

Oli
A star bridge too far
By Carl Derham

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THUG FROM ABOVE

The day started in the usual manner for young Arnus. As soon as the first scarlet rays of sunlight cascaded from the snow-covered peaks of the distant mountains to the valley below, he gathered his bow-saw, backpack and axe and headed out from the family home to fulfil his first chores of the day. He really didn't object to getting up at such an early hour to collect wood, sunrise was the best time of the day. The birds were singing, the forest animals were gathering at the creak for their morning drink and wash. All was well with the world. This time of year was also exceptional, because for just two weeks, once the sun had established its position in the sky, the giant neighbouring planet, Amphora, would gradually rise above the mountains. It appeared ten times the size of their home star and in years gone by had been worshipped as a deity, which unless appeased, would devour the mountains. Appeasement was generally achieved, as in all good bourgeoning societies, with a massive party, loads of drinking and a fair deal of fraternising between the sexes.

Arnus knew from his studies at school that Amphora was a gas giant and his home planet, Phorissi, was a moon that orbited its super-massive neighbour. As their society progressed to the post-industrial, technological standard that it now possessed, many studies were made of the solar system that they inhabited and as Arnus sat on his favourite rock witnessing the spectacular display unfolding before him, he imagined that one day they would leave Phorissi and explore the many moons that orbited the mother planet and beyond. Maybe he would have significantly greater success with the females of other species than he did with those of his own. Phorissian girls wanted athletic boys and boys that could ride a hover board without falling into the school pond in front of the entire assembly. They weren't interested in genius-level science students with obsessions about outer space.

Arnus' father had built shelves all around his bedroom that strained under the weight of his vast collection of astronomy and science books. He'd learnt about the distant stars and galaxies that existed throughout the cosmos and had only recently got his head around the immense distances that separated them. Amphora orbited a standard-sized star in one of the outer arms of a standard galaxy and Arnus lived on the outskirts of a standard village, with a totally substandard love life for a teenage Phorissian.

For a boy his age, only fifteen, he had his future mapped out clearly. He would finish school then go to college to study astral physics and eventually apply for a job at the Planetary Discovery Centre. This would of course mean leaving his idyllic life in the countryside on his parents' farm, where he had spent all his life, and moving to Torian, the capital of Phorissi. This thought terrified him as he had only visited the city once as a small child. His memories of the visit were not pleasant ones. He had cried the whole time and begged his mother to take him home. There were so many people crammed into Torian, all moving around so fast and the buildings were so tall that they almost blocked out the sky. The very idea of living in a place with no forest or river sent cold shivers down his spine. He would however need to overcome his fears if he were to follow his dreams.

Amphora had now cleared the mountains but because of the overpowering light from the sun, the gas giant took on a ghostly hue. Arnus' concentration was broken by the loud splashing of an overexcited water boar, gambolling in the creak. He smiled as the creature entertained itself with the tiny eruptions of water made by its hooves. He sat and watched the delighted beast's playfulness for a few minutes, then looked at his time piece and realised that it was time to get on with his chores, so he gathered his belongings and headed for the forest.

He'd only walked a short distance when his eyes were drawn skywards once more. Just to the left of Amphora, a few hundred metres from the ground, the sky began to swirl. Not in the way that one of the frighteningly regular, magnetic tornados would form, but

standing vertically in the sky. The atmosphere was a glorious green as usual, with no sign of clouds, and this vortex appeared to be generating its own atmospheric irregularities in all the colours of the rainbow. It began to grow, and the spinning increased its speed, then a grey funnel shape appeared behind the disturbance and arced out to the edge of the atmosphere. Arnus had never seen anything like this before and he had spent many hours staring into the sky.

He wasn't afraid. The object didn't seem to pose any threat and the dangerous part of a tornado was always the tail that touched the ground. This entity appeared to be venting into space. He suddenly remembered his camera in the inside pocket of his bag. He always carried his camera, on the off chance that something out of the ordinary might occur nearby, and whichever way that you viewed this event, it was most certainly out of the ordinary. He reached into his bag without taking his eyes off the swirling event and felt around for the pocket containing his extremely low-tech camera. All the kids at school had the very latest in electronics. Communication devices that were also cameras with programs that could locate your position anywhere on the moon within a few metres. Utterly pointless, thought Arnus every time he saw his friends with these coms. Most of them never left the village and if they would only avert their eyes from their coms, even briefly, they would see the beauty of the land that surrounded them.

Just as he located the camera and pulled it from his bag, the end of the funnel began racing back towards the vortex. He had no time to even raise the camera to his eye before the funnel collapsed into the back of the swirling cloud. As it did so, the cloud exploded with a sound that was louder and deeper than any clap of thunder he'd ever heard. Arnus turned his face away from the bang as a shock wave rushed past him causing the short summer foliage to dance around his feet. The tops of the trees directly below the vortex swayed to the sound of an unheard symphony. The colourful cloud vaporised in all directions and a small object was ejected towards the forest ahead of Arnus, who was left with his camera in his hand, his mouth wide open and a perfectly clear sky over head. It was as though he'd imagined the entire episode; there was no evidence of it ever happening.

He turned his gaze towards the forest, where a plume of dust was just clearing the canopy. For some reason the thought of running home and alerting the authorities never entered Arnus' mind. He just retrieved the bow-saw that he had dropped in his hurry to locate his camera and ran towards the edge of the forest. The object must have landed a fair distance into the trees but as soon as he entered the twilight world, he slowed to a walk so as not to trip on any fallen branches. Arnus knew this part of the forest like his own flesh. He'd been playing in here, collecting wood and building dens since he was old enough to walk. He'd worked out from the dust cloud before he entered the forest that the object must have come to rest by the fallen trunk of a great pine that had been slain in the mighty storm of last winter. The canopy of the forest was so dense that nothing grew on the floor and the trees were well spaced, so it was like walking through an ancient temple with thousands of columns and the dark red roof of the canopy high above. He adored the silence that always existed within the forest. The occasional bird could be heard extolling its virtues as a potential mate high in the canopy, but generally the forest was a place of deep tranquillity.

