish passage to the Narathu system."

"I'm done carrying freight," Avery replied. "Besides this is a cargo hauler, she was never designed for passengers."

"We can pay."

"Look, as I tried to explain to you, I'm not taking on passengers."

"Are you staying here?"

"No," Avery spat back at the Throg.

The creature cocked its enormous head to one side. "Where are you going, if I may be so bold?"

"Carina-Sagittarius, the outer arm." Avery gave him an answer hoping it would dissuade him from hitching a ride. Almost no one went to the outer arm.

"Good," the Throg sounded pleased. "Narathu is on the way." Avery gave him a look. Narathu was about as on the way as a stop in Iceland is between the run from New York to Texas. As the Throg finished his sentence, he waved one of his arms. What must have been half a regiment of Throgs started pouring on to the *Anne Bonnie*, through the airlock.

Avery Shepard wasn't pleased. "Look, As I tried to explain. This ship wasn't built to handle passengers. Especially more than I can count." He became more animated as the Throgs continued to pile in. "Please

don't do that. I would prefer you not to meander around my ship. You can't come in here," he finally shouted.

"You are a shepherd, are you not?"

The human's voice was stiff. He practically spat every word. "Well one of my ancestors was, but I'm just a cargo pilot. The names a carryover. I don't carry live cargo. No passengers." He said the last sentence slowly, to be sure he was understood by the non-native speaker.

"Not a shepherd. How ironic." The Throg gave the unusual chortle which other species in the universe had come to understand was the Throg laugh. Looking about he gave a cargo hold a cursory glance. "We have been on worse. Your ship will do nicely, and we carry our own supplies." True to his word, the Throgs started to bring on box after box of materials. Avery gave them a very unhappy look. His eyes practically smoldered with fury.

"Is it your intent to throw us off?" the Throg asked politely but closed the distance between them as a sign of intimidation. At this distance, Avery had no choice but to look up at the alien. Allies or not, he was beginning to get on Avery's nerves.

A human didn't have a chance tussling with a Throg, they were far too strong, so Avery gave in. "No, of course not. I wouldn't dream of it. Make yourself at home. My ship is your ship." Fortunately for Avery, Throgs don't understand sarcasm. Otherwise, they might have been surprised by his tone. Two other Throgs lined up behind the first one.

"These are my fellow officers." He used the loud, high-pitched squeals of the Throg language to introduce them by name. Some people thought the Throg language sounded similar to the melodic tones of whale song, but Avery simply found it squeaky and annoying. Like rubbing a dry squeegee on glass. He had to fight the urge to hold his hands over his ears.

"There's no way I can pronounce your names."

The Throg cheerfully accepted Avery's statement. "We understand. You may have the honor of naming us in your own language."

Avery was taken aback by this easy concession. "Alright, how about Larry, Moe, and Curly?"

"Done," Larry answered. You couldn't insult a Throg with a human name, no matter how hard you tried. He even tried to call one Benedict Arnold once, but it had no effect. The Throgs simply figured whatever you called them was far better than an inadequate pronunciation of their actual names.

"What about the others." Avery indicated the long line of Throgs piling through the airlock.

"You won't have to name them. They don't speak English."

"Well, what's a relief." Avery excused himself and made his way back up to the cockpit. He flopped himself into the chair as if this planet was twice normal earth gravity. Reaching into his licensed cargo supplier's uniform, he pulled out a bottle and extracted two pills from the interior. Returning the bottle to an inside pocket with one hand, he popped the pills into his mouth with the other. Swallowing hard, he forced the two large pills down. He didn't look at all well. His face was pallid and sweaty.

Larry followed him into the tightly packed room and took a seat in the disused copilot's chair. "We are ready to leave when you are."

Avery was hoping he could ignore them, and like a bad hallucination, they might go away. As he was contemplating this strategy, he saw a human uniformed officer of the GDF. The crisp, black-suited officer walked over to one of the bay engineers and started questioning him. Larry looked edgy and agitated. "I suggest we leave now."

"I don't have clearance to leave now," Avery protested. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the bay engineer point to his ship.

"I suggest we leave immediately. Otherwise, I can't guarantee there will not be damage to your ship," Larry's tone left no room for discussion.

"Great. I have a hold full of AWOL lizards." Avery's hands started working their magic over the control console. The holographic controls appeared before him. Diagrams of light and color. It looked a little bit like he was crocheting with his hands, but the lights around his fingers made it clear he was using the ship's mechanisms. He warmed up the thrusters and closed the external hatch. The *Anne Bonnie* rocked violently. The docking clamps were still in place. They were designed to keep a starship in restrained to foil smuggling operations. Harbormasters didn't want ships leaving without permission. Red warning lights started blinking excitedly. One of them even jumped up and down to get attention.

