

TLC Showcase

LUKE TARASSENKO

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Introduction to *Captain Weakling*

Captain Weakling is a YA sci-fi novel about a geeky highschooler who develops superpowers and is recruited to a UN peacekeeping unit while struggling with mental health problems.

Gonzalo Lopez is just a normal teenager except that he has super strength and invulnerability. Or does he? Ever since that fight with Bill Jackson when he broke the bully's hand by accident, everything has been spiralling out of control. Now all of a sudden he's getting invited to parties, his psychiatrist's started dating his Mom, and at least two different international organisations are trying to hunt him down.

Then there's Ali: the new girl at school and the only other person who believes any of this is really happening to him, who seems to be hiding a secret of her own. Is she really his friend or does she have some sort of hidden motive for being so nice to him all the time? Should he tell her about 'Miracle Force', the superpowered United Nations military unit he's just been recruited to? And is any of this really happening or is it all just going on inside his head?

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After two self-published novels and a third in the editing stage, my family and friends realised that the writing wasn't going to go away and got me a TLC mentorship for my 30th birthday. Carrying it out has been more fun than I ever could have imagined. The detailed reader reports from my insightful mentor, prolific genre author Jane A. Adams ("a major talent"-Val McDermid), have been so helpful. Since beginning the mentorship, under her guidance I have started to get some short stories published. Attending the TLC Industry Day especially for mentees, which gave me the chance to practice pitching to a real-life agent and editor and to receive feedback from them, was also immensely valuable.

Captain Weakling is in the late drafting stage and I will be seeking agent representation for him as soon as he is ready.

Extract from *Captain Weakling* by Luke Tarassenko

PROLOGUE

I hate flying.

I heaved my bag up into the luggage compartment and clambered into my seat. I had to tuck my legs in and half-stand up a couple of times to let some other passengers past.

I looked around for something to occupy my mind. Sat on my left was a very large grey-bearded man already breathing louder than I could think. I could tell he was going to be great fun to sit next to on this flight. (Sorry, that's my sarcasm talking. I try to keep it under control but it gets out sometimes. What a shame.)

I buckled my seatbelt around my skinny body and puffed out my cheeks. The palms of my hands were moist and I was breathing faster than normal.

God, I hate flying.

To my right on the other side of the aisle an attractive blonde woman was texting while she was still allowed. She looked in her early twenties; not *too* much older than me. I thought about trying to start a conversation with her, but my mind kept reverting to images of the plane plummeting to earth in a blazing fireball, which inhibited me a bit.

I leaned forward in my chair and craned my neck round to see if I could spot someone.

There he was, about five rows back: a red-headed teenager sitting tight-lipped and pale in his seat, looking as nervous as I felt. We made eye contact briefly, but I resisted the urge to nod at him.

I turned back round. *I had* to occupy my mind somehow. I took out the laminated safety instructions from the pouch in the seat in front of me and read them several times. They were no use at all. They were filled with pictures of emergency exits and life-masks and people careering down a ridiculous yellow slide to their freezing watery graves.

I jumped as a note sounded and a man's voice came over the plane's PA system, posh and patronising.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce myself: My name is Charles and I'll be your pilot for this flight to Ronald Reagan Airport this afternoon. We are currently due to take off on schedule at two forty-five. I'm just waiting for clearance from air traffic control to get on to the runway. It's very pleasant weather over the Atlantic this afternoon so it looks like we should have a straightforward flight and be in the US by six o'clock, East coast time. I'll check back in with you later."

The note sounded again.

A straightforward flight, I thought, please let it be a straightforward flight.

I sat on my hands and bit my bottom lip. I could feel sweat starting to trickle down the back of my neck now.

When the stewards appeared in the aisles and the safety video began to play on the screen in front of me I started to bounce my knees up and down.

"Don't worry, mate," said the big bearded man to my left. "Flying's the safest way to travel."

"It's not the flying I'm so worried about," I said, "er...'mate'. It's more the part where we *stop* flying. More the landing, I guess."

"You're American?" said the man. "Coming back from a trip?"

"Something like that."

"What did you make of the UK, then?"

I didn't answer right away because the plane began to roll forward slowly. I gripped the arm-rests on either side of me. "It was OK I guess," I said through gritted teeth, trying to think of something to make up in response. "I drank a lot of tea. And you do have a *lot* of rain."

I'd chosen the most ridiculous clichés but I must have gauged my audience right because the man laughed.

The stewards checked our seatbelts as we taxied to the runway and the man

continued to engage me in idle small talk. At least it took my mind off things a little.

When we sped up for take-off the man stopped talking to me and I white-knuckled the sides of the seat so tight I worried I might break them. I pushed my back up and stared straight ahead, counting from 10 to 1 in my head, trying to slow my rapid breathing.

The plane lifted up from the ground and I thought my stomach might drop out through my ass. Up, up, up it went and my back pressed deep into my seat.

Then the plane leveled out, but only with another gut-lurching tilt. I clutched a hand to my mouth and felt acid rising, but when I shut my eyes and took a few more deep breaths it went down again.

The plane climbed through the air. I tried to keep breathing slowly to stop my pulse from climbing with it.

Eventually, mercifully, there was a gentle *bong* and the seat belt sign went off. I fidgeted a little in my chair, trying to loosen my clenched muscles, and let out a long sigh.

I looked past the people on my left at the quickly shrinking patchwork countryside outside the window and wondered just how long this part of the journey would last. Would this be one of those journeys where the calm, uneventful part went on a long time before I encountered anything to panic about? Was the attack going to come now, or later, or would it even come at all this time?

I've got to stop worrying.

I jabbed a symbol on the screen in front of me to bring up the airline's selection of films and started swiping through them. The usual stuff danced in front of my eyes: a rom-com, a melodrama, one of the latest superhero films. That piqued my interest.