As he approached the fallen pine, he became aware of smoke, or was it steam? The tendrils of white vapour were rising in perfectly straight lines from the far side of the massive trunk. On many occasions he'd had to walk around the tree to find wood on the other side and since it was about three hundred metres in length, it added a substantial time to his journey. So, at the end of the winter he'd spent an entire day cutting steps into the bark with his junior axe, allowing him to climb over the obstacle. He placed his bow-saw on the ground and pulled himself up to the first step, which was slightly above his head. Arnus was unexpectedly strong for his size and could easily pull up his own body weight several times,

it was his lack of coordination that would constantly let the side down when attempting to compete in sport. He crawled to the top and lifted himself to his feet, where he had a birds-eye view of the atypical scene.

The object had cut a path through the trees and a wide beam of sunlight was pouring through the ragged gap in the usually solid canopy. It had then carved great chunks out of three trees on its way down. One of the trees was surely going to fall with the next big blow.

The object must have been destroyed, he thought. Nothing could hit one of these colossal structures and survive. The wood from even the smallest branches of a giant pine would burn for hours, so dense was its structure.

His eyes followed the course of the object, laid out in the trail of destruction and there on the forest floor was a dark grey; so dark as to be virtually black, cylinder. The smoke that had led Arnus to the fallen pine, was pouring out of one end of the object, which for some reason he surmised must be the rear, because the other end tapered to a point and if it was indeed a flying machine, then the pointed end would certainly be the front.

Arnus had a million thoughts racing through his head. He'd read many books that suggested the existence of Extra-Phorissians and this was most definitely not anything that his people had constructed. He immediately flung his bag from his back and searched for the camera. This had to be documented. He could become famous and maybe even obtain a scholarship to the university. His teachers at school always said that he was a dreamer. 'He should concentrate on his science studies,' they would say. But that was who he was. He couldn't prevent his overactive mind from working, neither would he want to. He took a couple of pictures from his high vantage point and then placed the camera back into his bag and clambered down the other side of the tree. As he silently approached the cylinder, taking great care not to tread on any twigs, he retrieved his camera and took more pictures stopping intermittently to check that nothing was moving and more to the point that no-one was climbing out. The cylinder was two or three times his height judging by the rear that was fully above ground, but because it had carved a furrow through the rock-hard forest floor, the front was almost level with his waist. If it were standing upright, it would have towered six or seven times above him. He walked to the edge of the crater and peered down at the alien vessel. He had to stop a few metres away because the object was radiating massive amounts of heat.

That explains the smoke, he thought. The heat of the object was baking the ground on which it lay. He really wanted to reach out and touch it but he couldn't get close enough, so he picked up a long stick and gave it a prod. It was definitely hollow, because the deep metallic sound rang out for a couple of seconds.

Arnus was just reaching out to give it another prod when a section of the cylinder made a loud hissing noise, lifted from the surface of the machine and slid violently towards the rear, sending a loud echo throughout the forest. He jumped backwards with shock but when nothing appeared over the edge of the crater, he slowly moved back into position.

A large part of the object had opened, revealing the inside of the craft and he gasped as he stared into the eyes of its passenger.

Now Arnus didn't want to make any rash judgments about this visitor from another world, but it sure was ugly. Its massive mouth spanned the entire width of its bulbous head and veins protruded from its flesh like blood worms in a bog. And what was that smell? Arnus had been catching fish in the creak since he was a boy and he still hated the job of gutting and cleaning them. It was the smell that he hated most of all. And the smell that was wafting from the open cockpit of this mysterious craft was not dissimilar. The creature didn't seem to be moving and the eye sockets were so deep and dark that he couldn't really tell if the eyes were open or shut. It was fastened into its seat with two substantial belts that looked

as though they could restrain a charging sand beast, and its huge hands were gripping some kind of joy stick. There were screens flashing symbols that Arnus had never seen before, so the craft was obviously still functioning, which was amazing considering its rather inelegant approach.

“Hello,” said Arnus, in an attempt to make contact. But the creature just stared blankly back at him. It was either unconscious or not in the least bit interested in making conversation. He still couldn’t get close enough to reach into the craft, so Arnus picked up his stick and gave the creature a gentle jab to the torso. It still didn’t stir, so he gave it a couple of harder jabs. It was heavy. Arnus could barely move it with the stick. He was just about to give it a good solid prod when the huge hand that had been resting on the control, shot across its body and grabbed the stick out of Arnus’ hand. The creature tore the stick away from Arnus’ grasp, taking a graze of flesh with it and flung it out of the other side of the capsule. The giant hand returned and punched a button in the middle of its chest. The two restraining belts disappeared into the back of its seat and the creature sat up and turned to stare straight into Arnus’ eyes. Arnus stared back, smiled and lifted his hand in what he assumed must be a universal sign of greeting.

“Hello,” he said again, “welcome to Phorissi.”

Arnus was blind in his innocence of all things universal. He approached everything and everyone as though they couldn’t possibly mean him any harm, which was a commendable philosophy towards life. But in this particular instance he should have been afraid and already running as fast as his legs would carry him, because if there was one thing that would be guaranteed to put commander Grrghracksh in a bad mood it was being poked with a stick, especially when he’d just lost his ship and crew to an ugly little runt.

Sirens were ringing out across the deck of the super tanker Kapetan Georgos, men were running about closing valves and shutting down all manner of electrical devices. From the bridge, Captain Hollander was trying to assess the damage.

Thirty minutes before, he’d been sleeping in his luxurious cabin; Mozart’s Requiem playing softly in the background. He’d never actually heard the entire work because for some reason he always fell asleep during the Tuba Mirum. On this occasion however, he was woken by the apocalyptic cacophony of a fifty-thousand-tonne cargo ship called Aphrodite, colliding with Kapetan Georgos and scraping down the full length of the gigantic vessel. In all his forty-three years at sea, Captain Hollander hadn’t put so much as a dent in any ship under his command. The sound inside the ship of these two metal Goliaths coming together was unimaginable. He leapt out of bed, scrambled to put on his trousers and ran down the corridor leading to the bridge, frantically attempting to button his shirt as he went.

“We’ve been hit Captain!” shouted Giovanni, the first officer.

“By what?” the captain enquired, trying to contain the massive feeling of panic that was welling up inside him. He knew that the job of the Captain was to remain calm and sort out any problems that arose, but the sound of armageddon that had awoken him suggested something more serious than engine problems or bad weather. He was venturing into new territory and understood that he would need all his training and experience to achieve anything other than disaster.

