

Smorgle Saves the Day

An Alien Adventure in Zion National Park

By

Margaret Dilloway

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Short story for Zion

Grades 4 & Up

Smorgle scanned the virtual logbook again, the symbols floating in the air, blowing air through his beak, to turn the pages. Nope, nope, nope. The log was just plain missing.

He fought down the rising panic in his throat. Where on earth had he put the Plasmic Irradiator? Well, that wasn't exactly right. He knew *where* on earth it was.

The problem was *when* it was.

He flipped back to the beginning. Maybe he'd missed it. Maybe the search feature on this thing was faulty. He'd meant to write it down—but it was nowhere to be seen.

The Plasmic Irradiator—the PI—was just a little bit important for their survival. It was a cube they placed carefully in the earth's rocks, to soak up the gases that the rocks emitted, which they then used to power their spacecraft. It needed to be replaced every five years. Without it, the ship wouldn't run.

This meant they'd have to return home ahead of schedule.

Which meant that his parents wouldn't be able to complete their scientific mission on Jupiter, measuring all of the solar storms as part of the Galactic Meteorological Project.

Which meant that Smorgle would get sent away to Intergalactic Finishing Academy for the Unfocused. That's where all the children who were disappointments to their parents were sent, to let them become someone else's headache for a while.

As much as he wished it wasn't, the missing PI was definitely Smorgle's fault. He'd been in a hurry that day, trying to get to atomic ball practice, that he'd blasted his pod to a random time zone, stuck the P.I. into the rocks, and then zoomed away without writing it down.

He shuddered, his ten tentacles shaking with him. His father Morgle would be furious with him. His mother Mortha even more so. He imagined his father's angry voice resonating through the space ship. "You had one job, Smorgle. When will you grow up? Why aren't you more responsible?" Why, if Smorgle couldn't produce the PI by—he checked his watch—two Planck units after sun rotation, he would be grounded. And he certainly wouldn't get the new cosmic gaming system he'd been eyeing for his birthday.

"What's wrong?"

Smorgle jumped at the sound of his sister's voice, his tentacles flying into the air in an extremely uncool manner. Smortha giggled. She always seemed to know the least opportune time to show up. "I didn't say you could come in my room."

She indicated the opening behind her. "Your portal wasn't shut."

"That doesn't mean anything." He couldn't wait until he left the family pod and went to college, without her always getting into his business. "You're supposed to knock."

Smortha, even though she was two years young, *always* remembered what to do. She knew what to log and would never forget how. She never made mistakes. Next to her, Smorgle was a clumsy oaf who might as well have meteors for hands. That's why Smortha was their parents' favorite and why she got straight Fs in school—F for Fabulous.

"Maybe I can help," she offered.

Smorgle glared at her, wishing she would leave him alone. She was almost a mirror image of him, thick orange-brown skin glistening with its protective mucous coating, three swirling eyes across the middle of their faces, and a wide expressive mouth full of the crooked teeth their parents had paid a lot of money to unstraighten. When they were little, they used to play together all the time, holding tentacles as they slithered around their home planet and space ship. Now that they were teenagers, they could barely stand each other. “No thanks.”

“I already know.” She squinted at him, her eyes lighting to neon green. “You don’t know where you left the Plasmic Irradiator.”

Smorgle swallowed. “Go away. I can fix this alone.”

Smortha shook her head. “I knew Mom and Dad should’ve let me place it.”

“It’s the duty of the eldest,” he said, two of his three hearts dropping.

“Yeah but when the eldest is not going to pay close attention...” Smortha shrugged, her tentacles elegantly rippling.

She was right. Smorgle couldn’t handle his shame anymore. A sob lifted in his throat and he turned away. “I’m useless.”

“You’re not.” Smortha crossed the room and put a tentacle on his shoulder. The suction cups squeezed gently, sending happy hormones through him. He moved away. He didn’t want her second-hand dopamine. “You’ve got a lot to offer. You’re...”