Just then, before I'd even finished selecting a film, before the stewards had even gotten up again to bring round the drinks and snacks, a few rows in front of me a man stood up and walked into the aisle, taking out a handgun.

That didn't take long, I thought.

Some people around the man screamed. "Heads down now!" he shouted at them in a voice that sounded more used to speaking in Russian. "I am taking over this plane! Heads down or I shoot!"

The screams carried on but were muffled as people did what he said and put their heads between their knees. Some of the screams turned into whimpering sobs.

"Oh God!" said the blonde woman across the aisle from me.

"I'm not ready to die yet!" said the large man to my left, clutching his head.

It was my turn to comfort him. "Don't worry," I said, "everything's going to be alright."

The attack had, in fact, come. But now that it had come, there was no point in worrying about it any more. It was time to do something. It was time to take action.

I undid my seatbelt, stood up and walked out into the aisle.

Several passengers screamed again when I appeared there. I could see that a few of them had disobeyed the hijacker's orders and were hysterically texting out of view. They were probably sending goodbye messages to their family and friends. Many of their faces were wet with tears.

"What are you *doing?*" said the terrorist in front of me. He had a shaved head and was dressed in jeans and a white t-shirt like a regular holidaymaker except that he carried a small grey handgun which he had somehow managed to smuggle on board the plane. "Back in your seat, head down, *now!*"

"I'm afraid I can't do that," I said to him. *Keep it together.* I summoned my bravest, boldest tones. "On behalf of the international community and everyone on this plane, I order you to surrender your weapon to me."

"What is this?" said the terrorist, his chunky brow furrowing. He laughed. "Are you out of mind? Do you have death wish? Sit down, little boy, or I will shoot you!"

"You wouldn't dare," I said. "You could cause explosive decompression and suffocate everyone on the plane." *I learned that in Physics class.*

"Do not test me, little boy! I am not afraid to shoot! This plane is going down either way!"

Having exhausted my nonviolent negotiation strategies at least to a defensible degree, I moved towards the man and, to his credit, he followed through on his promise and fired at me three times.

Two of the bullets bounced off my jacket because underneath it they met the resistance of my body.

They stung quite a lot, though; I never enjoy being shot. And they left two little nicks in my jacket where they pierced it before falling off me and dropping to the floor.

The third bullet hit me in the cheek, but that one bounced off as well, pinging onto the aisle carpet.

I still flinch when I'm shot at, though there's no reason for me to. I guess old habits die hard.

The man stopped shooting. The other passengers were still screaming, even more loudly than before. But then after a few seconds everyone went quiet, the terrorist included.

Wide eyes gawked at me. Only a few babies continued to wail.

I glanced down at the nicks in my clothing and sighed. "I'm going to have to replace this, you know. That's my third jacket this week."

"Wh-what are you?" said the man. A sensible question, I supposed, given the circumstances.

I took advantage of his stunned disbelief to take hold of his gun and scrunch it up into scrap metal in my hand. It made a wonderful snapping noise as I twisted it into a useless lump.

The man was trembling now and perspiration was pouring from his shiny head. I realised I still hadn't answered his question.

"A miracle," I said.

I flicked him on his chest with a finger and he shot backwards down the aisle from the force of my touch, bouncing off the door to the passenger toilets and landing unconscious in a heap.

After a moment of shocked silence, the passengers around me broke out into cheers and applause. I looked around at them awkwardly, not knowing what to do with my hands or where to put the scrunched-up gun, as they whooped and punched the air and cried more tears, now of relief.

"Thank you for saving us!" said the blonde woman who had been sitting across the aisle from me, her face beaming.

"Er...no problem..." I said. This was one of the best parts of my job, but I still wasn't quite used to it.

{I've neutralised a hostile in row F,} I thought. I thought it, I didn't say it, because Mute should have had us all connected into the mind link by now.

{I've neutralised a hostile too,} came the self-assured, feminine voice of Djinn inside my head, {just a bit more *covertly*.} It took a bit of getting used to, but once you were acclimatised to it the mind link really was the most efficient way to communicate.

{All clear here for me,} said Mute. {There's nobod--wait! Watch out!}

There was a massive jolt as the plane lurched violently to one side for a moment and then straightened out again with a wobble. I fell on my ass. Several people were sent staggering into their seats and some of the baggage compartments came open.

Orange oxygen masks dropped down from their hiding places above people's heads. I didn't know if they had been triggered automatically or if someone had released them on purpose.

The screaming started again, the loudest yet. I covered my mouth once more against the puke rising from my stomach.

And just like that, for the third time that month, I was in free-fall.

Did I mention I hate flying?

About the Writer

Dr Luke Tarassenko is a teacher by day, writer by night. He produced his first literary masterpiece in primary school; something about an angel uncovering a plot to dethrone God. The theological interests continued and while studying Theology and Philosophy at Oxford Luke wrote his first full-length fantasy novel. This instantly won standardised boiler-plate rejection letters from agents, except for one piece of encouraging feedback which gave him the ray of hope he needed to carry on. He read a stack of books on the craft of writing then wrote another fantasy novel while working on his doctorate. Both novels are now [available on Kindle](#) under the name "L.I.T. Tarassenko".

While working as a secondary school RE and Philosophy teacher, Luke then wrote a philosophical novel for young adults which he is currently editing. The manuscript he is now writing for his TLC mentorship is his fourth, a YA sci-fi novel entitled *Captain Weakling*. He has recently begun to get some [short stories published](#) which he finds utterly thrilling. Luke lives in Cambridge with his wife, a trainee vicar, and their two-year-old daughter. You can follow Luke's writing and enduring efforts to become house-published on Twitter [@LukeTarassenko](#).