“It came from nowhere Captain,” spluttered the first mate, “I only left the bridge for two minutes to go to the toilet, I checked the radar before leaving the bridge, then came back and started my watch on the starboard side.”

“WHAT HIT US?” shouted the captain, gripping both hands on Giovanni’s shoulders.

“I think it’s a cargo ship Captain,” spluttered his first mate, gesturing for the captain to follow him to the rear observation deck. From there, they could just make out the

dark silhouette of Aphrodite, already listing seriously to port. The closing speed and inertia of the two vessels meant that they had continued on their opposite courses after the collision and Aphrodite was already a nautical mile behind the super tanker. The only reason that they could see the outline of the smaller vessel on this darkest of nights was thanks to several small fires, that had broken out around its decks. It was going down; and fast.

Captain Hollander made a quick evaluation of the situation and decided that the crew of the other ship were on their own. For now, his main priority was to ascertain how much damage his ship had sustained.

They rushed back to the front of the bridge in time to see the communications desk lighting up from positions throughout the ship. As the rest of the thirty-strong crew arrived on the bridge or called in from some other area, the captain sent them to their various stations to report back any damage. Warning lights were flashing on the console. They were taking in water from somewhere. But the most important lights of all were the ones that would indicate an oil tank rupture, and these were, thankfully, inactive. The captain patted them gently, encouraging them to stay that way.

The deep throbbing sound of the engines had stopped, but the ship was still travelling at fifteen knots. It would take three or four miles for it to come to a dead stop, so the captain turned the rudder hard to port attempting to stay relatively close to the other stricken vessel. One, if not both, were going to need some serious assistance within the coming hours. He glanced across to the bridge navigation screen. Not that he had any doubt as to their exact location; they were about as far from land as it was possible to be, smack bang in the middle of the South Atlantic.

Just then the intercom phone rang. It was the engine room.

“Yannis here Captain,” came the strongly Greek-accented voice of the chief engineer, “we’re taking in water Captain ... a lot of water.” He paused for a response but when there wasn’t one he continued. “It seems to be coming in from higher up on the hull, probably a few metres below the water line.”

“Can you see the damage Yanni? Is there a hole?” The captain waited for a response, his heart beginning to perform an arrhythmic Bossa Nova. He waited and waited while Yannis climbed the steps to the next level taking him above the ninety thousand horse power diesel engine. Then he climbed again to the highest level in the engine room, wishing that he could put an end to his forty-a-day smoking habit and made his way to the port side. All the time, above the noise of machinery the captain could hear Yannis’ footsteps on the metal walkway. They were footsteps leading to an answer that the captain already knew. Yannis pushed past the four huge generators that were giving the ship its power and finally reached the inner skin of the double hull.

“Captain,” said Yannis, his voice revealing a level of concern that Captain Hollander had never heard from his catatonically calm engineer.

“The outer hull is obviously breached, and the force of the collision has buckled the inner hull, which has a hairline crack the length of the engine room.”

“How much water are we taking in?” asked the captain.

“It’s pouring in along the length of the crack Captain, then running down the inside of the hull. There’s no way that the pumps can handle this amount of water.”

“Thank you Yannis,” said the captain. “Turn all pumps on full power and keep me apprised of the situation.”

With that, the captain replaced the handset and instructed the first mate to send the mayday call, informing the authorities that the Kapetan Georgos was in danger of sinking. This was an unthinkable disaster for any ship’s captain, but Captain Hollander knew that if a ship carrying three million barrels of crude oil went down, it would almost certainly break up under the stresses and release its black death into the ocean, causing an ecological disaster.

The captain surmised that the bulb, on the bow of the smaller ship had hit the tanker at an acute angle below the waterline and continued to push the outer hull into the inner hull along a considerable portion of the ship. The first hour following the collision passed by in an instant and before he knew it, Captain Hollander was looking out to a rising sun. The first rim of the heavenly body was appearing on the horizon and Captain Hollander went to the rear of the bridge to check on the other ship. It had come to rest about three miles away, so he reached for his binoculars. The bow of the ship was completely submerged, with the propeller visible above the water. The sea was flat calm; he could make out two lifeboats leaving the doomed vessel and heading toward the Georgos. Seaman's code dictated that they would have to give refuge to the sailors, but the only thought going through the captain's head was to pull up the steps and leave them to their fates. He was close to retiring from an unblemished career and this bunch of morons had to go and drive into his ship. He instructed a crew member to go and meet them at the rear steps and take them straight to the medical room.

"I don't want to see or hear from them. Understood?" he stated, with an expression on his face that left no room for misunderstanding.

By mid-morning, the company that owned the ship, Trans-Atlantic oil, had contacted all shipping companies in an attempt to locate an empty tanker that could rendezvous with the Georgos and unload its cargo. But there were no ships within a thousand miles. The closest was a competitor's empty tanker heading back to the Middle East for re-filling, but that vessel would take two days to reach them. Captain Hollander informed them in no uncertain terms that their ship would be three thousand metres under the sea, resting on the ocean floor in two days. He ordered the engine to be run up to full speed and set the ship on a course to rendezvous with the other tanker. He would run the engine for as long as possible before it became waterlogged.

Yannis reported from the engine room that the pumps were working flat out but the water was still rising at an alarming rate. It was now over the grating that housed the propeller shaft and the spinning shaft was spraying oily water everywhere. Captain Hollander began to prepare an evacuation plan, whilst trying desperately to hide the film of water on his eyes. He knew that he wasn't to blame for the accident, but he was still going to have to witness his ship sinking below the calm Atlantic Ocean, every sea captain's nightmare.

During the week that Robbie and the ship had been hiding in the smuggler's cave, he'd increased the size of the central cavern and extended it to within a couple of metres of the cliff face, so all he had to do to leave the secret hideout was fly to the end of the cave and then matter transform through a small layer of rock. Oli and the crew had been enjoying a celebratory beer in their local, The Sailor's Arms, when a news report about the stricken tanker appeared on the television. Without finishing their drinks, they left the pub and ran up the hill towards the house ... well, they'd run about half way before the boys almost collapsed from exhaustion.

"We really must think about getting fit guys," gasped Oli to his wheezing companions.

"Good ... idea," panted Ed, grasping his knees with his hands. "We'll be surfing every day soon. That should help."

