

Excerpt from science fiction satire: Captain Gravitas and the Alien Prosthesis

(In this work GE satirises well known works like Star Trek and Lost in Space, as only a fan of the originals could)

0 Setting

Space – the current frontier.

An Admiralty Starship slices through space, disturbing the occasional stray hydrogen atom or dust mote.

Its five month mission, to boldly go where a carefully gender-balanced Diplomatic Corp, have refused to go.

To seek a strange life-form, potentially barbarous, and stubbornly refusing to join the Union.

It takes boldness and not a little stupidity to venture into this region of space.

It takes imagination and not a little stupidity to command a vessel on such a mission.

1 Mission parameters

Captain Gravitas was not going to have a good day.

It began with his scheduled wake-up call. When it came through, by some quirk of the frequency, the robotic cabin hygiene-unit in his chambers switched itself on, malfunctioned and started spinning on one wheel, sending high-pitched squeals and flashing red light everywhere. He awoke startled, thinking the ship was under attack, bumped his head on the overhead hypno-light and almost knocked himself unconscious.

Instead of the programmed rustic charms of Wordsworth and the music of Brahms, his arousal was a panicked scramble into action.

Secondly, his personal steward brought in the wrong breakfast combination. On Thursdays, he always had syntho baked-beans on a bed of sliced low-fat cheese and wholemeal toast; accompanied by vitamin and steroid enriched fruit-juice and Brazilian coffee. The steward forgot the juice. This set up a sequencing dilemma for Gravitas: have the juice later, wait for it and let the other things get cold, or start all over again. He had seen whole command systems collapse because of such seemingly trivial inefficiencies.....

And fourthly, and potentially the most serious, his Politics and Culture Officer, Lieutenant Hubris (a Magnite and fifteenth in the chain of command) had an attack of the vapours overnight. Literally. Noxious fumes emanated from his carapace and he had to be quickly isolated. PCO Hubris would not be able to oversee the diplomatic protocols welcoming the Gorf Ambassador on board, settling his retinue into their quarters, and basically smoothing

the way in that sibilant way of his, while Captain Gravitas smiled and nodded in his best ‘in-charge’ manner.

The Gorfs and Magnites were distantly related and were more comfortable with each other than with mammalian humanoid species, which their shared evolutionary history denoted as parasites.....

One thing was for sure, if Hubris was not available to handle the Gorfs, Gravitas certainly was not even going to try.

First problem of the day requiring a solution: find someone else to suck-up to the Gorf Ambassador.

2 Planning for success

Gravitas donned his skin-tight, golden command shirt, making sure no stray chest hair was visible. Leaving his cabin to the now pacified hygiene unit to clean up, he strode down the corridors of the ship, exuding confidence with an occasional nod or smile to the crew, giving the impression here was a commander who knew where he was going most of the time.

He found his engineer and third in command, naturally enough, in the Engine Room of the Starship. The ‘Engine Room’ was a bar catering mainly to tech types, those who had a fondness for the arcana of mathematical formulae and engineering problem-solving, those who were not too comfortable with the chaotic emotional and social swirl of the other clubs on board. There was no such thing as an engine room anymore in starships. The last one had been decommissioned decades ago and the Admiralty was still paying out compensation to the relatives of crews suffering radiation damage to their genetic structures.

The engines were now at the rear of the ship in groups of completely sealed nacelles pointing away from the crew areas and controlled by robots remotely monitored by the engineers. They did not even need robots because the computers could handle everything, but you had to give engineers something to do or they got very narky and started fiddling with things.

Some traditions last longer than others, such as the notion of an engine room and expostulating in a broad Scottish accent. This is a standard, whether or not you are a humanoid from one of the Scottish colonies. Aye.

Chief Engineer Tobias was discussing the virtues of the latest dark-matter harvesting drones with some of his team, when Captain Gravitas approached him.

‘We have a wee problem Tobias’, said Gravitas, joining in with the idiom at this bar.

‘Aye Captain, my Captain, that’s what engineers are for. Problem-solving is our bread and haggis. What is it?’

‘Hubris is out for the count. His carapace is still smouldering and he’s under observation in sick bay. The fool drank too much Rigelian beer again and when he tried to pass it through his ventral sphincters unprocessed, it set fire to his shell. I need someone to look after the

Gorf. They have to be of senior rank, reasonably tolerant, and be able to hold onto their stomach when the Gorfs vent their digestive systems. Got anyone I can use?’

Tobias thought for a moment then his bushy eyebrows leapt upwards and he slapped his thigh.