He waited for her to list his best traits.

“Um. You’re really good at eating,” she said. “I’ve never seen five stomachs put away so much food.”

He wished she hadn't said anything at all. Smorgle wiped his eyes. "I'm going to go tell our parents."

"No. I can help you." She flipped open the log book. "Tell me where you left it.

"Coordinates 99.446363, Zqarta. On the planet known to locals as Earth."

She breathed out an exasperated sigh. "Why don't you just call it what we call it? Quarquatium?"

"I like to call things by what the actual people there call them. Remember when someone called Dad an alien when we landed that one time?" Their father had been very offended. "We were here before," he had said. "Just look at the octopi! They're our descendants."

Smortha pushed the button to open the hatch to their pod. "And what is the time period?"

He expelled a breath. "That is the part I don't know." Because their kind could pass through time as easily as jumping into a swimming pool, they had no "present day." Their "present day" was wherever they were.

"Do you remember *anything*?" she pressed him.

He tried. "I got a thorn in my tentacle from some kind of bush." He held up the one in question. It had hurt quite a bit.

"Super specific. Thanks."

"I hate it when you're sarcastic."

The hatch to the pod completed its air pressure calibrations and the door slid open. They slithered across the threshold into the pod. It was about as big as a Quarquartian phone booth, but

because they lacked bones, they didn't need much space. The walls were covered in buttons and screens, with a domed window at the top. The two squished together and wrapped their tentacles around the safety handles.

Smortha input the coordinates and a date Smorgle couldn't see from where he was.

“When are you going?”

“My pick.” The pod shuddered and shook through space, landing on a plateau. In the space of a breath, it disappeared, leaving Smortha and Smorgle standing there. Smorgle looked down and almost jumped in fright. His beautiful Decather body, usually covered with its slime coat, was replaced by a sack of strange smooth of pale brown flesh, with only five tentacles on each hand—and they didn't even have suckers on them. He wiggled them experimentally. Disgusting! “Why humans?”

“Quarquartians.” His sister looked approximately the same, but her body-coat was medium brown instead. She blinked at him. Two eyes now instead of three.

“Humans,” Smorgle said.

“Whatever.”

They both wore human clothes, of some short-legged pants and soft shirts. The automatic translators were embedded into their human suits, for ease of use. Smorgle was relieved to find the PI locator inside his shorts pocket. He clipped it to his waistband to make sure it wouldn't be lost.

Smorgle looked around. They were on a plateau made of wide, flat rock and boulders and earth material, dotted with the occasional tree and bush. Some humans sat on the edge, their feet dangling off.

They went to the edge of the plateau and looked down. Below, the canyon floor spread out with a river winding through it. Had that water way been here? He vaguely remembered seeing water out of the corner of his eye, just a glimmer.

He looked around. This canyon was unlike any Smorgle had seen in his intergalactic travels. As far as he could see, burnt red-brown rocky walls dotted with green trees rose up from the flat white sand area of the river, which was covered in white-flowering trees. The valley was mostly in shadow, though it was not quite noon. Immediately beneath, a winding trail cut into the mountainside wound upwards, covered in hikers. The air was unlike the canned atmosphere or their spaceship, or that of their home planet, where it always smelled like it had just rained. This—he sniffed hard—this had sage and pine and some kind of mineral scent.

“Well? Does this look familiar or not?”

Smorgle wanted to say that he would have remembered this. But he’d been so tunnel-visioned he hadn’t really paid attention to anything but the rock in front of him. He didn’t want to admit this to his sister. “I remember water.”

She raised a brow. “This water?”

He looked downward. Below them, there was a narrow ridge of mountainous land that people were crawling up like ants. He definitely remembered something like that. “That’s where I put it!” he said with more confidence than he actually felt.

“Let’s go.”

They walked down the trail, passing human after human, who snorted and talked and played tinny music out of their odd and annoying personal devices. Smorgle marveled at the variety in their shapes. Decathers all looked similar. These humans were tall, short, wide and narrow. Their skin came in a range of browns, from light pinkish white to dark brown. It was amazing.