Julie and Sara just stood there shaking their heads in disgust. They had been members of a gym in London and would meet up for circuit training every Tuesday and Thursday evening. So, although they did party as hard as the boys, they managed to keep themselves in shape.

"What we really need," suggested Jay, taking great gulps of air, "is a house that doesn't lie at the highest point of the village."

The house belonged to Sir Rupert Evert, Stephan's uncle, and since they needed a secret base from which to operate, Stephan had persuaded his bumbling old relative to let them use the house. With its warren of underground tunnels and caves dating back to the eighteenth century and a time of smugglers, the house had presented them with a perfect base in which to conceal their secret.

Stephan had gone back to London to continue with his work, although everything that he believed to be fact about the pyramids had been disproven in a single swipe of fate and he couldn't share the secrets with anybody in the Egyptology department of the museum. He was starting to think that he may have to change his career. Who would have thought that the scruffy young man who he had sat next to on the flight to Cairo, could have upended his life in such a monumental manner? He wasn't complaining though. After all, his stuffy old life of museums and dusty excavation sights could not compete with his new life of ancient civilisations and inter-stellar travel. Obviously, Sir Rupert had no idea that they were keeping a spaceship, bequeathed to humanity by the dying Annenian race, beneath his property, or that they planned to operate a modern day International Rescue from there. The only proviso that Stephan's uncle had given was; if he wanted to come down for a holiday, the crew would have to tidy the place up and make themselves scarce for the week, or however long he wanted to stay. But Stephan assured Oli that this would never happen. The old fellow hadn't set foot out of London for years. He was a complete workaholic and spent all his waking hours at the museum studying Egyptian artefacts that had already been studied a thousand times before.

The crew carried on walking at a brisk pace till they reached the house. They went through the rickety door leading to the cellar, where they found the creaky old oak door that led to the smuggler's cave. Only now, there was no wrought iron handle or massive rusty key to turn. Robbie had built in a new security device to gain access to the secret lair. The door opened automatically, using voice recognition. They'd spent an entire evening over a few beers pondering over a suitable password to open the door, with ideas such as; 'open sesame' and 'let me in you nob'. But in the end, they had decided to keep the spirit of the old smugglers alive, and to gain access to the most secret object in the world, an object that could change the future path for all humanity, they had to utter the immortal word; 'Ahargh!' with a pirate growl.

The locking mechanism recognised everyone's Ahargh except for Sara's. She was having a few problems with it and it would come out as Ooargh, which was fine for communicating with the local fishermen and farmers, but would not gain access through this door. Oli had seen her on a couple of occasions practicing in front of the bathroom mirror, "Ah ... hargh, ah ... hargh," but whenever she tried to put it all together it always turned into Ooargh. This is going to be entertaining, thought Oli.

Ed, being first in line gave a hearty Ahargh! whilst shaking his fist and the door silently opened. The fist-shaking was essentially surplus to requirements, but Ed felt that it added a certain *je ne sais quoi* to proceedings, even though he had scored the lowest mark possible in every French examination that he had ever taken and really had no idea as to the meaning of *je ne sais quoi*.

Without a hint of creaking rusty hinges, the smugglers passage opened before them and two rows of tiny lights, one on either side of the tunnel at floor level, lit up giving the ancient walkway an unearthly glow. They pushed on down into the belly of the Cornish cliff, where four hundred years previously, smugglers had plied their illicit trade. They entered the cavern, which had been extended by Robbie and the drones to make room for the flying car that they had discovered on Annenia and various other bits of machinery from Cranus, the giant mother ship, which Robbie thought may come in handy. The cavern was illuminated by the same pin-prick lights that lit up the passageway. There were thousands of them all around

the ceiling and walls. It was like standing in the centre of the galaxy looking out at the stars, or so Oli assumed, having never stood at the centre of the galaxy ... yet.

“Righto.” said Oli, rubbing his hands together with glee at the thought of getting airborne again. “We’d better go and see if we can stop this tanker from sinking.”

He had no idea how this would be possible, but he felt sure that Robbie would come up with something smart. They rushed up the walkway, which closed after them, then made their way to the control room. Oli’s super-comfortable seat at the control panel was in its usual position but Robbie had added four more seats, two on either side of the room, so that everyone could sit in comfort and watch the screen.

“Hi Robbie,” said Oli, as he planted himself in his favourite position.

Oli held his hands out in front and mimicked using the controls to fly the ship manually, whilst looking expectantly at nowhere in particular.

“What’s missing from this picture Robbie?”

“I’m detecting elevated levels of alcohol within your blood, Oli,” said Robbie then paused for a few seconds. “I think I’ll drive today if that’s ok with you all.”

A resounding “absolutely,” echoed around the bridge.

The Graviton Generator began to throb, and the screen started shimmering as the matter transform bubble surrounded the craft, but instead of moving straight through the rock cliff face to the open air, the ship descended through the cave floor. Robbie had decided that in broad daylight, it would be prudent to exit the cliff face under water, head out to sea a few kilometres and then get airborne when he was sure that nobody was watching. He was planning to dig a tunnel through the rock straight into the sea so that they wouldn’t have to matter transform their way out every time, but he just hadn’t got around to it yet, what with sorting out the lighting and making the cave bigger and trying to top his high score at three-dimensional Galactic Larssey, an artificial life form’s work was never done.

After a few minutes, travelling through solid rock, they entered the dark, cloudy Cornish sea. Ed and Oli had spent many hours, bobbing in the sea on their boards, waiting for the perfect wave to materialise. They never imagined that they would be underneath it, travelling at over three hundred kilometres per hour in a spaceship.

Once clear of land and all ocean-going traffic, Robbie took the ship into low orbit and darted south. He locked onto the transponder of the Kapetan Georgos and re-entered the atmosphere at several thousand kilometres per hour. In the space of two seconds, the blue of the ocean grew in detail, the wispy cirrus clouds came and went in a split second and the black dot at the end of a milky white line of wake grew into the stricken tanker. They were heading nose down straight for the tanker and although everyone knew that Robbie would never dive straight through the ship, they all gasped in unison as he slowed from preposterously fast to stop, in the blink of an ant. They were now hovering just ten metres off the deck, immediately in front of the superstructure that housed the bridge. Robbie touched down on an open piece of deck. Oli noticed that the usual clunk of the legs was apparent only by its absence.

