

Space Man's Anchor

by Neal Holtschulte

The distant ignition of Aerolyth rockets rattled the window. Leander Fitzpeter took a swig of Nelson's blood from a flask as the flickering orange flames ascended over the A'Mhoine peninsula. The liquor helped fight the inescapable cold air of Durness, but did nothing for the emptiness he felt.

Sophronia slipped out of bed and retreated behind a curtain to withdraw the sponge soaked in solution fatal to the animalculae of the semen.

He wanted a connection to her that he couldn't buy. He put sullied money on the bed stand and tried to excuse himself before his thoughts grew darker, but she said, "Tell me something about your travels among the heavens."

"Why?"

"Some clients will pay more if they know I've been with a space man."

"A strange kink," he said.

"There are all kinds."

He shrugged. "I can tell you how we generate gravity."

She peeked from behind the curtain, eyebrows angled skeptically. "Sounds boring."

He continued undeterred, "It's called 'tumbling pigeon'. Claim it's a secret new sex position. Space men won't have it any other way."

She smiled. "Do tell."

While Leander told her about spinning ships, centrifugal force, and Coriolis effect, his mind retreated inside itself. Nothing would soothe his melancholy but to be back up there with the glittering stars and the heavenly orbs tracing their ellipses.

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Later, at the spaceport between Tongue and Durness, Second Lieutenant Leander Fitzpeter addressed his captain. “You wanted to see me, sir?”

Captain Alcide Giraud dropped heavily into his chair. The door to his office closed with a soft click, conversations in the outer room vanishing into an oppressive silence. Leander lowered his shoulders and squared up his feet, wondering what this was about.

The captain jabbed an empty pipe at Leander as he spoke.

“It’s come to my attention that you have been engaging in behaviors unbecoming of an officer: Association with a woman who is no better than she could be, excessive drinking, gambling.”

Leander’s face heated. He pictured his crew launching into space without him, his career vanishing like the speck of a spacecraft losing itself above sunlight and atmosphere.

Captain Giraud parried and stabbed his pipe like a sword. “We’re being invaded by killer bugs, for God’s sake! The Russians are allied with aliens! Venus! Mars! I shouldn’t have to deal with this sort of bobbery from you.”

“No, sir!” What more could he say?

“The very survival of humanity is at stake.”

“I understand, sir.”

“I hope you do. There’s no excuse for letting your animal instincts dictate your behavior, regardless of what Mr. Darwin says. You must find your anchor.”

“Yes, sir!”

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The next morning Leander rode a rattling contraption of iron and brass up through the sky. Death loomed in a thousand forms. A cornucopia of toxic and combustible chemicals swam through the ship's veins. Rickety mechanical brains kept the ship pointed up toward an unbreathable void fraught with invisible, penetrating poisons that defied understanding, to say nothing of aliens and other antagonists.

Beneath the sensible sheen of fear, however, Leander felt relief. The ship around him was both blanket and armor, the crew bristled with tense eagerness, and in moments, the howling atmosphere vanished into the comforting silence of space.

Beyond leaded glass the Earth hung like a lonesome grape on vines dewy with stars. Leander raised his thumb and covered the whole of the British Empire. For a moment all perspective swung out of balance. The queen was just a dressed up animal descended from tree-swingers. Even the war between the Hives and humanity was a squabble between children.

The creaks and groans of the canister that held the pocket of air Leander breathed brought his thoughts back to immediacy. His crewmates shared that air. Together their ingenuity and bravery would see them through.

He saw First Lieutenant John Granville on the way to the bridge.

"It's good to be back, John," Leander said earnestly.

Ever the patriot, Granville replied, "It's good to do our duty for the queen."

Leander envied the man's confidence. Leander was a loyal soldier, but his fealty to the crown was a flame compared to Granville's fire.

"I wish I came from a proud navy tradition like you," Leander said, referring to Granville's father who had crewed a ship that had captured a Russian frigate during the Crimea action.

“It’s not a long tradition,” Granville admitted. “My grandfather was a lowly knocker-upper. He roamed the cold pre-dawn streets of London with a pole and a timepiece, tapping the windows to wake the factory workers at the proper hour.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” Leander said, fearing a misstep.

“On the contrary, he kept British industry running like clockwork.”

Leander smiled, but his happiness did not reach his eyes. He wished he could muster the same pride for simple accomplishments.

They made their way to the bridge where officers were holding themselves at zero-gravity attention. Ms. Bonaventure, the French liaison, drifted near the captain. Leander politely kept his eyes from straying to her ankles, though she had surely donned something akin to a man’s trousers beneath her dress. Accommodations must be made in zero gravity.