The trail was steep and hard work. His skin prickled—something wet ran down his forehead. It had way more water than his usual coating. “Uh, Smortha.” He tapped his sister. “I think I’m melting!”

“It’s just sweat.” She gave him a funny look. “Do you mean to tell me you didn’t use any disguise when you hid it?”

“I didn’t see any humans around,” he replied.

“That’s weird. This is a National Park for the United Statesians. It’s usually packed with Quarquations.”

“Humans,” he muttered.

They reached a sign that said Angels Landing, with an arrow pointing toward the ridge of land. Another arrow, pointing from where they’d come, said West Rim. “Was this sign here?” Smortha asked.

He shrugged. “Maybe?”

She clucked her tongue at his incompetence. “Well, let’s climb up here and see what we find.”

They made their way toward Angels Rim. There were tons of humans here, bumping into each other and Smorgle, so Smorgle felt their strange sweat slap from their skin to his, the aerosol from their breaths landing in his nostrils. It made him feel sick. This couldn't be the place. Surely he'd remember all this commotion.

They began the climb up, holding onto a chain fastened to the rocks. Below the canyon with a river seemed to spin. Honestly, once you went into outer space, height meant nothing.

His pitiful human feet slipped and slid under him on the sandy stone, and his finger-tentacles ached as they gripped the warm metal. "Why aren't you wearing shoes?" a small human behind Smorgle said.

"What are shoes?" he said, his eyes glowing green, and the human child shrieked and retreated to its parent.

In a few minutes, they reached the top. A stiff wind blew Smorgle's tentacle-hairs against his head. He wondered how they could stand having all these stuff on their scalps. There wasn't much space up here—if you stepped a little too far to the right or left, you'd fall right off the ridge.

"Ahhh!" a huge man screamed as he emerged from the trail. "No thank you." He disappeared the way he came.

They crept across the rock. "Does this look familiar?" Smortha asked.

Smorgle looked. From here he could see more of the valley than he had from West Rim. The sun hit the canyon walls and reflected in a way that dazzled Smorgle's weaker human eyes

and took his breath away. Red stone topped with white sandstone seemed to embrace the wind in a way that made Smorgle, for all his experience in outer space, feel very small. He wanted to explore it all.

He thought he would have remembered this. Why hadn't he paid attention? "Let's see." He pressed a button on the PI detector. It scanned the rock, then let out a dismal beep. *Wah wah wah*. "Dang it."

"Excuse me, y'all are in the way." A sleek pale woman in a brilliant flowered shirt stood next to them. "I want to get a photo."

"I'm just looking for my block," Smorgle said, before he could stop himself.

"Sunblock? Did you run out?" The woman reached into her backpack and pulled out a tube. "Give me your palm."

Dubiously, Smorgle held out his hand. The woman squeezed white paste into it. "Now smear that around on your face." He did so. It felt slimy but not unpleasantly so, because Smorgle actually loved slime. When finished, he looked at his sister.

Smortha burst into laughter. "Your face is all white like that rock."

They stepped back from the precipice, and Smortha summoned the pod with a gesture into the air. The pod appeared in the sky next to them and they hopped in, immediately becoming invisible. Smorgle wondered if any humans would think they had just fallen off the cliff or something. But they were all looking at the view and not paying attention to them.

In the pod, Smortha turned to him. "Can't you remember *anything* else?"

His brains felt like mush. He tried to picture landing the pod, putting the PI block into the rock. That vague recollection of something shimmering out of the corner of his eye came to him.

“There was water.”

“How much? Lake, river, what?”

“Probably a river.”

Smortha brightened. “Now we’re talking.” and set the time odometer to the Permian period. 299 million years backward, give or take a few, from where they were at the moment—2020 AD.

The pod shuddered, and in a few moments, a vast swath of blue lay in front of them. What the humans called Angels Landing had disappeared. Instead it was just a sea.