‘Aye, of course. My exec. He’s got all the qualifications. Served in the Kellopian system wars when but a lad, helped keep those old synchronic-impetus engines going. Remember them Captain? Those old Battlecruiser engines were before the Jorgensen-Weft Drive. The stories I could tell you about them. He was also involved in the evacuation of the Kellopian colony from Iago Prime. If you can cope with hysterical cephalopods you can handle anything. He’s mature and capable, and besides, he’s an engineer.’

Gravitas had one outstanding quality that fitted him for senior command. It was not his fair, country-boy, good looks, or his ability to think outside the rhomboid when occasion called for it.

It was his ability to make decisions without the cumbersome process of thinking.

‘Done. Route the paperwork to my yeoman of the guard and send me whatshisname at 0900 for a briefing. I’ll get the spook to sit in on it – he’s better at details than any of us.’

‘The spook’ was an affectionate term of reference for the ship’s Science Officer, one of a series of humanoid cyborgs created by vulcanologists to study extreme conditions in planetary cores but adapted to other roles because of their extreme intelligence and thick skin. The spook was nominally second in command but was unlikely to exercise any real authority because he stood outside the military-economic command structure. He functioned as a scientific and spiritual counsellor to the Captain and his executive team, on those rare occasions when their starship, the ‘Venture Capital’, engaged in pointless explorations of regions where no corporation had been before or would bother investing. Spook was also the fleet champion at Pi-dimensional chess which, given his lack of a personality, was probably a good thing.....

3 The Briefing of Lumpen

Major Lumpen dusted away some lint from his dress uniform and pressed the buzzer to the Executive Directorate Suite.

Lumpen was a big man from a big planet and he like big challenges. His home was Tau Ceti 4, known as Holden’s World, a heavy gravity world, famous throughout the USSR for breeding big men and women, powerfully muscled individuals excelling at all weight-bearing sports.

The buzzer kept buzzing after he had pressed it and Lumpen wondered why, until he realized that the powerful thrust of his finger had jammed the buzzer's button deep inside the housing.

He had not been careful enough, although spirits of the vacuum knew he tried, always tried, to hold back. Ship's gravity was maintained at Earth Standard, which meant it was barely at fifty percent of Holden. His strength was magnified on board the VC and that was just one of the challenges he faced every standard day.

The door slid open and a rather annoyed female Ensign let him through.

'Buzzer malfunction due to deteriorated spring coupling in the bulkhead housing. Call maintenance. I'm here to see the Captain.'

'Okay. Over to you Spook.'

The uninflected, metallic voice of the Science Officer, tended to unnerve some people, in particular the crusty Medical Officer on board who had made it his life's work to develop and nourish a strong antipathy not only to Spook but all of science. This was an incredible phenomenon for a medical man, steeped in the applied-science of saving sentient life.

Gravitas was of the opinion that Mac was having a midlife crisis and was turning away from the coldness of science and rushing headlong into the bosom of the humanities. Something about intimations of mortality and the lack of meaning in the sciences. Prudently, the good doctor had not been invited to this briefing of Lumpen.

'What precisely do you know about the Gorf, Major Lumpen?'

'They are to join the USSR after decades of conflict. The Politburo back on Earth is very keen to have them. Something about being inside the tent and urine – a subtlety that mystifies me. Extreme alien-quotient makes them difficult to understand let alone integrate. We are to deliver them safe and sound to the conference, leaving the big issues for others to handle.'

'Good, you have been absorbing the newscasts and assimilating our orders..... so why do we want them in the USSR?'

'Not sure sir.'

Spook raised an eyebrow, which gave him a rakish look.

'They have vast reserves of pan-transformative n-dimension quark crystals, critical to our Weft drive. Under those circumstances the Politburo is prepared to overlook a few unsavoury aspects of their culture. They do not like humanoids, so this will be a difficult assignment for you. Your job is to baby-sit a giant crab and its retinue, a species which has nothing but abiding loathing for you and your kind.'

5 The Coming of the Gorf

The Gorf Battlecruiser was shaped like a giant dung-beetle without legs but it was easily dwarfed the Venture Capital. On the bridge of his ship, Captain Gravitas was preparing to

contact the Gorf Commander and begin the transfer of personnel. His navigator, a Franco-Russian teenage prodigy only two years out of the academy, was already plotting co-ordinates for their subsequent destination.

‘It is an advantage mon Captain to have the bigger ship, n’est-ce-pas?’

‘Indeed it is Mr Pushkin. Size counts, remember that, and keep taking those growth hormones. Now bring us about on a setting of twenty degrees north by north-east of the meridian. I like to have the sun, any sun, at my back.’

