

# THE SOAP BUBBLE

SEAN WILLIAMS

It was a moment of pure, A-grade drama, better than anything I could have scripted. So good, in fact, I had no choice but to include it in that month's episode.

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## Scene:

Control Bridge of the Navy Class Manned Deep Survey Ship *Rosenberg* (unofficially rechristened the *Wandering Jew*)

## Cast:

Gable 'Gabe' McKenzie, Captain  
Sara Mravinsky, Second in Command  
Myrion Hemmelling, Life Support  
Jake Foo-Wong, Astrogation  
Andre Passant, Security  
Steve Jefferssen, Engineering and Maintenance  
Freedom Maxwell, Science  
Alek Maas, Communications, Morale and Honorary Soap Operator (me)

## Extras:

Engineers, technicians, research personnel, the medical team, three cooks, sundry crew-members; one hundred and thirty-five in all.

## Notes:

Filmed live and on location near Mu Boötis, 108 light years from Earth.

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The *Wandering Jew* had finished its initial survey of the system when the Event took place. Captain Gabe, looking darkly handsome in his official flight-uniform, had successfully slotted us into a close polar orbit about the primary star, a greenish FO of unremarkable appearance. Freedom Maxwell, as beautiful as ever with her blonde hair tied back in a loose ponytail, was preparing for the first flyby of the inner planet. Jake Foo-Wong cheerfully checked coordinates every couple of minutes, conferring with the computers in unhurried, precise syllables. Steve Jefferssen watched the tell-tales monitoring the mighty engines with an avuncular eye; he seemed pleased, in his bear-like way, which was a good sign.

'OK, folks.' Captain Gabe surrendered control of the *Jew* to Jake and the AIs with a flourish of his wrist. 'This baby is rolling. Any questions, comments or suggestions?'

'Nice work, Gabe,' said Freedom, playing her part as Love Interest with aplomb, as always. Maybe a little too well. Was nature imitating art? 'We're ahead of schedule, again.'

'Well, it all adds up, doesn't it?' Gabe smiled back, obviously flattered by the compliment. 'Sixteen systems down the list, with thirty-four still to go. If we can save a day or two each time, that means we'll get home ahead of schedule.'

Sara Mravinsky and Andre Passant watched from the sidelines, obviously bored with the routine manoeuvres and uninspiring dialogue. Steel-haired Andre looked unhappy, which I duly noted. The script called for sullen resentment over Myrion's rejection, but I sensed something more. Was he, like Freedom, overacting, or could this be the beginning of a separate malaise?

I sat apart from everyone, studying the crew's interactions for any sign of tension, or release thereof. Who knew what would be useful? Even the isolation of Sara and Andre might provide enough material for a sub-plot, although I resisted the idea of pairing the two romantically. Apart from my own feelings, her fragile, almost childlike beauty would look incestuous juxtaposed with the stern security head. Although, maybe she'd like that. I found it hard to tell what was happening inside that pretty head, with its close-cropped auburn hair and burnt-orange eyes ...

'Ahead of schedule,' commented Andre, 'won't be soon enough for me.'

I came back to reality with a jolt. So that was his problem. Earth-sickness. I'd need to look at that later.

'Engines are fine, Captain,' said Steve. He licked his lips, acutely aware that every word was being recorded. 'It was a little rough for a moment there, but we rode through it. Give us four days to trace the problem and we'll be back at optimum.'

'Good.' Gabe nodded, unconcerned. Maintenance on such a long mission was an ongoing problem but nothing to be overly worried about. There was little save a direct asteroid-strike or a matrix-implosion that Steve couldn't fix on the hop. The engines only ran at full power once every five weeks, anyway, while we crossed the gulf between stars, so there was plenty of downtime to patch up the odd leak. 'Jake, tell me about the system.'

The half-Asian astrogator shrugged without looking up from his screen. He was type-cast and he knew it; more, he played up to it. 'Nothing new to report, sir. Three planets, two of them Jovian. The third is tiny and dense, in a close, irregular orbit. Probably a captured moon. No asteroid belts or cometary clouds to speak of.'

'Good.' Gabe visibly relaxed. The last binary system (Omega Herculis, a white Supergiant with smaller companion) had seemed as simple as this, at first, until closer inspection revealed a widely scattered belt of primordial black holes orbiting the primary sun. Tricky for astrogation and life-support, and, as a near miss had proved, potentially fatal. We were ready for anything, this time, including boredom. 'Uninhabited?'