There were no canyon walls at all.

He glared at his sister. “I literally just told you it was a river.”

“I know. But I’m going to do the opposite of what you say, because you don’t really know what you’re talking about.”

He wished he were an only child. “You’re impossible.”

“I’m not the one who lost a vital piece of space equipment.”

She was going to rub that in until they were both old decrepit Decathers. Smorgle climbed up to the window so he wouldn’t have to look at his sister. “I think I would’ve remembered this.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” Her voice was smug. “You’re going to have to swim to find the sun block.”

His three hearts beat hard. “Let’s skip this area.”

“Well, if you *want* to skip it, then we can tell Dad we looked at every era but this one.”

Smorgle looked down into the water and swallowed what felt like a snowball down his throat. All of them were born into water, but usually left right away. Smorgle hated swimming, hated the feeling of the water pressing around him, the way it could wash you away without control. In space, you floated without water.

When Smorgle was a young pup, he’d fallen into a river and had been swept away. Luckily their mother had fast tentacles and could save him quickly.

He glared down at his sister. “You brought me here because I’m afraid of swimming, didn’t you?”

She smiled a little meanly. “It’ll do you good.”

Smorgle gulped. He couldn’t let his sister be right again. His human flesh went hot and sweaty—gross. He told himself the water would feel good, cool off his skin. *You’re a natural swimmer*, he reminded himself. Before he could talk himself out of it, he opened the pod door and jumped.

“Wait!” Smortha yelled. “You have to turn back into Decather form!”

Too late. Smorgle broke the surface, the water rushing into his ear holes and covering his eyes with painful saltiness. The sea was dark, but shallow—he could vaguely see the irregular outline of some rocks at the bottom.

If he thought swimming as a Decather was unpleasant, it was nothing compared to swimming as a human, with these clumsy appendages. He might as well be a Morwobble, those beings with negative buoyancy who simply sank whenever they go into water.

Smorgle swam down. A black shape passed beneath him, twice his size, and Smorgle's hearts jumped in fearful unison. If there were monsters in here, he'd better get in and out quick. In his natural form, he'd be able to emit a cloud of ink and escape. Not so in his human.

He aimed the PI detector and heard it whine faintly. *Wah wah wah*. Of course. It hadn't been here. He knew it hadn't. It was all his sister's fault.

He turned and kicked to the surface. Smorgle would really let her have it. His head had just broken free of the water when suddenly something wet and spongy and sharp wrapped itself around his leg.

Stunned, he looked down. A giant mouth covered in rows of giant sharp teeth sunk into his leg. The spongy part he felt were its gums.

"Remerge!" he shouted at his sister, and she pushed a button just as a thousand trillobytes of pain shot up his leg into his brain.

Smortha yanked him up and the next thing Smorgle knew, he stood panting in the pod, his leg missing. Smortha pushed a button on the console, and Smorgle morphed back into his Decather body. The pain faded immediately.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Does it look like I'm okay? A shark just bit my leg off!" He glared at his sister.

"Thanks for teaching me a lesson."

“I’m sorry!” she said. “I shouldn’t have brought you to this era.”

He ignored his sister. Sometimes she could be so annoying. Concentrating, he made his leg regrow itself, until nobody could tell there had ever been a thing wrong with him. “Let’s get out of here.”

Smortha frowned and pushed the button again, so Smorgle turned back into a human. “Okay, but I need you to really concentrate. Was it hot? Cold?”

Smorgle closed his eyes. He remembered being a little chilly as he put away the rock. “Cold.”

“Thank goodness. Pleistocene.” She tapped the coordinates in. “Ice Age to you.”

“I know what that is,” he said, offended.

The pod shuddered and jerked, and they snapped into a new landscape.

There was no valley, but a large river. Behind them was a large meadow where a big elephant-looking furry creature chewed on some dried grass.

“Mammoth,” Smortha said, as if reading his thoughts.