Fortunately, Avery was an old hand at this. He knew more than a few tricks for leaving without authorization. Running his hands like a fierce typist, the red lights started to disappear. To an outside observer, it would appear as if it was a race. Would the ship shake apart before Avery could release the docking clamps? Larry appeared unsure, but Avery looked confident. He'd done this many times before. Still, the last red light appeared to be resistant. It refused to go off. Avery slapped the side of his chair. "What's wrong with this stupid system?" he remarked openly. "The fake emergency override should have worked."

The ship's rocking increased to a point over what anyone would have considered being a safe capacity. Avery repeated a series of commands. Still, nothing changed. With a scream of metal, the docking clamps released, and the *Anne Bonnie* shot into the sky with a sudden... and unexpected... acceleration. The two were almost thrown out of their seats. Avery turned toward Larry even as he was smashed back into the G-couch. "Took a little longer than I expected. I guess Bay 54's maintenance crew isn't up to standard. They should fix their clamp joins. They could use a little oil."

They blasted into the night sky and the computer engaged the FLT drive. You couldn't see the stars while you were going faster than light, so the view outside on the screens was the usual inky void. Avery leaned over toward Larry. "So, you and your fellow GDF soldiers on your way to join the 5<sup>th</sup> Army, aye?"

"I'm not a soldier," Larry retorted, "I'm a writer."

Avery sounded shocked. "Really? I've never heard of the Throg writer."

"There are thousands of us. Who do you think writes the songs of glory?"

"Good point. I hadn't thought of that."

“Would you like to hear one of my works?”

Holding up his hands in mock surrender, Avery tried to look disinterested. He had the sudden terrible thought of being helplessly trapped. Spending eons of time as Larry recited an epic poem in the Throg’s language. In which case, Avery would have no choice but to tear off his own ears. “No, no, that’s alright.”

Larry saw through Avery’s distress at once. “I wasn’t going to sing. I can provide you an English translation.” Avery sat quietly, hoping Larry would interpret his silence as a no. After a slight pause, Larry began. Throg poets could recite their songs by memory and Larry was no exception. “The glorious sky hangs tight with the limbs of light blasting forth from the eminent ardor of the defenders. Free are the waves of force that are shattered about the wind. Lo, may the coming rays beat upon our foes like the eminence of a solar flare. My memory dances with the names of the fallen, their tales are written in the lights of the heavens.”

Larry blinked several times and then wiped his eye. “That’s only the introduction. We won’t be in space long enough for you to hear Chapter One. What do you think?”

“I don’t know what to say.”

The Throg was not taking no for an answer. “You must have some opinion. Be honest, you humans always have an opinion.”

Avery fumbled for the right words. “Well, there’s no story is there? You have lots of words... very descriptive words, mind you, but there’s no coherent thread through your narrative. Not to mention the fact you don’t have any characters... no individuals in the work. I mean, how can you tell who it’s about. I don’t even know where it takes place. We Earth readers like to know what a story is going to be about.”

Larry’s shoulders slumped. “Yes, well... all your comments would appear to be an accurate description of the work. You have perfectly valid points. But, other than that, did you like it?”

“Well... I...” Avery fumbled again for the right words, “It was very expressive, vivid, very colorful... It was unique... I mean...”

Larry crossed his arms over his chest. “It loses something in the translation.”

Grabbing on to Larry’s thought like it was a lifeline thrown to a drowning man, Avery clutched onto the idea with both hands and held on for dear life. “Yes, it must lose something in translation.”

Reaching into his inner jump-suit pocket, Avery extracted two more pills and downed them without the aid of any water.

“Is there something wrong?” Larry sounded concerned.

“With me?” Avery chuckled slightly. “No, I’m fine. F-I-N-E fine.”

“You appear unwell,” Larry continued.

“Nonsense. I’m just afraid of flying, that’s all.”

Larry settled back in his G-couch. "Your statement disagrees with your medical profile."

Avery practically shot out of his seat. "Have you been reading my mail?"

"Of course not," Larry appeared taken aback. He took out a pad from the seat arm next to him. "I downloaded it, but I haven't had time to read it yet."

Avery was getting a bit agitated. "Well then, what makes you think I'm sick. You a doctor as well as a writer?"

"No, but we have keen eyesight," Larry related. "From looking at you, I can tell your blood pressure is elevated. Your pain nerve centers are showing far too much activity and your adrenalin output is off the scale, despite the high volume of pain inhibitors you are digesting."

"I'm fine, really." The two sat in silence for a moment. Larry stared at him with a pair of eyes capable of boring through solid rock. Avery finally broke down. "Fine. If you must know, I have inoperable cancer, Okay. You happy now?"