'Of course. What did you expect?'

'One of these days you might surprise me.' Gabe smiled wryly. 'Sara, all non-essential crew can take a one-hour break. On stand-by until further notice.'

Sara toggled the intercom and broadcast the order. A feeling of tension began to ebb as, throughout the ship, the superfluous crew left their posts for a breather. Eighteen hours of hard work - crossover, primary survey, injection - was finished. Earlier than normal, too, as Freedom had said; Gabe's technique of combining insertion with flyby seemed to be working. Unless something went wrong, the ship would be back on regular rosters for the next few weeks.

Gabe flickered through various screens of information, browsing, filling in time until the flyby. I too watched the torrent of data, understanding no more than ten per cent but not feeling too bad about that. None of us understood it all, not even the backroom boys under Freedom's command. In the eighteen months we had already been Out Here, we had collected as many anomalies as coherent facts, and more questions than answers.

As Morale Officer, it was my job to make sure the wrong questions were never asked.

The inner, rocky planet crept closer. A battery of instruments scattered across the hull of the ship subjected it to constant analysis. It was lifeless, as expected, and a potential wealth of minerals. Halfway there, three impact probes were launched from the *Jew*; they separated with a half-heard, half-felt clang and swooped down to their fiery rendezvous.

An hour later, three tiny flashes of light were recorded and filed away for analysis. And that was it until the next flyby, three days later. If Freedom's staff found nothing too unusual in the spectrographic data, the *Jew* would shift its orbit to study the primary star in more detail, after which we would head out to the gas giants. Then we would leave.

Five weeks. Four, if the system was as empty as it appeared to be. Another month for me to keep the crew from each other's throats.

I stifled both a yawn and a recurring inspiration to write a romantic sub-plot involving Sara Mravinsky and myself, just to liven things up. Perhaps I was wrong to suppress this urge. The cathartic process included myself, didn't it? Who was going to keep me from my own throat?

Then it happened.

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(Cut to: Close scanner shot of Jake Foo-Wong studying the astrogation screen, concentrating on tracing a path through the system. Suddenly, his head snaps up; on his face is an expression that combines both fear and total surprise.)

JAKE: Captain! We have something!

GABE: Yes, Jake - ? (he looks up) My God! *What the hell is that?*

(Snapshot view of the screen: an orange tangle of overlapping lines and circles. One small dot is moving very, very quickly across the screen.)

JAKE: (Struggling for self-control) Astrogation reports ... an unidentified object -

GABE: Red Alert, Sara! Red Alert!

JAKE: - velocity three four by ten exp seven -

GABE: Standby main drive!

JAKE: - heading ... (he looks up, and his face is pale) ... *right at us, Captain ...*

GABE: Seal all airlocks. For God's sake, Steve, get that engine running. I want medical on full standby!

(Pull back: Control is a mass of confusion; voices shout into intercoms; an alarm begins to wail. Captured in one corner of the shot, with a look of absolute, impotent horror on his cola-black face, is me.)

JAKE: (A little calmer, but still breathless.) We have visual, sir.

(Cut to: A star-speckled view with Mu 1-Boötis in the top-left corner. Nothing is visible at first, then a bright green dot appears in the centre of the starscape. With a soundless *whoosh*, it instantly fills the screen.)

GABE: Jesus Christ ... That thing is *moving!* What magnification was that, Jake?

JAKE: Full, sir.

GABE: ETA?

JAKE: One-ninety seconds.

GABE: Is it broadcasting?

JAKE: No, sir, and it does not respond to signals.

GABE: Shit. Give me an evasive course and I'll take manual.

SARA: (Looking uncharacteristically frightened) Can't we just jump the hell out of here?

STEVE: No. We need at least forty-eight hours to program a crossover.

SARA: (Embarrassed) Of course. Sorry.

(Cut to: Freedom Maxwell, at her console. The same image as before, of the alien spacecraft zooming towards the ship, fills her screen. Note: although her hair retains its coppery sheen, even in this bright green light, her beauty is only matched by her efficiency at her job.)

FREEDOM: OK ... (briskly, to the computer) ... roll it back a frame ... more ... *there*. Freeze and store. Magnify.