Beyond the mammoth, a belch of dark smoke drifted into the sky. Smorgle opened the hatch. “This isn’t cold,” he said. He opened the top hatch and peered out the top. The air smelled like the worst fart in the history of time. A red and black slurry of fire and rocks moved toward them. “That’s a volcano. I’d definitely remember seeing a volcano.”

Smortha sighed. “Great. Very helpful. What else do you remember?”

He closed his eyes, concentrating. “I know I saw water.”

Smortha punched the buttons. “Great. Let’s get out of here. I’m not a fan of fire.”

The pod whirred, then stopped. It groaned, a strange mechanical sound.

“Oh, no.” Smortha hit more buttons.

Smorgle’s stomachs, all five of them, sank. “What do we do? What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know what’s wrong.”

The mammoth had spotted the space vehicle and was coming toward them. Actually, it was hurtling toward them. It probably thought they were some kind of threat to the mammoth’s family.

“Can we turn this invisible?” Smorgle said.

Smortha jammed at some buttons. “Won’t work. Nothing’s turning on!”

Smorgle opened the floor panel that held the space craft’s electronics. Now, he told himself, all he had to do was carefully, calmly troubleshoot, the way his parents had taught him.

The pod shuddered as the mammoth thundered toward them. This definitely made it more difficult.

He forced himself to go through the steps. “Slow is smooth, smooth is quick,” he said out loud, something his parents always said.

“This is no time to quote Mom and Dad’s weird sayings!” Smortha said from above.

He examined each component. There was the catalytic converter, all the red, green and yellow lights blinking like they were supposed to. The chromium XJ1000, which provided the

extra boost of energy, was next to that. It should have lights like a slot machine, bright and blinking in patterns. But it was completely dark.

He reached his tentacles out and gripped the machine, feeling all of it at the same time. No loose connections. He hit the power button, and nothing happened. What was wrong? He'd have to take it apart.

BAM. The mammoth hit the pod, and they were knocked onto its side. But in his natural form, boneless and free, Smorgle immediately adapted. He felt around the device once more, to find the part that let it open up.

BAM. The mammoth hit the side of the pod again, and they rolled.

“Oh, no!” Smortha cried.

There was a sizzle as the lava hit the bottom of the pod.

Quickly he began to pry open the XJ1000, but then his tentacle felt something peculiar.

The power port was empty.

This thing was unplugged!

That would teach him. The power was the first thing you should always check.

“Drat.” He felt around the engine compartment, looking for the loose power cord. Finally he located it and plugged it in.

ZAP.

The pod landed with a hard smack. Smorgle crept to the window.

There was nothing but desert dunes. Winds blew the sand this way and that, crashing it against the pod window.

He looked down at Smortha. “Really? You really think I wouldn’t remember nothing but DESERT?”

She nodded at the sand. “All this sand gets turned into sandstone. The canyon walls of Zion. I thought maybe you left it in a dune.”

“I didn’t. When is this, even?”

She shrugged. “What they call Jurassic.”

“That’s not very specific.” The Jurassic period spanned millions of years. “Besides. I told you.” He got down off the window. “I stubbed my tentacle on a bush. So obviously there were plants. You know what? I should have done this by myself.”

“You should have. I’ve got better things to do.”

“Like what? Sit alone in your room writing in your cloud bank diary because you have no friends? Because you’re a know-it-all?”

Smortha’s eyes filled with tears, and Smorgle immediately regretted what he’d said. His sister *did* have trouble making friends. She spent a lot of time alone.

Maybe that’s why she was good at remembering to log things. She didn’t have any other distractions.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and meant it.

“It doesn’t matter.” She sniffled.

He hated that he'd made her cry. "I shouldn't have said it."

"Why not? It's true." She shook her head. "I'm a loser with no friends."

He didn't know what to say, couldn't think of what could fix this. "You're not a loser. *I'm* your friend."