Larry opened his lips wide, which for a Throg was the equivalent of a smile. "Excellent."

"Are you nuts?" Avery spat out in a huff. "How can you term imminent death excellent?"

"It's simple," Larry explained happily, "You're with us now. You can come into battle with no fear. You are already dead. But instead of merely dying alone, you will be remembered. You can become part of our song. A heroic verse destined to be repeated for centuries."

Avery's face turned red. "That's got to be the stupidest thing I've ever heard. Dead is dead. I don't want to be dead. No human wants to be dead. It doesn't matter if you sing songs about me... I'll still be dead. Trust me, the dead are the ultimate in tone-deaf."

"Then your condition is treatable?" Larry asked quietly.

Settling back into his G-couch, Avery sighed. "No, it isn't."

Larry squinted. "I thought your kind cured cancer?"

"My kind? What do you mean by that?"

"Humans."

Lowering his head, Avery gave the Throg a blank stare. "Most of it," he lamented. "But what it ended up doing was to make the forms they can't cure much worse, more insidious. It's as if the cancer cells know you are looking for them and they find cover. What I've got is the gorilla war of diseases."

"So, you must ask yourself how then you will fall," Larry explained as if to a young student.

"What?"

“You are in the acceptance stage, friend,” Larry replied calmly, “You ask the question: *as if the way one fell down mattered*. And I would respond as the character of Richard in your human literature does.... *When the fall is all there is, it matters.*<sup>1</sup>”

“That’s a movie, you idiot,” Avery shouted back, “They’re not real. It’s not a heroic song about actual heroic deeds. It’s fiction. Somebody just made the line up.”

The Throg wasn’t impacted by Avery’s outburst at all. “I beg to differ, friend. The story is fictitious, the sentiments are real. Like us, you humans share your ideas in your fiction. What’s the harm in coming to die with us... if all you have left is death anyway? Why not make it mean something rather than simply passing away in the cold vastness of space? No one to know. No one to care.”

A red hazard light started blinking in front of Avery. “Yeah, well in the short term we’re going to have a bigger problem.” He pressed a few indicators and checked the resulting readouts. “We had to leave in such a hurry, I didn’t have time to get the ship refueled. We’re not going to get anywhere to answer anyone’s questions. I told you I wasn’t ready to take on passengers.”

“*Astracan*,” Larry explained. “We need to go to *Astracan*.” The Throg punched the spatial location into the navigation computer.

Avery elevated his eyebrows and shifted uncomfortably in his G-couch. “*Astracan*? I never heard of it. What kind of planet is it?”

“It not a planet, friend... it’s a colony ship.” Larry rubbed his teeth with his long fingers. “We helped them out a while back. They owe us... as you humans say... a favor.”

Looking at the coordinates, Avery could tell they had only barely enough fuel to get there. Fortunately, the location was nearby, but it would still take a couple of hours of ship time to reach the indicated location. His fingers issued the commands, relaying instructions to the ship’s autopilot. He ordered the ship to reroute itself to the input location. “Anne Bonnie, confirm.”

A computer-like voice came back through the bulkhead. “Target confirmed. Realignment positioning imminent. Maneuver commencing.” The red warning light stopped blinking. The ship shifted suddenly to the right, throwing everyone to the opposite side of their G-couch.

“There is another human on board?”

Avery laughed. “No,” he attempted to regain his composure with limited success, “*Anne Bonney* is the name of the ship. It’s a computer. She’s an older model, so she replies verbally, not via direct mental connection like the new models do.”

“This *Anne Bonnie*, was she someone you knew?”

Chuckling again, Avery turned to the Throg. “No, poignantly she’s been dead for a long time.”

Larry’s skin turned the light yellow of Throg embarrassment. “How do you know this? Did someone write it down?”

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<sup>1</sup> The Lion in Winter (1968)

“Yeah,” Avery looked disappointed. He’d let the Throg corner him with his comment and he knew it. “Yeah, I guess they did.”

“Be the new shepherd in your family,” Larry suggested. “Lead us into battle. Choose a glorious end. Not always does one have the chance to grab such a choice. You should take the opportunity life presents you to choose your time.”

A look of exhaustion spread over Avery’s face. “I’m going to get a few hours’ sleep. Try not to break anything while I’m in my rack, Okay?”

“I have the conn,” Larry joked.

“No. No, you don’t,” Avery cried back in response, “you’re just a passenger. Don’t touch anything.”

The Throg grunted his acceptance as Avery worked his way back to his quarters. Calling it his Quarters was an exaggeration. It was more like a foldout bunk resting both above and behind the ship’s cockpit. He struggled to get up to the point where he could lift one knee to the bunk. He even had to take a moment to rest before finally rolling himself over, landing atop the unkept sheets covering his thin mattress. It didn’t take him more than a few seconds to fall asleep.