“What have you done to the legs Robbie?” asked Oli. He had been dumbfounded as to how the Annenians could build such incredible machines, capable of travelling through space at many times the speed of light, but when they came in to land, the landing gear made the same clunking noise as a significantly technologically inferior human aircraft.

“I’ve made some adjustments,” explained Robbie. “The comparison between me and one of those pre-tech flying cattle trucks was unacceptable.”

“Great improvement,” said Ed through gritted teeth, still reeling from the re-entry and currently gripped by a very personal struggle of removing his lower intestine from the top of his throat.

“Right,” said Oli, leaping from his chair with a clap of his hands, “there’s work to be done here. Let’s go up to the bridge and check out the situation.”

They all engaged their Go-rings. They all had a Go-ring now and could realistically walk through the corona of a star without any adverse side-effects. They had decided that whenever entering a potentially dangerous situation, that they would err on the side of caution and become ostensibly invincible.

Robbie connected with the ship-board computers and assessed the damage.

“There’s a one hundred and twenty metre gash in the outer hull,” he explained, as the crew headed for the hangar. “But before we can attempt to fix that, we need to repair the similar-length fracture in the inner hull. I’ve prepared two molecular welding guns for you.”

As the crew entered the hangar bay to the sound of the ocean and cool Atlantic breeze through the open gangway, a flap opened in the wall and two machines appeared that looked like the pneumatic hammers that road workers use to break through the tarmac. Julie walked over and rubbed her hands with glee. When it was time to get glammed up for a night out on the tiles, she was one hundred per cent girl, but what Oli really liked about her was that she had a grubby, mud-covered boy side to her, desperate to break free and dive into the first quagmire that appeared. Ed was his best mate in the world, but Julie was always first to get in there and get her hands dirty. She went to pick up the tool, expecting it to weigh as much as an industrial breaker. She straightened her back, placed one hand under each end and tensed her arm muscles in readiness for the strain. She lifted it so fast that it nearly flew over her head and she stumbled backwards to regain her balance.

“It’s as light as my hair dryer,” she explained, jumping around, pointing the welder at imaginary targets. Then she slung the molecular welder over her shoulder like some inter-stellar cowgirl. Sara grabbed the other machine and they headed out into the cool fresh air of the South Atlantic. Robbie gave them directions to the rear of the superstructure, through a metal door and up a noisy metal stairway that led to the bridge.

“Jay,” shouted Robbie, as the crew were descending the ramp, “You’re with me, I have a ‘special’ job for you.”

When the crew entered the bridge, the captain was leaning over the navigation table with his back to them. The good news was that land was only 3 kilometres away, the bad news was that it was straight down. He was attempting to calculate, with the rate of ingress, how long they had before the ship began its long, vertical journey to its final resting place. The water had risen halfway up the side of the struggling diesel engine, so they had to shut it down, which meant that the ship was slowing down and would come to a halt in about thirty minutes. Captain Hollander had calculated that at the present rate of flooding, the ocean would take over the vast ship in just two hours. They were sunk and there was nothing he could do about it. He slammed both fists on the table, causing all the navigation tools to leap onto the floor.

“Ah ... excuse me,” Oli quietly interjected, with one hand in the air as though he were asking to be excused from bible class. Captain Hollander spun round in shock to be greeted by the unlikely sight of five motley-looking youngsters.

“What in the name ... who the hell are ... how did you get ... are you from that damned ship that rammed me? Get off my bridge!” he bellowed.

“We’re here to help,” said Oli, taking one tentative step towards the irate captain. “We came here in our ship, which you can see on the deck if you just look out of the bridge window, and we have some pretty wicked toys that can fix your boat.”

“Ship!” barked the captain.

Ordinarily, if someone was presented at their greatest moment of peril with such utter bunkum, they would probably react somewhat rashly. But there was something about

this scruffy lad that stopped Captain Hollander in mid-rage. Without taking his eyes off the five intruders, he took a few steps backwards to the outward slanting windows and quickly glanced at the deck then back to the crew. Oli nodded his head and pointed down to the left of the ship. He never could remember whether port was left or right. What was it? There's no red port left on the captain's table?

Sara nudged Julie and pointed at Oli, who was mouthing the words of the saying and moving his finger from left to right. They looked at each other and shared a shake of the head and a little grin. Meanwhile, the captain was glancing down at the deck to see the sleek black shape of the ship.

"Port is left," declared Oli, to the only man on the bridge who was probably already aware of that fact. Ignoring the prize of knowledge that had just been gifted to him, the captain slowly walked towards Oli jabbing a finger in his direction.

"So, you came here in that," he said, pointing to the window, "and you think that you can fix a hundred-metre gash in the side of my ship."

"Hundred and twenty actually, so we'd better get started. Where's the engine room Captain?" Oli turned and offered a hand to beckon the captain off the bridge. The girls were stood either side of the door with the molecular welders slung over their shoulders. The captain thought about it for a second or two. This day had gone from catastrophic to utterly inexplicable in the space of a few minutes. What did he have to lose though; there was definitely some kind of alien ship on the deck of the tanker and these kids had just arrived with some odd-looking machinery. His career was going to end in disgrace and he would probably take the decent, seaman-like action and go down with his ship.

"This way," he said, pushing through the exit and double-stepping it down the stairs.

In a few minutes, they were on the top level of the engine room looking down over the semi-submerged diesel engine. The only noise was emanating from the pumps, which were positioned high enough to still be above water. Yannis was tending the machines, trying to coax every last revolution out of them. He knew that he couldn't stop the ship from sinking but if he could keep her afloat till the relief tanker arrived, at least they might get a chance to remove some of the oil.

Robbie had briefed Oli on the plan as they made their way down to the engine room. He told the captain to take Sara and Ed to one end of the crack and Yannis would take him and Julie to the other end. They would then work towards each other, sealing the damage as they went. Yannis had no idea what was going on, but Captain Hollander had never let him down in twenty years of serving together so he followed the captain's instructions.

Oli, Julie and Yannis reached the far end of the crack but it was quite a stretch to reach up to the damaged area from the walkway. Robbie had instructed Oli that they needed to hold the end of the welder about half a metre from the crack for it to work properly. They both tried but couldn't get close enough. Yannis was only the same height as Oli, but it was obvious from his Popeye arms and neck that appeared to seamlessly connect his shoulders to his head that he was probably as strong as a Greek engineer.