"Thanks," she said sarcastically. "Just what I need. Maybe you can be my date to the Senior Promenade."

"Let's just work together, okay? No more doing the opposite. And no more of me pretending like I know things when I don't," he added, because of how he'd pretended to be so sure of himself during the first time jump.

"What about humans? Did you see any of those?"

"Not a single one." He concentrated, remembering. He had smelled something, though. Smoke, and food cooking—but what, he didn't know—some kind of Earth food. It had made his stomachs growl. "But yes. They were there."

Smortha's eyes lit up again. "Okay. I have one more idea."

The pod landed hard, launching Smorgle onto the console, where his tentacles gripped all the buttons. "You better let me go with you." Smortha peeled him off. "You're sort of hopeless."

“I’m not.” He should’ve been more insulted at this, but he was secretly glad that he didn’t have to go alone.

Smortha turned them back into their strange bipedal forms—Smorgle still thought it was weird to walk on two legs—and the siblings exited the pod.

A cool wind blew from the north, ruffling their odd human hair. Smorgle lifted his arm in horror. “Ah! I’m covered in bumps.”

“Relax. Those are called goosebumps. Humans get them when they’re cold or scared.” She made the pod disappear.

“Humans are weird,” Smorgle said.

“I know, right?” Smortha touched his shoulder. “Hey. How about that?”

Smorgle looked toward where his sister was pointing. Ah.

The valley floor was higher than it had been in their first stop, but lower than in the others. The river wound pristine and green-blue through the canyon. No roads. No hikers. Just nature. “I think this is it. It’s cold and there’s water and I don’t see anyone.”

“That’s promising. It’s either in what’s known as Angels Landing or—would you say—West Rim?” Smortha said. “So you take West Rim and I’ll take Angels.”

Smorgle nodded, still feeling ashamed that he’d misplaced the PI. Feeling bad about it wouldn’t help, would it? There was nothing to be done about it now except find it.

They split off, Smortha heading down and across toward Angels Landing. Smorgle stood at the edge of what the humans called West Rim—a flat mountain top—and peered into the canyon as he had when they first landed.

He was glad they hadn't landed lower. In the first time period, the humans had created a winding path cut into the rock—this didn't exist. There was just drop off to the canyon floor, with a lot of jutting rocks in between.

“Hello,” a girl's voice said, from the edge of the cliff. Smorgle jumped. A girl about twelve had emerged. She held a loosely woven basket and wore a dress made of animal hide, with what looked like animal fur draped over her. She had medium-deep brown skin and long black hair. Around her neck, hanging from a leather cord, was a pink stone. “Are you lost?”

Had she climbed the side of the cliff? But how, with only these useless human appendages? Maybe she was supernatural. Smorgle fought his urge to run, but couldn't manage to suppress an automatic toot that sounded from his backside like a horn—that was his body trying to do the ink thing. “Remain calm,” he said to himself.

“Sorry?” said the girl.

“I'm sorry,” Smorgle said. “I was speaking to myself. No, no I'm not lost. How did you climb up here?”

She pointed. “Ladder.”

Smorgle looked. Indeed, a ladder made of some kind of twined dried plant hung down into the valley.

“We go down there to forage for berries.” She showed him her basket. “And fish and hunt a little.”

“I see.” He didn't see, not really. The human lifestyle of eating was very strange to him. He scratched his head. “Nice to meet you. I better get back to what I was doing.”

“What was that?”

“Looking for something I lost.”

“Good luck,” she said.

He walked away without saying anything else, not seeing the point in conversation. He had to get the PI. The sun was beginning to disappear beyond the canyon, a cold evening wind blowing across the plateau. Time was growing short.

He walked away from the edge of the precipice, down a steep but short incline of sandstone, slippery and smooth. It hadn't been slippery when he came, because he was in his natural form, but he could feel sandiness that was the same.

He went around a boulder and stubbed his toe on a small, scraggly bush, with a thorny branch that stuck into his human foot.

The same bush that had pierced his Decather flesh.

