

TERRYAL-6

By Mark Lain

*Inspired by the Fighting Fantasy gamebook **Starship Traveller** by Steve Jackson
and © Steve Jackson*

Dr Sjuff eyed developments through the electron microscope intently and with a certain amount of hopeful apprehension. 'This time,' she exhorted, 'surely, this is the breakthrough.' The multi-coloured strands twisted and contorted under the glass slide as the digital timer counted ten, then twenty, then thirty seconds. With one eye still over the eyepiece of the microscope, she switched her focus to her other eye as the seconds reached the previous failure point: 00:34:00. She inhaled excitedly as the numbers changed to 00:35:00... 00:36:00... 00:37:00... then the inevitable. The strands separated and disintegrated as her expression changed to one of disappointment. The now so familiar sight of the DNA degrading into tiny broken dots of disconnected worthlessness was there before her once again.

She had been appointed to the euphemistically-named Progress Amelioration Unit five years ago at the age of four, making her one of the oldest ever Terryals to be assigned to the team tasked with addressing the ultimate problem: the rapid and irreversible mental deterioration that had plagued the species since records began many hundreds of years ago. Rarely did a member of their race get beyond the age of twenty with their full cerebral capacity intact. To reach thirty with anything approaching even fifty per cent of their faculties was a scientific anomaly. Few, if any, Terryals could hope to be anything other than completely senile by forty, with death being a certainty by fifty. Legend tells of the one they called Old Gascuff who supposedly lived to seventy-five and remained fully *compus mentis* well into his fifties, but records are scant on the subject as the PAU's research had not yet begun in earnest back then, and, the unavoidable fact is that no Terryal old enough to have been his contemporary still had the memory, mental stability, or motor skills to provide any coherent information on the subject.

Dr Sjuff noted the failure of her latest strain of synthetic phosphate on the standard format sheet that she had been using week after week to record what little progress she had made. Time was that she would use the same sheet, filled out in pencil, and simply erase each failed attempt and re-use it for the next try. But the sheet had so much use through her determined efforts that the paper had quickly worn right through and she had instead wisely opted for making many duplicates of the log so as to chronicle her slow and seemingly futile path. In spite of her catalogue of failures she remained positive and determined to at least try to make a worthwhile and memorable contribution to the advancement of her society, knowing very well that her own decline into mental ineptitude

would soon catch up with her. She had a maximum of ten years of life left as a genius to relish before everything she knew faded rapidly around her.

By no means was the outlook bleak for the planet however. Some aspects of Terryal society had moved forward rapidly over recent years, especially since the Great Intercontinental War had devastated the surface of the planet such that subsequent generations had to live on the hovering platforms that so surprised off-world visitors to Terryal-6. Gone was the pre-War conservative attitude to subjects such as reproduction, pre-natal research, and genetics, for example, and almost all disease was eradicated with the, admittedly grave, exception of “that which will take us all”, as the education machines called it. The education machines themselves were a huge advance and meant that knowledge gained in youth was not lost in adulthood but was now able to be passed from generation to generation via pre-recorded vid images hosted by the best-spoken and most eloquent two-year-old prodigies that the planet could offer, as opposed to the rambling gibberish from twenty-five year old geriatrics that passed for “teaching” before the cataclysm that caused the race to go “On Platform”. Procreation itself had of course always been difficult, given that Terryls reached sexual maturity at a similar age to Terrans, giving them just a handful of years to find a mate before they totally forgot what to do (referred to as “erasing the birds and the bees”) or, as was often the case, would begin the act but be unable to complete it due to one or both parties simply not having a long enough concentration span to see it through to its conclusion. Thankfully, the first area to be addressed post-War was just this and the creation of the Futureproofing Regeneration Centre, essentially a test tube-based cloning factory, was the first huge leap forward for the species. There was initially talk of having four or five strata to the race to allow for different levels of intellect and to create a “working” class of Terryal who could be responsible for rebuilding a society on the planet’s ravaged surface whilst the genius classes focussed on science and technology on platform, but this was quickly decided against as there were practical and ethical issues raised concerning long-lasting damage to the species if a certain part of it was “born stupid”, as it were, given the fragility and brevity of mental strength that the Terryls were ultimately trying to reverse. Clearly, technological development had never been a struggle for the Terryls and a regular flow of spacecraft to and from their planet guaranteed them access to equipment and commodities from all around the Seltsian system. Indeed, the Terryls would gladly welcome any visitors to meet and converse with their most senior younglings (often even the great Luff himself would give audiences to their more important guests) and the Terryls had developed a keen skill in trading off-world information and supplies for unique insights into galactic research that the Terryls had inadvertently gathered in their quest for a solution to their senility problem. Occasionally even the warlike Dar-Villians or Emissaries of the far-off Ganzig Empire would be welcomed, on the proviso of course that they respect and acknowledge the Terryls’ status and right to autonomy. Furthermore, due to their exceptionally high intellect and interpersonal skills at birth, the Terryls would usually absolutely insist on certain rules of etiquette being followed, in particular the correct

response to the “run-and-pull” hand greeting that they used as standard with visitors, and their policy of absolute zero tolerance of any act of aggression or antagonism whilst on their territory. Not for nought do Starship Captains have a saying that goes “The Void hath no fury like a baby Terryal scalded!”

