

Rhiannon Heggie

Andromeda Bounty Crew

In the year 2516, there are 389 billion galaxies in the Galactic Register. In Caldwell 5 – a dwarf galaxy just outside of the Local Group and the newly emerged Milky Way - lies a small, green planet almost completely covered by water.

The planets' most evolved inhabitants are The Eight [VIII], a race of conquering cephalopod molluscs who live in hive colonies along the ocean floor. Giant, pod-like constructions resembling transparent plumes of smoke. Ten different colonies inhabit Yharnams' dark waters and all vie to be the sole governing body. To secure this position, it is common practice for a colony to invade and replace the residing queen with their own. Any individual who has left their home-world is exiled due to fear of contamination...

★

Sirens pierced the air.

An *VIII* was breaching the external pressure system.

VIII's in the defence sector barked orders:

‘SEAL off all of the exits! SWITCH on the circulation!’

There was a blur of cobalt blue as Michael slipped through a vent in the metal wall. It took only a few minutes to swim through the small maze of vertical tunnelways before arriving at another vent. This is *it!* The trove of treasure his Queen had hidden away! Four of his arms reached ahead, popped open the passageway and pulled the young mollusc forward... Into a dark, murky room. Black silt blanketed the floor. Strips of long-dead algae hung to the glass like wallpaper. The ventilation unit must have been turned off for this whole area. An empty trophy room lay before him; nothing more than a memory of the expeditions his Queen had commissioned. Inky tears bubbled upwards from the corners of his eyes. He swiped at them, leaving black streaks across his sunken temples. Of course they had found it all, and had taken it for themselves! Clasp ing her empty amulet – a twist of gold - tightly between his yellow suction cups, Michael turned and punched the emergency release. A flat, red panel popped open with a clack and he tapped in the code. Originally intended as a failsafe should the indoor-water circulation malfunction, it would now be his only way out and to freedom. A haunting echo wavered through the vent.

‘-y did he GO?’

The boys’ breath escaped his beak as a strangled whimper. That was his brothers calling. They had been sent out to find him, to bring him to *HER*, for punishment. He would be dead before he’d ever had the chance to look for more treasure, and... His

tentacle clenched the amulet. The doors in front of him beeped loudly. Overriding the control system would take a few minutes. Panicking, the cephalopod's cobalt limb slammed the release three more times. Black ink sweated from pores on the back of his bulging head. After a series of beeps, the water-lock finally hissed open – barely 3 inches. He slipped through and reached for a mask and suit off the wall. It was worn and mouldy, but still stretched to accommodate his frame, instantly adding an internal water barrier. BEEP BEEP.... SSSSssht. Unfiltered, murky water flooded in. It slammed Michael against the internal door, lifting him up and out into the abyss.

Michael flicked on the helmets torch. Ahead of him stood the *VIII's* colony home – a massive erection of cold, glass cells connected by a maze of tunnelways. But around him swarmed so much life! A small creature whipped past his mask. It disappeared in a whirl of purple tendrils that disguised knife-like spikes. As he neared the ship deck, he spotted two lone guards. Good. That meant the colony thought he was still inside. Sliding past them, he spied his ride – a blackened glass roof and misshapen double-barrel propulsion system – and climbed inside. Small and compact. Familiar with the old settings, he breathed a sigh of relief as his tentacles flicked the pod to life and received a whirl in response. The guards were alerted to the sound of engines starting up. One disappeared to alert others while the second strained to open the door. Before the guard could react, he was incinerated by the pressure of the pod's escape as it shot forward and up.

The boy's eyes lingered on his planet. A dark green mass of rapidly swirling whirlpools appeared and disappeared instantaneously. Jagged rocks, sharpened from the force of the wind, made for the only land in sight. His head spun. They must have moved the treasure to a more central location... The only place large enough would be

the old throne room. Michael had no chance of knowing for sure, until he returned. He pulled his gaze away to check the pods navigation.

SEARCHING FOR: NEAREST LIFEFORMS.....

...LIFEFORMS 03 SECONDS AWAY.

‘What?!’

Before the young alien had time to react, his pod blasted through the side of an orbiting ship, ripping open a decent-sized hole in the hull.

★

The thunderous crash awoke Stella from the process of repairing the ships internal systems. Something wasn’t right.

‘Stella!’ the ships AI immediately recognised the baritone of Andromeda Dave.

AUTOMATIC REBOOT: INITIATED.

‘My SHIP!’ Dave’s voice shrieked with incredulous rage.
‘Please!’ A second voice whined.

VISUAL SYSTEMS: ONLINE.

Before the ships central monitor stood a human sporting a tiger-emblazoned, sequin jacket and the orange quiff of a 1950’s Rock & Roll star. Protruding from underneath his right arm was the bloated head of an octopus, tentacles trailing.

‘You wrecked my SHIP you goddamn slime bag!’

The slime-bag squirmed free and scrunched up his large black eyes. Without warning, Andromeda Dave's handsome face was covered in a violent spray of thick, black ink.