He didn’t get to sleep for long. It wasn’t a productive sleep either or a relaxing one. He tossed and turned regularly. An hour or so later he was awoken to the sound of the alert klaxons wailing. Bolting upright, he immediately hit his head on the bulkhead ceiling. As he was rubbing his head with his hand, he saw not one, but two Throgs in the cockpit below him. One in the co-pilot’s seat and one in his. “Larry,” he called out, “what the devil are you doing?”

“I’m not Larry,” The Throg in the pilot seat replied, “I’m Curly.” In the co-pilot’s seat, the other Throg held up his hand cheerfully. “I’m Moe,” he announced. “Larry has gone back to the cargo hold to start making battle preparations. Organizing everyone for deep combat protocols.”

The *Anne Bonnie* shook and rocked like it had received a salvo of torpedoes from a hostile ship. She rattled and the metal in her support pylons creaked, protesting the high-stress factors. “Great. But you still didn’t answer my first question. What the hell are you doing with my ship?”

Curly was eager to reply. “Your computer has plotted a very round-about course to the *Astracan*. We’ve plotted a new one, saving us considerable time.”

Shuffling himself out of his rack, Avery was still groggy. “The reason the computer laid in such a ‘lazy’ course by your calculations is because the ship can’t take these kinds of stresses.” As if agreeing with its owner’s assessment, the ship gowned loudly, the sound echoing over the ship interior. “It’s a cargo hauler, not a military frigate.” Avery checked the controls, there were yellow caution and warning announcements on almost every structural system.

“I believe,” Moe explained, “You’ll find your ship capable of more than merely exceeding the manufacturer’s specifications.”

“When she was new... maybe.” Avery looked about grimly. “You’ve had personal experience piloting an E-100 class Cargo Hauler, have you?”

“No,” Curly replied, “we don’t. We’ve had plenty of experience with the caution your Earth corporations take with their designs to avoid being the subject of excessive litigation.”

“Why is it,” Moe asked with the innocence of a small child, “do you Earth people attack each other with paper? We do not have lawyers on our homeworld.”

“Why do we attack each other with paper?” Avery repeated snidely, “Because it hurts more. That’s why.” He made a few adjustments to the systems and managed to extinguish half the yellow warnings, but the remaining ones refused to depart. At least he got the groans down to a reasonable level and the shakes down to one or two a minute. “I can barely hold this thing together when I’m keeping her running using the specifications... never mind exceeding them.” Avery pushed Curly out of his chair and sank back into the G-couch of the pilot’s seat.



*Astracan* was an enormously long, a rather boxy-looking multi-generational spacecraft build by the Ha’ans, who had never invented FTL drives of any kind; neither jump, phase, or fold. They were happy to take as long as it took to get to where they were going. They enjoyed the leisurely pace of sub-light travel. Their ship was covered with baroque-style golden statues and decorations. Making the ship look like a gaudy reject of some long-forgotten steampunk era.

There were no landing bays to set down in, so the *Anne Bonnie* would have to pull up alongside her and use an external airlock. The *Anne Bonnie* wasn’t an all-black body, like a military vessel. Its reflective surfaces were easily spotted by almost any detection system, even visual. There was no question their approach was being monitored. But the *Anne Bonnie* didn’t appear to be much of the threat. Even from only a few kilometers away, she looked like an ant who had attached itself to the side of a Zeppelin.

Avery shut down the engines and placed the reactors on standby. No reason to use up fuel he didn’t have. Everything else running on battery power was placed in reduced power mode. Walking out to the airlock, Avery was closely followed by Larry, Moe, and Curly. “I hope this works,” Avery told the other three, “I haven’t used the extender tube for a long time.”

Using a series of holographic controls, he extended the airlock with a flexible tunnel. The term tunnel was an inadequate description for the round foil tube which closed the gap between the *Anne Bonnie* and the *Astracan*. The foil was just thick enough to allow the tube to be pressurized, but no more. Actually, it was only truly capable of this when the ship was new. And the *Anne Bonnie* had seen way too many anniversaries for guaranteed safe usage of this device. Avery cautiously opened the outer hatch. Air didn’t rush into the chamber, flinging them all out into space, so that was a good sign. “If we get sucked out into space while using this thing, I charging you double,” Avery gave the three Throgs the evil eye.

As soon as they left the hatch, they were weightless. They started floating towards the huge colony ship. Avery struggled in the zero-g environment. Being weightless always made him feel sick to his stomach. Knowing this, his parents had always questioned his desire to become a space pilot. Some days he wondered himself. Now significantly older, he could add dizziness in zero-G to the list of his discomforts.