Dr Sjuff completed her latest failure report and submitted it to Luff via the usual means of an adult male messenger who still had enough left of their mind to be able to blindly repeat the word “Failed” until they were forcibly removed by one of Luff’s surly and emotionally erratic teenage guards and hurled unceremoniously off the platform to meet a mercifully premature death in amongst the remains of fields and factories that still littered the planet’s surface. She would try again tomorrow, of course, as this was quite literally her life’s work – all twenty or so years of it that would be worth living, that is.

As the adult messenger left her laboratory, Dr Sjuff’s partner, Professor Iluff, entered with news of reports being transmitted to all local systems from the cordial central belt world Cliba that the violent storms that had recently blighted their surface had suddenly been brought under control after being unexpectedly visited by an unknown, but notionally malign vessel referred to as the *Traveller*. Dr Sjuff read the full transmission with great interest. If this ship and its crew could actually bring something as irrational as Cliba’s natural climate under control, perhaps this ship is from a world with such a high tech level that they may be as medically advanced as they must be technologically advanced and can provide some guidance on curing Terryal’s great problem. The irony was not lost on either of them that Terryal is in fact a very medically developed planet itself, a fact made all the more frustrating to its hapless inhabitants as they seem incapable of curing their own hereditary weakness. Of similar frustration to starship Captains who might find themselves in the far reaches of the system where Terryal-6 is located is the Terryls’ willingness to trade medical assistance for information pertaining to a given ship’s computers and weaponry. At face value, this arrangement appears mutually beneficial to both parties until the ship in question leaves the planet’s orbit and is faced with the choice to either turn around and retrace its steps or to run the risk of a hyperspace jump into one of six nearby black holes if intergalactic exploration is the ship’s purpose. As the Terryls often say with a childish giggle as they wave off another visiting crew, ‘Boldly they go, but to where, only the great Luff can know.’

‘Has the great Luff seen this yet?’ she asked her partner after reading the communication for a second time. Iluff shrugged his shoulders and shook his head vigorously, his bleached white skin showing signs of reddening through embarrassment at making such a schoolboy error. ‘It was transmitted on all known frequencies to all charted worlds within the Seltsian system so we can expect this ship imminently I feel’, he replied.

The two made haste to Central HQ where Luff was anxiously awaiting them. To his left was seated Medical Director Ledoux who had already been summoned to Luff’s presence earlier that morning. Ledoux himself is unusual in the context of what passes as “normal” in Terryal

society (as least from an outsider's perspective) as he is considerably taller and more muscular than the average Terryal child, a product of a recent cross-breeding programme with the Maccommonians of Malthus-4. The programme was one of the more extreme attempts to eliminate the Terryls' degenerative genes through reproductive genetics under laboratory conditions. All it had achieved however was the creation of freakishly tall Terryal children who were ridiculed as halfwits from birth due to often being mistaken for senile adults. To stigmatise and single-out these cross breeds even further, they were the only Terryls ever to not be named using the ancient Terryal naming convention of an "-uff" suffix. The Terryls have subsequently tried to justify this misguided experiment with the rather transparent excuse that "*Those were different times*" but, as all Terryls will forget about it fairly quickly into their short lives and this part of Terryal history is conveniently missed out of the education machines' vid classes, this is not an issue of great import to them.

After a brief discussion, Luff, Ledoux, and the two scientists agreed that they would welcome a delegation from this ship were it to request authority to beam down an away team. Naturally, any attempt from the ship to show aggression or anything other than strict adherence to Terryal protocol would be met with immediate expulsion from the planet. The four Terryls stared at the commlink screen and smiled hopefully as the human face of the starship's Captain appeared before them and requested permission to send down three crew members. If the crew of this *Traveller* had achieved as much on the worlds they had already visited on their voyage as reports were suggesting then this could be the Terryls' breakthrough. Would they finally acquire the knowledge and technology needed to cure them? 'Perhaps YOU are our hero', thought Sjuff as the Captain vanished from the video link screen and began to materialise in front of them.