ANDRE: (Leaning over her shoulder) What the hell ...?

FREEDOM: (Tapping on the screen to highlight aspects of the alien craft) Disc-shaped, rotating at a very high speed, a border of yellow light around the edge of the disc, seems to leave a particulate vapour in its wake ... (Turning away from the screen) Gabe, is this some sort of joke?

GABE: What? No, of course not. Why?

FREEDOM: Well, in that case, Captain, we seem to have discovered our very first flying saucer.

(Stunned silence.)

JAKE: Bogey still approaching. (You can tell by the look on his face that he's always wanted to play this role.) ETA now seventy seconds.

GABE: (Still incredulous) Flying *what*?

ME: (With an almost insane grin) A bona fide UFO!

ANDRE: Alek, if this is one of your ridiculous sub-plots -

ME: God, no. I may be crazy but I'm not *that* crazy. Who would believe a flying saucer, out here in *space* ...?!

FREEDOM: And how would he program the visuals? We're seeing them for real.

ME: Yeah. Thanks, Freedom.

ANDRE: (Scowling) Keep a lid on it, then.

ME: Only if you stay in character.

JAKE: (Interrupting) ETA thirty seconds.

GABE: Right. Suggestions, anyone?

(Silence, again, apart from the impact-siren.)

GABE: OK. I guess we'll just have to try and bluff our way out. (His face shows a hint of fear but, on the whole, he maintains his persona well.) Hang on tight!

(Gabe's hands flicker over his control board as he wrenches the ship to one side. There is a muffled roar as the mighty engines kick into life. Note: there is no joystick; no falling from side to side; no screaming. This is *real* space opera, even if the dialogue's a bit wooden in places.)

JAKE: Bogey changing course.

GABE: Towards us?

JAKE: Aye, sir. ETA fifteen seconds.

(The Captain tugs the ship in another direction. The grim set of his jaw reveals that he knows the gesture will be futile, but he tries nonetheless.)

JAKE: ETA ten seconds. (I belatedly applaud his next words, although I loathed them at the time.) Nine ... eight... seven ...

(Cut to, in turn: Andre, Sara, Steve, Freedom, me, Jake and Gabe, interspersed with snapshots of the visual scanner, upon which the alien ship is approaching rapidly.)

JAKE: ... six ... five ... four ...

(The saucer seems to explode out of the screen.)

JAKE: ... three ... two ...

(Everything goes green ...)

JAKE: ...one...

( ... blindingly bright green ... )

JAKE: Impact!

(Blackout.)

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In the wake of the encounter with the flying saucer, a vague sort of panic reigned. Of all the footage faithfully recorded by the security scanners, there was only one salvageable line:

ANDRE: Where the fuck has it *gone*?

And, as no one at the time could provide a suitable answer, I was forced to archive it.

My first thought, to maintain the dramatic impetus, was to cut immediately to the debriefing session, held in the Captain's quarters eight hours after the event. People had calmed down a little by then, and were able to make a little more sense.

But, after much shuffling and re-editing, this eventually became the episode's opening scene:

Gabe chaired the meeting, naturally. His haggard face was a mask of tired determination. He hadn't slept for over thirty-six hours. None of us had.

'OK, folks. I guess we need to work out what the hell happened. Anyone want to suggest where we start?'

'Something *did* happen, I presume?' Andre was taking the easy way out: evading the problem by questioning its very existence. 'It wasn't just an hallucination?'

'No.' Freedom was adamant. 'It's all there on file, if you want to check. The bogey appeared, flew towards us under an acceleration beyond the capacity of human engineering and then disappeared on impact.'

'The "bogey"?' Myrion looked amused, although the half-smile was twisted by her usual bitterness. Her psych file spoke of deep traumas, buried beneath conditioning. She was one of

the few truly complex characters in the drama of the *Wandering Jew*, and one for whom I had great plans. Plainly attractive, with shoulder-length white hair, she was an interesting contrast to Freedom, with whom she was usually at loggerheads. 'I thought you said it was a "flying saucer"?'

'Whatever. Does it matter what we call it?'

'No.' Gabe stepped in to forestall an argument. 'Either will be fine. And I think we can assume it was of alien origin. The pertinent question, as I see it, is: what was the purpose of its behaviour?'

'Why did it try to ram us?' added Jake.