Someone murmured that it was bad luck to have a woman on board. Granville replied that the British shouldn’t need French help. The exchanges ceased as the captain began speaking.

“Our orders are to make haste to Lagrange five, reinforce the French, and hold the position against all comers. A Russian fleet is racing for the point. We are to fire only if fired upon, but must not yield the position.”

Informally the captain added, “The Ruskies have amassed a considerable space navy and we’re scrambling to catch up, but we’ve got el-five. Ms. Bonaventure, has some expertise in this area.” He gestured to her.

Ms. Bonaventure pointed at a board with a diagram drawn in grease pencil. “El-five and el-four, unlike other Lagrange points are attractors. Objects, like asteroids, can be guided to el-five and expected to remain there. It is an ideal location for a space-based shipyard fed with extraterrestrial resources.

“A French destroyer has been station keeping at el-five for the past two months. Three Russian ships have been spotted heading for the point. We believe they intend to displace our ship and claim el-five for Russia.”

The captain cleared his throat. “Prepare the ship for hard burn.”

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First of her class and christened Trafalgar by the queen herself, the destroyer was a beacon of hope for the Royal Space Navy. She measured one hundred and sixty feet from bow to stern, eighty feet from port to starboard, and weighed over one thousand tons. Her Aerolyth thrusters were capable of six meganewtons of thrust and she could roll one hundred and eighty degrees in fifty seconds. Shiny new missile tubes flanked her forward infrared sensor array like the tusks of the fiercest boar in the queen’s forest. One hundred lowly ratings and ten superior officers called Trafalgar home, but one of them was a traitor.

Sabotage had been discovered on the push-pull control wires between the forward infra-reds and the bridge. Someone had interposed a device capable of introducing false information had the device not been discovered and removed.

First and Second Lieutenants Granville and Fitzpeter conferred with the captain in his stateroom.

Captain Giraud said, “You know what I like about the void?”

The lieutenants exchanged a glance.

“No weather. No storms to wreck your fleet or hide your enemy.” The captain said, “No subterfuge, but this saboteur ruins the game.”

“We’ll find him, sir,” Leander stated confidently.

“Or her,” Lieutenant Granville pointed out. “I haven’t trusted the French since the Sanderson committee found them stockpiling Aerolyth meant for the alliance.”

The captain cut them off. “Stow your suspicions. Rating Jephtha Smith is our suspect. He has already been detained.”

Leander frowned. “Isn’t he the one who discovered the tampering?”

The captain held up a book with Cyrillic on the cover. “This was found among Rating Smith’s possessions.” He handed the book to Granville.

Granville flipped through it, said, “Sir, I’ve met Rating Smith. I don’t think he can read a word of English, much less Russian. On the other hand, Ms. Bonaventure has the technical prowess necessary to…”

“Find out the truth discreetly,” ordered the captain angrily. “Dismissed!”

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Leander visited the prisoner, book in hand. Jephtha Smith was clapped in irons and leashed to a support strut in a maintenance cabinet that served as the ship’s brig.

Smith explained that he had worked as a servant for a prominent British physicist. Among his duties had been the task of verifying calculations. Smith claimed to be able to read mathematical notation better than he could read English.

Leander confirmed that the Russian book was a mathematical treatise, but there was little he could do. A lowly rating made a much better suspect than the diplomatically volatile French liaison.

Smith remained imprisoned. The Trafalgar continued racing toward el-five. Soon all the pieces were in play, the French on the scopes ahead and the Russian ships appearing as hot, indistinct dots to starboard.

“We’re being hailed by the French,” said Comms.

“Where is Ms. Bonaventure?” barked the captain.

The bridge sergeant reported that she was not in her quarters.

Leander went to search for her, propelling himself hand over hand down the spine of the ship. He paused near a multi-oxygen exchange when he heard a strange tapping sound. His ears were attuned to the out-of-place since any uncommon sound could foreshadow death on a space ship.

He followed the sound aft.

He found Ms. Bonaventure bound, bruised, and gagged between two Aerolyth canisters, a bomb strapped to her chest. She ceased her tapping and looked up with desperation in her eyes.

Leander hurried forward. Wires ran between the explosives and an old-fashioned timepiece with seconds remaining before midnight. He didn’t have to guess what would happen when the hand reached the hour.

Ms. Bonaventure bobbed her head, urging him to take action. He retrieved wire cutters and set to disassembling the bomb and unbinding Ms. Bonaventure.

Her gag removed, she spoke in a rush, “I was framed. I think the saboteur wanted it to look like I was hoisted by my own petard. The bomb is too small to damage those tanks, but it would have killed me.”

“Did you see who it was?”