“Ouch! Yes!” he shouted. This was it! He'd gotten pierced by the thorn and stuck the PI into the boulder right here. He took out his scanner.

Wah, wah, wah.

There was nothing there.

Just a hollowed out space where the PI had been.

“Are you looking for the shiny, warm rock-brick?” the girl's voice behind him said, and he jumped up so suddenly that he hit his head on the boulder.

“Yes. That's mine. I put it there.” He didn't see a point to lying. “Do you have it?”

She nodded. “It’s warm, you see—we use it to keep things heated. My grandmother’s using it right now.”

“That’s great!” He tried to think of something to make her give it back. “You’ll notice that, uh, it’s a cube. Brick. It’s not a natural rock. My father…” he thought of a story. “My father made it. I took it, and I shouldn’t have. It’s important for our family. Can I get it back, please?”

The girl hesitated, but looked at Smorgle’s desperate face. “Come on.”

She led the way down another incline of boulders, Smorgle stumbling after. He would never get used to these things they called feet. Smorgle heard the sounds of people talking and children playing, and smelled the smoke of a fire and some kind of stew cooking. His stomach rumbled. This was definitely the same smell! He quickened his pace, the girl also going faster in response.

They went around a corner, and a shrieking little boy almost ran into Smorgle. “Whoa!”

There was a shelter hollowed into the ground, covered from the elements by a roof made of sticks and leaves. A fire smoldered near the entrance, and a woman tended a clay pot over the embers. Inside, people huddled together, covered in fur. They all looked at him curiously, in his odd clothes. They said things, but his translator was too far away to work.

Smorgle froze. This may be worse than being an alien. What if they thought he was an enemy?

“Wait here,” the girl told him, and went to a corner of the cave to where an elderly lady was lying down. The girl pulled up the old woman’s fur blankets, and Smorgle could see the

woman had a badly injured leg, crisscrossed in some kind of bandages, her ankle sticking out at an awkward angle. Ouch. That looked painful—and humans couldn't just go around regrowing things.

The girl patted the blankets back into place and said something to her grandmother, then pointed at Smorgle. The woman nodded. Then the girl picked up another animal hide.

The PI!

Smorgle felt as if a crushing weight had been lifted off his chest. The girl picked it up, the cube glowing quietly in reds and yellows, its lights blinking like a living thing's heart. She approached him, holding it out. Someone shouted something, and someone got up shouting more—but they weren't in range of the translator—Smorgle knew from the tone they were angry, though. He backed away, wondering if he'd have time to run.

The grandmother spoke. Whatever she said made everyone be quiet. The man who'd gotten up sat back down.

“My grandmother says she knew this wasn't made by human hands.” The girl handed Smorgle the PI. It was warm, and he could feel the faint electrical impulses still humming away. “She said thank you for letting her borrow it, and she hopes all is well with your family.”

“Smorgle!” Smortha yelled from not far off.

The girl looked toward the sound. “My sister,” Smorgle said. “I have to go. Thank you.”

He turned and began walking away. Smorgle looked down at the box. He stopped.

He looked back at the grandmother. The elderly woman lifted a hand in a wave. *Go on*, she was saying. But how could he take this away from her, when clearly she needed it? So his

father and mother would be angry. Smorgle had lost the PI and that was his fault, but he would not add to an already bad thing by making it worse.

Taking this heating cube away from the injured grandmother would make it worse.

Smorgle walked back to the girl and handed her the PI. “When it gets cold, just put it back in the rock and it’ll be reheated.”

She stared at the instrument. “Are you sure?”

“I am.” Smorgle smiled at her. He was. He began walking away, faster this time. They had to get home before their parents noticed they were gone. Not because he was worried about being in trouble, but because he didn’t want them to worry.

“Wait.” The girl caught up to him. She took off the leather rope necklace knotted around a cloudy pink stone. “Here.”

He allowed her to put it over his neck. “Thank you.”