On the far side, the receiving door of the *Astracan* opened. They were greeted by three security robots built by Intermech Corporation to provide internal security. There were only four cases of a ship this size ever being attacked by pirates, but you can never be too sure. The Intermech robots were readily

identifiable by their pure white armor. The trio looked over the visitors with their single red cyclopean eyes. Well-armed, they pointed their weapons in a rather unfriendly manner at the newcomers. Avery slowly put up his hands. There was a tense moment before the Ha'an arrived. To Avery, they looked like miniature bears with tough, shaggy lavender fur and six arms. They had excessively large black eyes, the kind Japanese artists like to put on every westerner. Avery found they had a bit of a puppy-like quality to their appearance. The Ha'an got excited as soon as they saw the Throgs.

To Avery, the Throgs all looked alike, but the Ha'an were able to identify individuals easily. They ordered the guards to lower their weapons and then led the visitors inside the ship. Avery didn't have a clue how to translate the chirps and gerbilist squeals the Ha'ans' used as a language, so he unassumingly followed along. The inside of their ship appeared to be a mix of marketplace and carnival. There were Ha'an everywhere. A good number of them were even hanging from the ceiling. There were colorful parades as if it was Chinese New Year and enough noise to make your eardrums vibrate for a month. He wasn't the type, but if forced to admit it, Avery would have confessed to the fact he enjoyed walking around in the festive atmosphere. He found it invigorating.

The streets were thick with sellers hawking packaged goods. Whoever these creatures were they looked as if they specialized in business and trading. From outward appearance, every available space on the ship was dedicated to the art of the deal, the flow of commerce. Avery always hated bargaining with these types. It was always worse when they thought they had you in a bind. You know, ship out of fuel and nowhere to go to get more. Avery had a sinking feeling in his chest. He took out a couple of extra pills from his pocket and popped them. He figured overdosing and addiction were the last things he needed to worry about.

The group's escorts led us past clusters of stalls. They were little more than tents. Although what the occupants needed tents for in the middle of a spaceship, Avery didn't even have a clue. Sudden rainstorms didn't appear to be a factor. They proceeded down a dimly lit alleyway and through a well-used hatch. Inside was a large chamber, less crowded than the main hall, and affected with far less noise. There was only one small knot of Ha'an on the far side of the chamber. From the sounds of their animated conversation, it sounded as if there was a dispute about the referee's call in a tennis match. The sides of the room were covered in painted set dressing. Canvas walls decorated to look like the Ha'an version of an ornate medieval castle. Apparently, to the Ha'an, a room was what it was painted to look like... especially when the weight restrictions of space flight were factored into the equation.

Following Larry, Moe, and Curly, Avery crossed the room to the knot of bickering Ha'an. When they arrived a rather disheveled one with bits of gray hair turned to welcome them. "So, they did bring us a human. It's a pleasure, sir." It was odd to listen to the little six-armed creature speak in imitation of a posh English accent. It was as if he'd picked up the accent watching a series of old movies.

"You speak English," Avery noted.

"Professor Acksuack, Lead Associate Chair on the Study of Primitive Languages... at your disposal. I understand you are attempting to buy some fuel?"

"Yes."

“So, where are you headed?” Inexplicably, immediately after asking, he waved all six hands at Avery. “Never mind. Don’t tell me. I’m sure it’s all hush-hush and whatnot, aye? It doesn’t matter where you are going. There’s a good chap. We’ll just fill you up, shall we?”

Avery tried not to appear too shocked. It wasn’t a good bargaining position to give the impression you didn’t know what is going on. Especially when the reality is... you didn’t have a clue. “If we could just discuss the price?” Avery asked.

“Nonsense,” Professor Acksuack replied, “Your funds are no good here. I’m sure you’re on some kind of GDF business, aye what? I can see you are shuttling our friends here about. Say no more, say no more, we’re only too happy to help.” He proceeded to squeal something to his associates. Following this, they all nodded their heads. At least Avery understood their nods. Funny how this one single gesture is so universal... even across half the galaxy.

Refueling took some time, so the Ha’an took us out to dinner. Dinner and business went together like cake and frosting to the Ha’an. Their version of a restaurant is space in a well-stocked kitchen so you can make whatever you are comfortable eating. The one thing Throgs don’t do well is cook, so Avery got down some pots from the hooks on the ceiling and started cooking. He had to spend some time rummaging through the eighteen open shelf units in the spacious kitchen to find anything he recognized as palatable ingredients. A huge grin crossed his face when he found something he could put a name on.