Steve: 'How does it work?'

Sara: 'What do they want from us?'

Freedom: 'Where did it come from?'

Andre: 'Where has it gone?'

Me: 'And how do we report it?'

Gabe shrugged. 'That's why we're here, Alek. We need to think this through. It vanished without trace when it should have hit us head-on, and we haven't seen it since. Whoever they were, they didn't bother to tell us what the hell they were doing, so all we can do is guess.'

'Maybe it was some sort of defence mechanism,' suggested Andre. 'Warning us away.'

'From what?'

'I don't know. Could there be life on the inner planet?'

'Unlikely' Freedom's voice was firm. 'A civilisation which could build a ship like that would surely leave some trace behind. We didn't even pick up heat-sources. Just old lava and the odd fissure.'

'The Jovian worlds?'

'Again, unlikely.'

'I guess we'll find out soon enough,' said Sara. 'We'll be passing them in a week or so.'

'Will we?' Gabe studied us closely. 'One of the things I wanted to discuss was the status of the mission. Should we abandon this system and skip to the next, or keep going as planned?'

'Abandon the system?' Freedom was outraged. 'We're on the brink of what might be the greatest discovery we'll ever make! The quest for alien life is one of the mission's primary directives!'

'Unless it places the mission itself in jeopardy,' reminded Andre.

'They didn't hurt us, did they? Whoever they are and whatever they want, I think they've demonstrated quite adequately that we're at their mercy. And yet we still live. I don't think they're hostile, just ... cautious.'

'Funny way to show it.'

'Of course. You don't expect them to behave like humans, do you?'

This triggered a thought in my own head, but I bit my lip to keep it in. Had their behaviour really been unhuman?

'I myself would like to keep going as planned,' said Gabe, 'but I'll hear any arguments to the contrary before filing the order. Now's the time to speak, if you want to.'

Silence greeted this announcement. Andre was clearly nervous behind his blunt aggression, but he kept quiet. The only other member of the panel who might have spoken against the Captain was Sara, but she too said nothing. I could tell by the way she fidgeted that she was ashamed of her own fear.

Gabe waited for a minute, drumming his fingers on the desk, until it became obvious that no one was going to speak.

'I guess it's settled, then. If nothing untoward happens on the next flyby - and I want us on full alert for that - then we'll proceed as normal. But if anybody comes up with something we haven't thought of, no matter how ridiculous, I want to hear it. Absolutely anything could be important.'

We all mumbled our assent. I crossed my fingers behind my back, where the cameras couldn't see the gesture.

'So, folks, I suggest we get some rest. It's been a long, hard day. I declare this emergency council closed and wish you all pleasant dreams. Good night.'

\* \* \* \*

The second flyby was uneventful. Our alien friend refused to reveal itself, if it was still around. We shifted orbit closer to the primary without mishap, then migrated out to the gas giants, where we refuelled. Three weeks later, the *Jew* was ready for crossover. All that remained was the sending of the Mu Boötis report.

Communication with Earth was restricted to small, bullet-shaped lozenges fired through hyperspace to Sol System, where they arrived two days later. The energy required to send the tiny capsules on their way limited the despatches to one per system, at the conclusion of each survey. Thus, every one counted. There would be no chance to send a postscript until the next month; it had to be perfect first time.

And that was where I came in. It was my responsibility to collate all the data into a coherent report. I collected logs from the department heads, rewrote the mass of technical data into readable English and prepared an overall mission log. This process, with the help of AIs, took no more than a couple of days, and was very dull work.



The position of Communications Officer was therefore only part-time. I doubled as Morale Officer (another thankless job) between reports. It took me months to work out how to combine the two tasks and thereby make life a lot more interesting than it had been.

Alpha Boötis (otherwise known as Arcturus, fourth-brightest star in the Northern sky) was our third stop, thirty-six light years from Earth. This much-anticipated system unfortunately proved to be fairly bland, as did the following four: Gamma Serpens, Sigma Boötis, Yale 5634 and Tau Boötis. I knew the folks back home would be hoping for more than the odd boring gas giant and the usual spectral data. So, in an attempt to enliven the report from Yale 5634, rechristened McCormack's Star upon our arrival, I included footage of the day-to-day activities of the senior crew. Instead of sterile, scripted speeches from the department heads, we had real-life interactions, a close-knit community of people at work and play aboard the *Jew*. By editing the recordings, I managed to create a feeling of continuity, even though the half-hour of footage was composed of snippets recorded weeks apart.