'My....My beautiful FACE!' he sputtered 'That's IT! OUT he goes!' He spun around towards the airlock, arms swinging.

'Dave, there is an issue of higher importance to attend to...' Stella's automated voice crackled from the screen.

'Yeah yeah, we can deal with it after I DEAL with this slimebucket' He made for the exit. The alien was curled under Andromeda Dave's grip like a kitten. 'My name's not Slimebucket, it's Michael!'

Dave sneered. 'Slimeboy then.'

'Despite the ships shield preventing oxygen loss,' Stella continued, calmly, 'we will still have to find parts in order to safely complete interstellar travel.'

Dave dropped the alien with a CLANK, turning on his heel to face the ships monitor. Deep in thought, he caressed the main control panel. A piece of rust snagged on the soft skin of his hand, causing it to bleed.

'Okay, easy! So we go to the nearest repair station, fix my baby and THEN continue on the path of fame and glory!' Wiping his palm on his pants, he glowered at the crumpled hitchhiker.

'Impossible.' Stella trilled. 'Maffei Station is the closest at just under 24,000 Light years away. However, the ship's status suggests the internal-engine-capacitor could trigger an explosion at any moment.'

Dave's brows furrowed with frustration as he considered his options.

Timidly, Michael spoke up. ‘Could you... fix it you had the right parts?’

Andromeda Dave viewed his stow-away warily.

‘What if I told you that I have some on my planet? Old spaceship parts that you can use!’

Dave glanced briefly at the monitor.

‘And.... There is a trove of treasure amassed by my Queen during her reign.’ The young alien gripped a rusty chain around his neck. ‘If I could just grab a few pieces to remember her by... you can have as much as you can carry!’

Now Dave was interested. ‘OK. Sounds great’ He shrugged, and turned away, feigning nonchalance. ‘Treasure and ship-parts... just like that.’ He spun around, bending so that his nose was pressed against the alien’s beak. ‘What’s the catch, Slimeboy?’

Michael looked from Dave, to the monitor and back. ‘If we make it out – you bring me with you,’ his expression confident.

Andromeda Dave appraised the boy with a raised brow.

‘The kid has guts!’

To Stella: ‘We don’t actually *need* this slime-ball do we?’

A dark tentacle wrapped around Dave’s arm, anchoring him in place.

‘If they find me there, it will mean my *execution!*’ Desperation dripped from Michael’s beak.

‘This option leaves us with the lowest possibility of malfunction. We need metal sheet and wiring. The other supplies are on-board.’

Dave slumped in the button-back captain's chair, shaking slime off his jacket's sleeve. The red leather squeaked as he sighed and absentmindedly probed his right nostril with a pinkie.

'Well!' Standing abruptly, he swept out his arm. An unmistakable glint of excitement in his eye. 'To Yharnam we go!'



Michael and Andromeda Dave, safe inside a florescent-orange, astronaut suit, sunk deeper into the icy depths of Yharnam. They were swallowed by a thick blackness.

'The escape pod is unrepairable.' Stella had explained only minutes earlier, after testing Dave's underwater-communication device. 'You'll have to swim down to the colony yourselves.'

A small, blue light suddenly appeared before the two, quickly increasing in size.

'There it is!' Michael's voice shook. 'Stick together and stay out of the light - we can't be seen!'

Their descent slowed as they swum down to the colony, and Andromeda Dave's eyes widened. A beautiful structure lay before them - gleaming glass pods resembling pockets of air, held in time. Light ebbed from the structure, illuminating all life that swum just outside its walls.

Michael led them towards an unlit tunnelway marked only by an invisible torrent of water which threatened to send them tumbling backwards.

‘We’ll enter through the circulation tube.’

Dave shook his head dubiously.

‘It’s the only way you’ll fit undetected! Here.’ Michael held out a strip of sticky suckers which promptly wrapped around Dave’s elbow. The boy tugged them over to the opening. Once his suckers were secured, Michael pulled Dave through and together, they began to infiltrate the place he had so recently referred to as ‘home.’



A pale-blue *VIII* swam into the hallway Andromeda Dave and Michael had just entered. He was patrolling. In an instant, Michael had them pressed flat against the inside of a metal-grey doorway. He camouflaged his body so well that the toes of Dave’s bright orange boots were all that could be seen. Dave held his breath and the enemy passed without a glance in their direction.

They set off, passing through brightly lit tunnelways and huge entryways, all finished with clean cuts of glass. Michael slowed and stopped, indicating for Dave to do the same, before peeking around the next corner. They had arrived at a massive hallway. At the end stood two colossal crystal doors, their glass opaque with carvings telling tales of cephalopod history. Two guards floated on either side of the installation, tentacles wrapped around glass spears.

‘We must get them away from here...’ The young alien turned to whisper a strategy.

He was greeted by an empty space.