Soon the air was filled with the aromas of cooking. Steam wafted toward the ceiling as pots boiled and bubbled. Avery glided about the kitchen as Larry, Moe, and Curly watched intently. One of the Ha’an kept leaning over the pot, sticking a finger in the water, and tasting it. He would then gibber something to the rest of the Ha’an. Avery half expected Professor Acksuack to translate what the other was saying as a negative review or at least a statement explaining why they believed the dish lacked salt. But the Ha’an settled down and soaked in the odors.

When it was finally ready, Avery served everyone with bowls he’d found on the back shelves. Much to his surprise, he was also able to provide forks from the kitchen stock. At least the Ha’an had some table manners. The Throgs and the Ha’an ate with gusto. “What do you call this dish?” Larry asked.

Avery gave him a wry glance. “Spaghetti and hot dogs.”

The conversation at dinner was quite animated. They apparently went back to arguing the tennis score. Avery did learn from Professor Acksuack about the last human they had encountered. He traded them the noodles for some spare parts. Avery didn’t even want to ask where they had gotten the hot dogs. They had a pungent taste to them. Somethings it’s best not knowing.

Toward the end of the meal, Avery looked like he was disposed to vomit.

“Are you all right?” Larry asked.

“Fine,” Avery replied while gritting his teeth.

Larry wasn’t convinced. “Your legs are shaking.”

“That’s only because the rest of me is too tired to shake.” Larry could see Avery was wearing the tight-jawed look of someone who didn’t want anyone to notice his infirmities, so he let it pass.

He did manage to keep dinner down and they said their farewells to the assembled Ha'an and went back aboard the *Anne Bonnie*. Curly was a quick study. Just from observing Avery's actions, he deduced how to retract the flexible airlock tube from the *Astracan*. Avery didn't have to lift a finger.

They made their way up to the cockpit. The ship always had a certain aroma when the fuel tanks were full. It was probably a leak at the top of the tanks. Avery had meant to get it fixed, but somehow, he never found the time.

The engines roared back to life as Avery made the adjustments to send the ship toward Narathu. The *Anne Bonnie* lurched forward as the FTL drive kicked in. Moe and Curly went back to join the others in the cargo hold while Larry sat in the co-pilot's seat. Avery still couldn't believe how many Throgs were stuffed into his cargo hold. He gave Larry a one-eyed look. "How are they doing waste extraction back there?" Avery thought better of the question as soon as he said it. He held up a hand. "Never mind. I don't want to know."

Larry brightened up. "It's rather intriguing. You see..."

"I don't want to know... REALLY."

"Whatever you say." Larry sat back in his G-couch. "Have you come to terms with how you want your life to end?"

"No." Avery gave him a snotty response. "I'm still working on the not dying part. I still looking for more time."

"They say life passes in a blink of an eye," Larry commented.

"I think that's true if you had a good life," Avery lamented. "If you've struggled, life takes forever. You're always waiting for the next day, hoping it will be better."

"Time passage is related to happiness?"

"I think it's one of the weirder parts of life. The grind of waiting. It always seems to take forever. But if you're happy, you're not waiting for happiness, you've already found it. This is when times passes at the speed of light. Because you don't want it to end. But, of course, it does."

"Interesting philosophy. Maybe tomorrow things *will* be better."

Avery snorted. "Fat chance."

For this part of the journey, Avery looked even more distressed than before. He spent about ten minutes doubled over, elbows on his knees, shaking and gulping the cockpit's recycled air. For most of his life, Avery had only felt a small amount of discomfort when the FTL drive was engaged, now... well, it was a bit more than disorientating... and far less comfortable. He crawled up into his rack to try to get some sleep a few times, but it eluded him, even with a healthy dose of pharmaceuticals. It was an odd feeling. He could feel the end approaching. Larry felt concerned for him, but there was little he could do.

The approach to Narathu wasn't a difficult one. Not being spotted was going to be the difficult part. Avery scanned the area around the system. There were at least two dozen Banshee cruisers and at least two heavily armed battle craft. They were too far away to pick up the heat signatures of the smaller

fighter craft, but even one fighter would be more than a match for the *Anne Bonnie*. His hands worked the holographic controls. "Annie," Avery called to the computer, "put us back into normal space... NOW."

The computer gave an emotionless response. "Entering normal space." The ship rocked and jerked as it came to a sudden, unexpected halt.

Larry leaned forward and checked the controls. "We're still quite far out from the planet," he protested. "You're not planning on ejecting us into space and making us walk, are you?"

Bemused, Avery continued to work the controls. "No, we're outside of Banshee sensor range. They won't have any trouble spotting us once we get inside their intelligence bubble. We're going to need to look like something they don't care about. If we even look like a spaceship for half a second, they'll blow us out of the sky before you can say 'deploy.'"