"Would you mind having Julie on your shoulders," asked Oli. "She's very light and I think you could manage better ..."

Yannis was already down on one knee, facing away from Julie. Oli took the welder from her and gave her a helping hand onto the chunky Greek's shoulders. He slowly stood up as though there was nothing more than a flimsy scarf draped around his neck. Oli handed the gun back to Julie and the Julie/Yannis combo moved into position. Julie was no stranger to balancing on the shoulders of people whom she'd never met. Being of a somewhat diminutive stature, when she found herself at a concert or festival she would always latch on

to a strong tall chap, who was usually more than willing to accommodate her legs around his neck.

When she pulled the trigger, the machine began to hum and a circular section of the hull about twenty centimetres in diameter shimmered like a distant heat source. She moved the welder slowly to the left and a new section melted at the molecular level. A force field at the point of contact with the hull prevented the water from rushing in and the piece of hull that she had passed over became solid, without even a hint of the crack. Yannis pushed his head forward looking for traces of the damage but the hull plate was faultless. Julie quickly discovered that she could sweep the welder across a metre of hull in the time that it would take to do a brush stroke, then Yannis, who was open-mouthed in disbelief, could shuffle along to the next metre-long section of hull. Oli kept his hands up against Julie's back to prevent her from falling but she was perched on a platform that was as solid as the ship itself. The others were having a much easier job as the crack started at floor level. Captain Hollander could not believe his eyes, but he wasn't going to question it; they were fixing his ship and that was all he needed to know.

The ship lifted off the deck and plunged into the sea alongside the tanker, making no more of a splash than an Olympic diving champion. From there, they could see the full extent of the damage to the outer hull.

"Wow!" exclaimed Jay, examining the cavernous opening in the side of the hull. With the outside lights shining at the damaged area, Robbie could have flown the ship right inside the opening, which stretched into the murky distance.

"We cannot weld that," explained Robbie. "The two pieces need to be within a few centimetres of each other for that to work. We're going to have to spray a sheet of polymer canvas across the hole."

"When you say we, I take it that you mean me," said Jay, suddenly realising the extent of Robbie's 'special' job. He was nervously pinching his brow between his thumb and forefinger.

"Well if you don't mind Jay, all you have to do is walk along the hull spraying a web of canvas across the hole. It will mesh together, solidify and provide an unbreakable barrier between the sections of steel. The Annenians used it to construct domed tents when it rained at other-world parties. It's very clever stuff, completely unbreakable and ... bio-degradable. I can programme it to disintegrate the moment it touches air, so when they put the ship into dry dock and let the water out, it will disappear without a trace."

"So, I'm going to walk down the side of the hull, under water?"

"With your Go-ring of course," interjected Robbie, with the most positively encouraging voice he could muster.

"With my Go-ring on, looking down at ... I have no idea how many thousands of metres of water?"

"Four thousand three hund ..." Robbie's newly-learnt bedside manner kicked in, just a little too late. "Yes, that's about the size of it. Come on, it'll be fun."

"Obviously Robbie, we have somewhat different definitions of fun, but I guess I'll never hear the end of it if I refuse, so let's get it over and done with."

Jay went to the hangar bay. The door was open, and the gangway extended to the ship's hull. Robbie had landed on the side of the ship and although they were upended, pointing at the bottom of the ocean, the ship's gravity kept everything the right way up. A wall of rippling water was held back by a force field. A flap opened in the wall of the hangar and what appeared to be a super-soaker water gun with a tank on top appeared.

“It’s full of compressed polymer canvas Jay. More than enough to cover the hole. Just walk down the edge of the opening, spraying even lines across the gap. The polymer will do the rest.”

Jay tapped his arm on the wall to ensure that his Go-ring was engaged. He felt nothing so assumed that it was. He picked up the toy gun and headed for the wall of dark, forbidding ocean that was hanging uninvitingly at the entrance to the hangar.

Oli looked to his left and could see Ed and Sara working their way towards him. By his reckoning, they had about thirty metres of damage remaining. He also noticed that as they sealed more and more of the crack, the pressure of the water outside being pushed through an ever-decreasing gap was causing the ocean to enter the engine room in a more horizontal manner. Instead of merely running down the inner hull of the ship to pool on the flooded floor, it was now jetting across the cavernous room in a curtain of water.

“This looks cool,” said Oli, stooping to look underneath the perfectly flat plane of water then raising his head to look along the top of the strange effect. He moved under the sheet of water and poked his finger into the fast-moving jet. It nearly pulled his finger out of its socket and sprayed him with freezing cold water, which fortunately, the Go-ring dispersed. Julie had climbed down from Yannis’ shoulders as the crack came within reach of the gantry.

“Oh wow!” she exclaimed, crouching to look along the sheet of water, “you could wait a lifetime and not see anything as perfect as that.” She lifted the welder to point at the next piece of hull. “Anyway Oli, work to be done.”

Yannis stepped back to the edge of the walkway just as Julie pressed the trigger. The slight change of angle at the edge of the crack caused the curtain of water to change its trajectory. Instead of clearing Yannis’ head, it suddenly fired straight into his barrel chest. Even Yannis’ stocky build couldn’t compete with a force similar to that produced by a water cannon condensed into a two-centimetre line across his torso. He flew off his feet and was slammed backwards into the guard rail surrounding the walkway. The inertia of his weight and the continuing onslaught against his chest pushed his top half over the rail, followed by his flailing legs. Yannis had spent enough time in the engine room to know every section, every walkway and every danger presented by the harsh environment in a ship’s engineering and as he helplessly pirouetted over the top of the rail, he knew full well that the next stop, following an eight-metre plummet, would almost certainly be a backbreaking crunch on the steel casing of one of the giant generators that provided electrical power to the ship.

Jay faced the wall of ocean with a certain amount of trepidation. He poked the barrel of the polymer gun into the iridescent wall and it disappeared without any resistance. Next, he pushed his arm into the water and felt no sensation of wetness or cold on his skin. He built up the courage, took a deep breath and stuck his head through. There in front of him was the horizontal hull of the great ship disappearing into the murky distance with the jagged gash looking like a rocky canyon.