‘Inform the ambassador I will meet him in our arrival lounge near the transporter room.’

And with that, Gravitas turned on his heels and after issuing some irrelevant, but well modulated, instructions, he and Spook left the bridge.

In the lateral, parabolic elevator, Gravitas and the Spook exchanged ideas.

‘Well, so much for protocol. I want that megaphonic software overhauled tomorrow and all internal speaker volumes in the Gorf cabins turned right down. Tell me Spook, should I be insulted, should our republic be insulted, that a mere eight-legged cabin-boy addressed me?’

‘I do not believe offence was intended. The Gorf culture normally presents to outsiders the lowest element of their hierarchy for any given task. It is a culture used to conflict, and the risks of death preclude revealing their most important assets too early in any negotiation. However, there was an intriguing reference to their dietary habits, Captain. We shall have to be careful not to cause them too much distress with our appearance, bearing in mind how closely you resemble one of their major food groups.’ He arched both eyebrows for emphasis.

‘They better be careful too. Sea-food is a delicacy back on earth and one Gorf will keep a restaurant going all year.’

The Transporter room was ready. Lumpen was there with a troop of space marines as honour guard. Tobias was handling the transfer coordinates, Dr Mac was in his dress uniform and scowling at everything, his antique black medical bag by his side.

Six ruddy glows flickered, coalescing into crab-like forms on the raised platform. Gravitas saluted in the general direction of the Gorfs as one of the marines played the welcoming dirge on the bag-pipes.....

6 Major Problems

It was during lunch, in the officers’ mess, while Gravitas was tucking into a fine syntho-steak and listening to Mac’s off-colour patient jokes, which the Spook never appreciated, that the condition-purple alarm sounded throughout the starship.....

7 Just pulling your leg

8 Taking charge, again

It's the things they don't teach you at Starfleet academy that a leader has to call upon in times of crisis. A leader commands, steps into the breach, fills the vacuum with his or her commanding presence, thus validating a system which places a majority at the beck and call of an apparently superior being, or perhaps just a taller loudmouth.

It comes down to basic character, will-power, corridor-smarts, and good voice-projection. Gravitas knew how to yell.

'QUIET! Everybody settle down. Gorfs over to the left, marines to the right. Spook, use that cyborg strength and get the ambassador down to sick bay. You, Lumpen, bring that thing over here. Mac, put it on ice. Get your medical team together. Let's move it people.'

People, even those with hard, chitinous exoskeletons, want to be led during catastrophic situations. The herd looks to the lead-bull, the pack to the alpha-male. When the command is given they move into action because the thinking has been done for them and no time is wasted.

But not all people play their part willingly, subsuming their individuality into the collective mass. Dr Mac chose this moment to speak up.

'I'm not having that creature in my sick bay. It's bad enough we have to transport them, breath the same foul air as these methane ventilators, and you want me to stick a pile of crab-meat on the operating table and do what exactly?'

Gravitas was taken aback by the doctor's vehemence, his undisguised specieism.

'Mac, listen to your self. You sound like some southern-state hick. What about your Starfleet oath to heal and put back together damaged beings? Do what you are trained to do and fix that damned leg. I want that Gorf able to do the fox-trot by 1800 hours, is that understood Mister?'

'Good heaven's man, I'm not rated for Gorf surgical techniques. What do you expect me to do? Stick it back on with a glue-gun? Besides, its got seven more. If it's like crabs on earth the leg will just regrow.'

'You will do whatever it takes. Spook will help. We've got an incident here and instead of being part of the solution you're giving me some twenty-first century speciest bilge!'

Spook carried the ambassador down to the sick bay where a disgruntled Mac and his nursing staff tried to glean information from biology texts about terrestrial arthropods, to see how they could reattach his severed leg.....

9 Penance

Gravitas, accompanied by Spook, adopted the humility ritual recommended in the Gorf cultural briefing notes sent to the VC by Starfleet. It consisted of getting on all fours (normally eight for the Gorfs) and head-butting the floor eight times (once for each leg). This

demonstrated deep sorrow, worthlessness, and contrition. It was reinforced by the Spooks clever idea of dabbing some red paint on their foreheads to simulate blood.....

10 Yes we can

11 Gorf Kama Sutra

Gravitas could not believe his luck. A looming catastrophe, which could have dragged the USSR into a war with the hostile Gorfs , was averted. In fact, it went even better.....

12 A legend is born

Gravitas spoke to the crew via the internal-com links.

‘Gentlemen, ladies, and others.....

The work will be published as an eBook novelllet at some stage...GE