They smiled at each other for a second. His human cheeks heated.

“Thank you,” the girl said.

“Smorgle?” Smortha called.

“I have to go.” He turned and jogged toward his sister’s voice before anything else could happen. Still, a part of him wished the girl had asked him to stay for dinner—only so he could taste whatever they were having.

Or so he told himself.

“I can’t believe you just let them keep the cube,” Smortha said. They’d powered back into space, heading back to the ship. “Dad’s going to be furious.”

“I know.” Smorgle played with the necklace, glad to have his tentacles back. “But they needed it more.”

“I don’t know if our parents will see it that way,” Smortha said.

It was true. As soon as they docked the ship and stepped out of the bay, the first thing they saw were their parents standing there waiting for them. “Where have you been?” their mother said.

“We’ve been looking all over space and time for you!” Dad said. “It’s past your bedtimes.”

“Relax,” Smortha said. “Didn’t you get my note?”

“Yes, but it said you’d be home by dinner,” Dad said. “Now what were you doing out there?”

Smorgle and Smortha looked at each other. “It was my fault,” Smortha said. “I should’ve been supervising him better.”

“I’m not a baby,” Smorgle said. “It’s not your fault. It’s mine.” He took a deep breath and looked his father in all three of his eyes. “I lost our PI.”

“You what?” Mom and Dad screeched at the same time.

“How many times have I told you to…”

“I can’t believe you are so irresponsible…”

Smorgle stared at the floor. He deserved lectures. It didn't matter.

"Wait." Smortha cut into the noise. "You don't know why he didn't take it back."

Smortha explained it all. The eating of the leg. The fixing of the XJ1000. The volcano. The sand. The sickly grandmother.

Mom and Dad listened in silence.

Smorgle played with the stone. "I'm ready for whatever punishment you have for me."

"Oh, son." Mom put her tentacles around him and squeezed so hard Smorgle's head popped outward like a balloon in a fist. "I'm so proud of you."

"That's right." Dad joined in the squeezing. Smorgle was once again glad he didn't have any bones. "We all know how barbaric the humans can be. You helped that woman. You saved a life."

"Thanks," Smorgle gasped through their tentacles.

They released him. The necklace rock banged against Smorgle's chest.

"Where'd you get that?" Dad asked.

"From a human girl who liked him," Smortha said for him.

"Be quiet. She didn't like me like that." But Smorgle's hearts beat a little harder.

"Hey." Mom picked up the rock. "That's rose quartz."

"What?" Dad said.

"I don't know what that is," Smorgle said

Smortha looked. “You’re right! I can’t believe I didn’t recognize it. Rose quartz!”

“The energy in this...” Mom said

“Is worth five of the PI blocks!” Dad finished.

Smorgle took off the necklace and handed it over. “Yeah. I, uh, knew that.” He considered. “Why don’t we just go to Earth and get all the quartz we need?”

“We’re not pirates,” Mom said, “plundering other worlds for our own benefit.”

“It doesn’t matter. All’s well that ends well, is what I say.” Dad slithered off with the necklace in one tentacle, Mom following.

“You got out of that one,” Smortha said. “Barely.”

“Barely.” Smorgle thought of the earth girl. “Maybe we can go back to visit sometime and get more rose quartz. If they want to give it to us.”

“I knew you liked her,” Smortha said.

“Yeah, I do. So what?” Smorgle said. He wouldn’t let himself be teased by Smortha anymore. At least, not so much. He looked fondly at his younger sister. “Hey. How would you like to go to atomic ball practice with me next time?”

“Me?” Smortha pointed at herself. Her brother never invited her anywhere. “I’m not that good.”

“Who cares? It’s for fun.”

Smortha’s eyes lit up in multi-colors. “Thanks, big brother. That would be great.”

His stomachs grumbled. “How about some nourishments?”

“I could use a kilo or so of spacecraw.”

Holding tentacles like they used to do when they were little, they slithered and squelched on down to the kitchen.

The End