His fingers danced over the controls, slowly changing all the lights to green. "Annie, Activate thrusters. Set 14 million pounds of thrust, please."

"The proposed configuration is not safe," the computer protested.

"We're going into a battle zone Annie, nothing about this trip is safe."

"I see your point," the computer replied. The ship lurched forward. Larry and Avery were pressed back into their G-couches. Avery came very close to decorating the cockpit floor with the contents of his stomach. "Annie," Avery had a hard time speaking, "Shutdown thrusters... NOW."

"Confirmed," Annie replied. The two were thrown forward, right into the base of their respective control consoles.

Avery glanced at Larry out of the side of his eye. "Strap yourself in. Here's where it gets exciting. Annie, give me 2.5 degrees delta-V to port."

"Confirmed." The ship jerked violently. You didn't want to be looking at the view screen at this point. The ship was doing things ships should be doing. Avery's knuckles turned white as he held on to the arms of the G-couch.

Larry almost growled "You put the ship into an uncontrolled spin. Are you insane?"

Taking a deep breath, Avery tried to explain. "It's the only way to get thru. If the Banshee spot us... which they will in about five seconds... they can't think we're a ship or they will blow us to kingdom come. This way, we just look like a spinning asteroid. I've plotted a course near to Narathu, so they won't see the trajectory as a threat. Hopefully, they'll get tired of tracking us."

"Then what?"

"When we get close enough, we'll have to use the thrusters to get us out of the spin so we can change course to land."

"Won't they notice such a maneuver?"

"Probably, but I'm hoping by then it'll be too late for them to respond."

“What if it isn’t?”

“Well then, it’s been a fun trip.”

Reaching into his interior pocket, Avery took out two more pills and popped them into his mouth. “How can you take those without water?” Larry inquired.

“It’s an acquired talent.” Avery’s hands ran over the controls. The light on the holosurface began to blink out. “Annie shut down everything you can. We need to go dark.”

“Life support?” the computer asked.

“Yes, life support.”

Larry’s face turned a little yellow. “I can’t say I’m happy with you turning off life support.”

“We can’t have any energy emissions. They’ll read the energy output and see right through our ploy.”

Swallowing hard, Larry glanced over at Avery. “How are we supposed to breathe?”

Avery gave the nervous-looking Throg a wry grin. “Breathe shallow... or hold your breath... take your pick.”

The trip wasn’t comfortable. Everyone’s stomach was making the journey from throat to groin about every two minutes. Or at least it felt like it did. Avery had to turn off the view screen or he would have ended up losing his lunch. It was a pretty close thing already, but Avery had to keep an eye on things. A lot can go wrong when you are tumbling out of control in space. It would have been tough on a healthy pilot, but for Avery, it was well past his limits. With a groan, he passed out.

It was some time before Avery came to. Lucky for him, he’d missed most of the bumpy stuff. Larry had taken over monitoring the ship. Avery’s voice sounded cracked and dry. “How far away are we?”

“About four minutes from the closest approach,” Larry responded.

“That’s not good. Annie turn everything back on. Give me manual.” The holocontrols lit up in front of him and Avery started the intricate dance between his fingers and the interface. Some of what he did appeared to be working spinning dials. At overtimes, he clearly pressed controls. Slowly, painfully, the ship’s unrestrained spin slackened and then disappeared. “Annie, where are we?”

“Two minutes to insertion.”

“Crap.”

Larry choked back his expression. “What’s wrong?”

“We came out of the spin too soon.”

Annie’s computer voice came over the speakers in perfect unison with the klaxons and the red blinking warning lights. “Incoming fire detected. Time to impact, 30 seconds.”

“Boy,” Avery complained, “They catch on quick.” His hands flashed over the controls. The *Anne Bonnie* pulled to the right and just as suddenly to the left. Larry felt as if he was being thrown around in a blender. Evasive maneuvers weren’t Avery’s strong suit, but it was better than doing nothing.

“Will they hit us?” Larry groaned.

“Well, this is a cargo ship and we don’t have any military shields, so I’d say... Yeah.” As if to punctuate his comment the ship bucked and rattled. “Annie status?”

Annie’s computer voice showed no signs of concern or worry. “Engines offline. Thrusters inoperable. Structural integrity at 12%.”

“Okay then, We’re just passengers from this point on... along for the ride. Hey, Larry...”

“Yes?”

“You ever crash before?”

“No.”

“Well, this will be a new experience for you then.”

Flames could be seen on the external monitors. The temperature spiked. Annie’s computer voice came back on the speakers. “It’s been a pleasure serving with you, Captain.” The speakers crackled with static and then went silent. The temperature in the cockpit continued to rise. You could almost see the steam in the air. Sweat beaded on everything and then began to fall in the cabin as if it was raining. The metal of the ship plates groaned and then made a sound akin to a small animal screaming. This, of course, all came to a halt then their forward motion was abruptly brought to a sudden and conclusive stop.