Spinning around, he saw the horrifying image of Dave swimming, unarmed, towards two *very* angry inhabitants. Frozen in place with fear, he watched, useless. Quick as a maelstrom, Dave twisted the first spear from one guard and rammed it, flat end first, into the *VIII's* forehead. The guard drifted to the floor like dried seaweed. The second barely had time to react before his spear was commandeered and whacked across the side of his mid-section. Out like a light.

The huge doors opened silently and cold water rushed out to greet them. They dragged the guards in with them and propped them up as doorstops. Andromeda Dave turned, dusting off his palms, and froze. His eyes widened in amazement. Piles of gold were expected but the sheer number of *vessels*! There were small Sky ships! Sails eaten away by time, yet decks still sturdy enough to carry 15 men. Underneath precious metals and gemstones as large as a man's palm, lay the enormous carcass of a submarine. Rusted through in several places, the faded white letters on the side were unrecognisable. It gave Dave goose-bumps. He spotted a ship that resembled his own and headed over for parts...

'It must be here...' Michael's voice echoed from the centre of the room, distracting Dave from his task. BZZT! The wires Dave was cutting sent an electrical current pulsing through his body. He emerged from the ship with his prize, hand smoking, and added the cables to the metal in his rucksack. Michael knelt, tentacles hunched over a fairly plain iron chest that sat isolated in a clearing.

'Here it is!' He jumped up and spun around to display his prize. An iridescent purple stone rested gently on his suckers. He held up the gold entwined casing that hung

from his neck, and carefully slipped the stone inside. His face was set with determination.

‘Before she died, my mother the Queen used to wear this around her tentacle. She once said that a part of her soul was here. Now I’ll have her with me forever.’

Andromeda Dave smiled and backed away, leaving the alien to his discovery – he had one more task. Hopping around the piles of gold, he gathered a few gold plates and rings – items easily melted. Handfuls of diamonds and large precious stones follow, adding to his already-bulging nap sack.

Andromeda Dave appraised his surroundings, a satisfied smile in place. ‘We good to go?’

Michael smiled back at him, ‘yes,’ before gazing back down at his completed amulet. ‘Thank you Dave. I don’t know if I would have ever made it back were it not for you and Stella.’

The two smiled at each other, eyes glistening, as together they pushed open the heavy doors...

Pale blue tentacles wrapped themselves around Andromeda Dave’s legs. He twisted free and saw Michael, disappearing in a cloud of ink. Alerted by the lack of guards at the door, three *VIII* had planned an ambush. Dave heard a strangled yelp as Michael tried to free himself.

‘He’s with an OUTSIDER! Get the CONTAMINATION SECTOR!’

One of the offenders raced off to gather others.

‘Slimeboy!’ Dave glanced at the exit. A plan...I need a plan!

‘He’s inside my SUIT!! Get him OFF me before he contaminates it!’

A Cobalt-blue head emerged from the ink-cloud, eyes wide.

‘GO!’

In their panic, the *VIII* had released their grip enough for Michael to slip free.

Dave summersaulted and started swimming, thighs burning. Michael was hot on his orange heels, followed closely by the ink-spattered guards.

‘UP AHEAD!’ Michael located the circulation pipe and they prepared themselves before jetting up the passageway in a slurry of bubbles...

As their heads broke the waters churning’ surface, Michael panicked. ‘They’re coming! We need to get *away* from here!!’

‘Shh,’ Dave hushed ‘Give her a second...’

Michael’s flustered retort was cut off by a deafening WHOOSH. Skimming across the water, heading straight for them, was the burnt umber hull and blue fins of Dave’s ship, Stella at the helm.

In seconds, a rope ladder was dangling above them.

Andromeda Dave grabbed it in one gloved palm and heaved himself up, out of the nebulous water.

‘Climb aboard,’ the ship trilled. ‘We’ll complete repairs in orbit!’

Dave turned back to the alien and paused, despite straining under the rucksack’s weight.

‘Look kid. It doesn’t look like you have much to stick around for here and you’ve got guts, so you might as well jump aboard,’ he yelled down. ‘There’s just one thing you gottah do first!’

‘Anything!’ Michael’s trusting eyes and breathless excitement put a grin on Andromeda Dave’s face.

‘You gottah commit to the bounty hunter pledge!’ He turned and continued making his way up. ‘Do you vow to write your own destiny, hunting loot around the galaxies?’

‘Yes, I’ve always loved treasure!’ Front tentacles wrapped around the rope, Michael followed.

‘Do you declare that you will always protect your shipmates, facing, if need be, the oppression of authority?’ Dave pulled himself up and into the open airlock before bending and offering a hand.

‘Of course! It’s easy!’ The alien’s suckers wrapped around Dave’s arm.

‘But, most importantly, do you promise to drink, gamble and get with the laaadies?’

‘Uh...I’m not sure about the odds of that last one but I guess... I do vow to be the second best bounty hunter there ever was!’

With that, he was pulled up and over, into the belly of the ship. In front of him stood his new Captain.

‘Michael,’ Dave slid his reflective sunglasses down his nose, peering at the boy from the corners of his eyes. ‘Welcome to the Andromeda Bounty Crew.’