“Yes, but I fear you won’t believe me!”

Leander looked at the timepiece he’d taken off the bomb, a sense of betrayal rock-heavy in his gut. It was an old and inexpensive timepiece, the kind used by knocker-uppers. “You’re right. I can hardly believe it.”

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Leander returned to the bridge with Ms. Bonaventure and Jephtha Smith in tow. He made his accusation.

“Arrest that man,” bellowed the captain.

Lieutenant Granville yelled, “I acted for Queen and Country. Britain can stand alone. We are God’s chosen nation.”

Then he leapt from the bridge, the sergeant in pursuit. Granville was too fast and too cunning. His second act of treachery soon became apparent.

The sensor officer reported, “Missile firing! It’s us. We just fired a missile and the Russians are returning fire!”

Granville intended to start a war.

The captain dispatched more men to subdue the traitor. Those remaining focused on the first volleys of war with Russia.

Grease pencils flicked across boards, stopwatches clicked, and the officers called out telemetry of incoming Aerolyth missiles.

Smith tapped Leander’s arm. “We need the French telemetry too. By coordinating between ships, our combined sensor spread is huge. We can shoot down those missiles. Let me make the calculations.”

Leander made a split-second decision, confidence settling his mind. “Captain,” he said, “I believe this rating can help. He’s trained in mathematics.”

“Now is not the time for gimmicks, lieutenant.” Then, speaking to the weapons officer, “Ready all tubes.”

Leander kicked off from the wall, landing at the Captain's side. "Sir, we can avoid a shooting war by intercepting their missiles."

The weapons officer called out, "Tubes ready."

"We can get good triangulation using the French's sensors," Leander pointed out, sweat beading on his brow.

The captain's jaw tensed. "Tactical," he ordered, "Get this rating a pencil and board. Weapons, reload the tubes with ay-em-em's."

"Copy that, loading anti-missiles."

Smith glided swiftly across the room, speaking as if he were in command, "We need the timing on those vectors," he said. "Don't erase any data!"

Leander ordered, "Get us some fresh boards up here. I won't die because we ran out of room to make calculations."

"Yes, sir!"

Leander turned back to the swarm of officers and one rating huddled around the command board.

"Check those calculations in the Babbage machine."

"There's no time to turn gears."

"Incredible!" exclaimed Leander as he looked over Smith's shoulder. "I've never seen anyone perform infinitesimal calculus with such speed."

"My previous master demanded immediate feedback," explained Smith without pausing from his work.

They were almost at a firing solution. Leander instructed the communication officer, "Tell the French to hold fire. We're going to shoot down the missiles."

“Understood, sir.”

“We’ve got it!” said Smith.

Leander seized the board. “Send these numbers to fire control.”

“This will require precise timing,” said Smith, holding a stopwatch.

“Fire on Mr. Smith’s mark,” ordered the captain.

“Mark!”

Aerolyth anti-missiles leaped from their tubes atop blazing flames and sped into the ink-black void.

The mood on the bridge shifted from frenetic energy to anxious anticipation. Stopwatches ticked unrelentingly forward.

The sensor officer said, “Ay-em-em detonation confirmed. Visual on the shrapnel cloud.”

Silence reigned for agonizingly long seconds, then, “Secondary explosions! A massive heat reading. The French confirm. We are no longer picking up any missiles!”

A cheer erupted.

The sensor officer said, “New heat profiles from the Russian ships. They appear to be turning around.”

“Of course they’re fleeing,” said Captain Giraud. “They’re overawed by British ingenuity!”

A second cheer rang out.

Leander shook Smith’s grease-stained hand. “Impressive work.”

“Thank you for believing in me, sir.”

Leander flinched, a trace of strain pinching his face, but the tension passed. Leander realized that he did believe in Smith. He said, “It was my pleasure.”

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The Trafalgar reinforced the French at Lagrange five. Soon after, the development of a shipyard began. Diplomats on Earth chalked up the weapon fire to “warning shots” and misunderstandings.

Later, the captain and Leander spoke privately.

The captain said, “When Magellan rounded the globe the world shrank. Now I can cup the Earth in my hand. A machine can calculate what used to be determinable only by man’s intellect. Ape and man share a common ancestor. Common. Regardless of birth, rank, or nationality, man is common and small.”

“It’s enough to unmoor a man from his sanity,” Leander said. They were both talking about John Granville who was imprisoned awaiting trial.

“Indeed,” said the captain. “And what about you, Leander? How will you find your anchor and brave the winds of change?”

Leander smiled. “I’ve already found it, sir. I found it when I made the decision to trust Rating Smith. It’s my crew. That’s where my loyalty lies, above all else.”