When Avery came to, Larry was no longer in his G-couch. There was no sign of him. Crawling back into the cargo area, he found Larry getting his troops ready. Amazingly, none of them had been hurt. Throgs are tough little creatures. They were all standing, checking their weapons. “Avery,” Curly called out to him, “can you help us with this? Without power, we can’t get the outer airlock hatch open.

“Forget about it. it’s not worth the trouble.” Avery stumbled to the back of the cargo bay and opened an access panel in the wall. Pulling down a manual handle, he set off a series of explosive bolts throwing an entire wall section out onto the sand-covered hillside. The Throgs didn’t need any instructions, they streamed through the opening screaming their guttural warrior battle cries.

This left only Avery, Moe, Larry, and Curly in the cargo hold. “We better get out of the area,” Avery suggested, “The Banshee will have patrols coming along shortly.”

“Our thinking exactly,” Moe commented as the four ran out through the panel opening.

The crash site was in a mountainous area of the eastern highland region. An ice-covered peak loomed in the distance. The land around the crash site was not only uninhabited by the colonists, but it was sparsely overgrown with stumpy trees and short growth grasses. From the air, they’d be easy to spot. With limited places to hide, they needed to get out of this upland area as quickly as possible. They could see taller trees in the lower foothills, so they decided to head for these.

They were only halfway down the hill when a pair of Banshee hoppers appeared in the sky. The remains of the *Anne Bonnie* exploded soon after. The smoke cloud from the burning ship obscured the sun and gave them a fair amount of cover.

The rest of the Banshee they met coming up the hill as they were coming down. The firefight was intensive. Light flashing in the sky, explosions raking the ground. The Throgs closed in and fought almost hand to hand. The tactic was designed to ensure the Banshee couldn't call the hoppers back or zero in artillery. Not without hitting their own as well as the Throgs. Even the Banshee weren't this crazy.

Larry pushed Avery aside, just as a weapon's blast plastered the hillside next to them. Avery got up a brushed the dirt off his suit. "See?" Larry suggested, "You get to live longer. Now on to battle." Soon the dust and haze from the explosions made seeing anything difficult. Each shot reflected in the thousands of particles in the air, making the sky light up as if it were made of sparklers and flares. The fling sand crystals appeared to be on fire as they danced into the swirling breezes. The smell reminded Avery of the campfires of his youth. Especially the odors which smelled like roasting hamburgers. He briefly wondered if Banshee tasted good with a little garlic sauce.

Mercifully, the firefight was short. The Banshee had only sent a small party up the hill. They were expecting to remove the bodies of a few crew members from an insignificant cargo ship... not run into a pack of wild Throgs.

Now the fighting had died down and the area returned to its previous pastoral silence, a light wind blowing up the hills. Avery looked around and saw the terrain covered with the remains of Banshee troopers. Some of the Throgs were checking the bodies for intelligence and any usable equipment. The Throgs were pretty good shots. Most of the bodies had a single, very clean hole in them, right through vital areas. Where the Banshee were happy to spray areas with indiscriminate fire, the Throgs were precise and methodical.

This is why it surprised Avery to see one of the Banshees move. Chances are it had been playing dead, waiting for a chance to exact revenge for his fallen comrades. The grey-skinned Banshee sat up and took a bead on Larry with a hand-held weapon. At this range, he couldn't miss. Just as Larry had done for him earlier, Avery pushed the Throg out of harm's way. He took the brunt of the blast personally and ... he was disintegrated in an instant. Only a puff of smoke remained where the Earthman had once stood.

Nearby Throgs responded with a hail of gunfire, riddling the offending Banshee with enough holes to turn him into a cheese grater. It was serious overkill. Even Larry took offense and kicked what remained of the corpse until it rolled down into the valley below.

Larry looked at the spot where Avery had last stood, the vaporized residue on the ground. "Well, my friend, you got to pick your time."

The Banshee were driven off Narathu after several months of bloody fighting. Ruthless and powerful in space combat, the Banshee had little stomach for consolidation of ground targets. By the time the main GDF fleet arrived to launch a counterattack, the Banshee had withdrawn, their tails between their thin silvery legs... at least metaphorically. GDF officers found the remaining 5<sup>th</sup> Army Throgs on the ground involved in an ecstatic celebration.

True to his word, Avery's deeds were recorded in the now-famous *Song of the Shepard*. A year later, Larry laid her eggs. Avery probably would have been surprised to discover Larry had been a female. She named the first egg Shepard. And it would later become one of the most revered names in the Throg language.