“Wow!” he gasped, then frantically breathed in and out expecting his lungs to fill with water, even though he’d been told just to breathe normally. He flew backwards into the cargo bay, slipping on the water that he brought back in with him and landed flat on his backside.

“That’s the spirit,” said Robbie, trying to fill every syllable with reassurance, whilst really thinking; what a nob. He could quite easily have sent the drone out to complete the task, but Jay needed to get to grips with the technology and overcome his fears. If the ship really started to go down, the drone could seal the hole in a couple of minutes.

“Off you go now ... just walk out there like you’re walking to the pub.”

Jay picked himself up, headed for the ramp and marched straight out into the ocean, still holding his breath for a few seconds before tentatively sucking in short mouthfuls of air.

“Now this is weird,” he said, taking in the view. It was obvious where up should have been. The light of the sun was flooding around the hull of the ship to his left and the darkness of the ocean was to his right. Straight in front of him was the hull, which should have been angled ninety degrees round to the right. “Very weird,” he reiterated.

He walked down the ramp and over to the start of the gaping hole. He decided to work along the bottom edge of the damage so that he would be facing the daylight, because every time he looked the other way he felt a gurgling in his stomach at the thought of what might be lurking in the featureless depths. With the gun held out in front of him, he pressed the trigger and a stream of blue liquid shot out at high speed and impacted the steel hull. He was quite taken aback by the power of the jet and let go of the trigger. In the space of a couple of seconds, the blob of blue liquid expanded to 100 times its size, shimmered and transformed into a dark silver colour. He kicked it and it was as hard as the hull of the ship. It was actually seventy times harder than the steel plates that made up the hull and weighed as much as an orange, but there was no way for him to have known that. He aimed the gun at the edge of the blob, which had expanded over the edge of the hole and pulled the trigger again. This time he moved the aim of the gun across the hole and back again then let go to see the effect. The trail of blue liquid turned out to be more akin to string and traversed the gap to stick to the other side and then back again. It then expanded so fast that Jay felt the shock wave through the water. The two strings joined together and completely covered a metre-long section of the hole. Overjoyed with the simplicity of the operation, Jay, completely oblivious to the seven-metre long killer whale hovering vertically above his head, continued with his task.

Oli had seen the jet of water change course and witnessed Yannis’ ungainly exit from the walkway. He didn’t even have time to think about what he was planning to do, he just leapt across the three-metre wide steel platform and made a grab for any part of the floundering Greek that he could reach, which happened to be his left ankle. There was no way on Earth or any other of the trillions of planets in the galaxy, that he would be able to pick up the stocky engineer if he was using both hands with Yannis standing still, let alone with one outstretched arm whilst the engineer was spinning through the air. But none of these thoughts had deterred him from his heroic dive. Oli wrapped his hand around Yannis’ ankle, just above his boot. His hand wouldn’t even cover three-quarters of the girth of the ankle, but he gripped with all his might. He felt a slight tug in his arm as he took the weight followed by nothing. Sara had stopped welding and turned around to see the cause of the commotion.

“What the ...?” She almost dropped the welder in amazement at the sight of Oli with his arm outstretched over the edge of the railing with Yannis dangling by one leg at the end of Oli’s extended limb. Oli didn’t appear to even be straining with the effort; he just turned his hand so that he could see Yannis’ face and with a look on both of their faces as though they’d seen a brass band of mermaids playing Roll Out The Barrel, he lifted Yannis up, placed his other hand on his chest and swung him over the rail onto his feet.

“Thanks,” said Yannis, a blank look of utter confusion on his face.

“No problem,” replied Oli, with a similar air of bewilderment.

They both moved behind Sara to avoid the curtain of water as she continued with the welding. They had barely ten metres to go now.

Outside, Jay was well into his stride covering the gaping hole with polymer canvas. He’d relaxed into the idea of being the wrong way up hanging over several

kilometres of ocean. He'd gone about halfway along the one hundred and twenty-metre hole when a booming voice echoed all around him.

"Hey Madge, come and have a look at this odd-looking Haman."

Jay arched his neck backwards to determine the origin of this massive voice and was confronted by the enormous teeth of a killer whale just a few metres above him. Another slightly smaller whale was just joining the big one at the same vertical angle.

Oh, no ... hold on a minute, he thought, as his legs buckled from under him and he collapsed to the hull, they're swimming normally, I'm the wrong way up and who said that?

"I did," boomed the voice, "and how can you understand Whale." The whale turned its massive head to face the other one and said, "This Haman understands Whale and it's telepathic."

"I am?" asked Jay, but he heard his voice come out as whale song.

"It's the Go-ring," explained Robbie, his voice appearing from nowhere in particular. "It translates on demand. The whales are telepathic and can hear your thoughts translated into Whale. Say hello; they won't hurt you."

"But they're Killer whales," blurted Jay, "as in; they kill things." Jay was desperately trying to extricate from his mind, the image of these black and white monsters biting a two hundred and fifty-kilo seal in half.

"Killer? him?" sniggered the smaller whale, "he couldn't hurt a sprat."

"Only when we're hungry," bellowed the whale, ignoring the jibe from his smaller counterpart, "and to be perfectly honest, you wouldn't even suffice as an hors d'oeuvre."

Jay thought about this for a while and felt safer in the knowledge that even if the whale did try to eat him, it would probably break its teeth on the Go-ring.

"Hello," said Jay. "Who's Madge?"

"The wife," said the whale with a flick of his head towards the other whale.

"I'm Burt."

"Well my name is Jay and I must say it's a pleasure to meet you."

"What are you doing with this Haman craft? I hope it's not going to sink and spread its filthy black death into the sea; is it?"

"I'm just fixing the hole," said Jay, waving the polymer canvas gun in front of the whale's eye.

"How can you breathe under water?" asked Madge.

"Long story," said Jay "which I'd be more than happy to tell you, but I really think I'd better get on with this job before it does sink."

"Absolutely," said Burt, pushing Madge away with his huge pectoral fin.

"Women!" he exclaimed, "Always with the questions. Carry on young fellow. Don't mind if we watch, do you?"

"Not at all," said Jay, turning to begin a new line of spray.

"Now that's impressive," bellowed Burt, as the first section of string expanded into a solid shell. "Would I be correct in my assumption that what we're witnessing here is not entirely Haman in origin?"

"Not entirely," answered Jay, slightly confused as to how a whale would know the difference. "But don't you mean human?" asked Jay, continuing with the spraying.

"Not according to the original Annenian I don't, no."

Jay spun round, firing a trail of polymer canvas down the side of the hull.

"You know the Annenians?" he barked, the whale translation of his words vibrating the steel plate on which he stood.

“Not personally,” said Burt, with an unmistakable air of stupid boy in his voice. “I’m old but I’m not that old. We were rather hoping that they would return at some point and stop their naughty little creation from trying to wipe us out. Thankfully, apart from a few ignorant bladder-sacks, you managed to curtail that particular hobby just before you started filling the sea with Black Death.”

Jay thought about how he, as the first person to speak to a whale, could possibly make up for the hundreds of years of maltreatment that the whales had suffered. He wasn’t really a great ambassador though. He’d once decided to give Sara, who cared with every fibre of her being about wildlife and the planet, a special gift for her birthday. So, he bought a tin of tuna steaks and took great care and not an inconsiderable amount of time, constructing a new label for the tin. The label had a picture of a dolphin on it with the words Tuna Friendly Dolphin Steak written in bright red letters. It had taken a few days for the lump on his head caused by the flying tin to subside. Fortunately, Burt continued to talk thus covering what could have been an uncomfortable silence.

“Where are they? Are they back?” Burt sounded excited at the prospect.

“I’m really sorry,” said Jay, “both for the behaviour of humans and for the fact that I have to tell you that the Annenians are all dead, wiped out by a horrible disease thousands of years ago.”

Jay continued to repair the hole whilst relaying the tale of the Annenians’ demise to the two whales. They floated in silence by his side, Burt comforting Madge with his fin. Tales of the Annenians had been passed down by the whales from generation to generation. The whales had hoped that they would return and knock the Hamans into shape. They made such a mess of everything. If they weren’t killing whales by the thousand, they were fighting amongst themselves, building bigger and louder machines to carve through the precious oceans. Every time one of these monsters sank, it vomited its poison into the sea and killed their food. And as if that wasn’t bad enough, their ham-fisted techniques for extracting the Black Death from the ocean floor often failed and destroyed even more of the whale’s precious habitat. And now the Annenians were never coming back, so the Hamans would continue bickering and polluting till nothing was left.

Jay told Burt and Madge about the spaceships and Annenian technology and their plan to use it for good. He explained, to the total agreement of the whales, that humans were not ready for such potentially destructive power. But he did point out that there were many good humans who had formed organisations that fought for the whale’s rights and indeed the rights of the entire planet. Burt and Madge surfaced for a gulp of air and Jay continued with the final ten metres of damaged hull.

Julie lowered her welding gun, allowing Sara the honour of finishing the final section of repair. As the last powerful jet of water shot across the engine room to impact on the side of the half-submerged diesel engine, everyone cheered. Captain Hollander offered his hand to Oli.

“I have no idea where you came from or how you just did that, but may I offer you my deepest thanks. You have averted a major tragedy.”

Oli took his hand and put every effort into matching the old sea dog’s vice-like grip. The captain suddenly yelped, pulled his hand away and shook it to get the blood flowing again.

“Oops! I’m so sorry,” said Oli, tapping the Go-ring to turn it off and offering his hand once more. The captain held up both hands in front of his body and suggested that they just accept his thanks and forego any physical displays of gratitude.

“What do you plan to do about the outer hull?” asked the captain. “A hole that size will seriously weaken the structural integrity of the ship.”

“All done,” shouted Jay, as everyone turned to see him bounding along the walkway with a spring in his step that was unlike any version of Jay that they’d ever seen. But whilst the eyes of Oli’s crew were fixed on the unusual sight of an ebullient Jay, Captain Hollander and Yannis were giving their full attention to the leggy red-head, gliding down the steps behind him.

“Captain,” she said, in her soft Irish inflection, “If you run your pumps at full power for fifteen hours and twenty-two minutes, you will be able to restart the engine and continue with your journey.”

Oli put his head in his hands and muttered something in Oli’ish as Ed joined the captain and Yannis with their drooling. Even though he knew that she was a construction of the nano-drones contrived from the imagination of Oli, it didn’t seem to matter whenever Roberta walked into the room.

“But you must place the ship in dry dock for repairs as soon as you unload the cargo ... OK?”

“OK,” said the captain following a long pause.

“Right then,” said Oli, rubbing his hands together like someone who’d just completed an excellent job of cleaning their car. “We’ll be off.”

They headed back to the deck of the ship, boarded the little black craft and waved to everyone on the bridge. The gangway closed behind them and in a split second they were gone, leaving Captain Hollander and Yannis confused but nonetheless, overjoyed.

BURT’N’MADGE

“How in the name of all that’s believable did I manage to hold up that Greek guy with one hand?” asked Oli, as they headed underwater towards the coast of Cornwall.

“Well, either you’ve been secretly working out to a level where you’ve achieved super human strength,” said Robbie.

“Unlikely,” whispered Ed to Julie.

“Or the Go-ring,” continued Robbie, “sensed an overload in the muscles in your body and compensated with a neural-linked expansion field, thus increasing your rather feeble human strength sufficiently to allow the completion of your desired task.”

“Can it do that?” asked Sara.

“Can it do what?” asked Ed.

“What Robbie just said,” said Oli.

“Yes, of course it can,” stated Robbie rather matter-of-factly. “The ring is designed to protect the wearer from any damage which may transpire due to either external or internal forces. If you attempt to perform a task that stresses the body to breaking point, then the ring will interject and compensate for any shortfall.”

“You could have told us,” Oli said, shaking his head and grinning at the others as the cliff below the house appeared out of the murky Cornish sea.

“I just did,” Robbie replied, as the ship moved into the dissolving cliff face. There followed a few minute’s silence as the craft matter-transformed the rock and moved up into the smuggler’s cave. They settled onto the hard rock of the cave floor and headed up the passageway to the house. Julie was first in the kitchen and had already put the kettle on for a nice hot cup of tea.

“Tea!” snarled Ed. “I think the completion of our first successful mission calls for something a little more appealing than tea.”

“Good point,” said Julie, lifting the whistling kettle from the Aga and placing it on the steel hot plate. “Hey Robbie, why don’t you come to the pub with us?” she said, looking towards the cellar.

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