I showed the crew the final cut before despatching it, explaining that High Command would be interested to see how we performed as a unit, instead of as individuals. The dramatised footage would convey the reality far better than any Morale Report. If I had taken any remarks out of context, then that was simply to give the half-hour a feeling of completeness, by hinting at plots and sub-plots that may not really have existed.

'The Adventures of the *Wandering Jew*, Episode One,' said Jake, 'certainly has a better ring to it than "USSN *Rosenberg* Routine Survey Report: Yale 5634, 21.08.26."'

'Exactly' I beamed confidently. 'Fun, isn't it?'

'But where will it end?' protested Andre, perhaps prophetically. 'Are we becoming *Star Trek*, or *Lost in Space*?'

There were a few other grumbles, mainly about privacy, but my innovation was ultimately approved by Gabe. The report was sent.

For the next report, from Tau Boötis (58 ly), I took the exercise one step further by actively encouraging the senior crew to improvise. I suggested possible situations and outcomes that might be entertaining for the folks back home, as well as 'fun' for ourselves. Already I'd had the idea that this communal exercise might be employed as a means of catharsis. Half the trouble with surviving as a community in a closed environment is the lack of a pressure-valve. Most of my time as Morale Officer was spent bleeding-off dangerously charged situations - onto myself, more often than not. I hoped that, by turning the *Wandering Jew* reports into a soap opera, I might be able to take the strain off myself as well as the rest of the crew.

For instance: If Andre Passant's sullen manner rubbed Myrion Hemmelling the wrong way, why not have them act out a confrontation? This clumsy psychodrama was amongst the first sub-plots I attempted.

And it worked. Everyone became involved, if a little reluctantly in some cases. It was a game to be enjoyed when actively participating in it, or to be discussed (for and against) when not. I received suggestions from many people regarding possible outcomes. Pretty soon I was handing out rough scripts and engineering vital exchanges. Our everyday work continued - studying, collating, surviving - but now we had a game to keep our minds amused as well.

Then, two systems later, something happened that changed shipboard life forever.

The *Wandering Jew* wasn't the only ship on the deep-space exploration program; there were nineteen others, each with fifty systems to explore before returning to Earth. Although many of us cursed the five-year confinement, we all acknowledged that the arrangement was the best available. It was far more efficient to send one ship to explore fifty systems than to send fifty each to one system and back. Sure, with *fifty* ships the thousand systems could have been covered in less than half the time, but at more than twice the cost.

Omicron Boötis (75 ly) was our ninth system. Observations from Earth orbit had suggested the existence of a large solar family and we were therefore anticipating a great deal of work. We blipped out of hyperspace on the system's rim, wary of comets, and took stock of our surroundings.

Sure enough, O-Boötis was *big*. Fifteen planets, two asteroid belts and an extensive cometary cloud crowded the cool orange giant. Gabe took us in on a wide polar orbit, high above the ecliptic, and Freedom went to work.

And that's when we spotted it: a reply capsule from Earth. Only the third we had received in nearly a year. Personal messages from families (none of us had a spouse back on Earth, but there were always relatives who wanted to keep in touch), fresh instructions from High Command, news of earthbound politics and sports, the latest fads ... We waited impatiently for the *Jew's* unmanned drone to collect it and bring it back for perusal.

The news, however, was not all good.

Of our nineteen sister-ships, three had suffered cataclysmic disasters; one had despatched a garbled message about an asteroid strike before also disappearing; and a further seven had returned to Earth, abandoning their missions for a variety of reasons (including illness, discontent, psychological maladjustment and outright mutiny). Of the remaining nine ships, six seemed to be developing similar problems, and two of these were so far behind schedule that their itineraries had been cut back to thirty systems.

Which left only three fully operational missions, including the *Wandering Jew*.

The news was sobering, to say the least.

There was also a 'private and confidential' note addressed to me personally from Robin Blanchard, General Secretary of High Command, counter-signed by the President of the Solar Tribunal, Valerie McCormack herself. I opened it nervously, fully expecting it to be a terse order to get back to work, to stop wasting the crew's time on trivial matters. It meant the end of the soap, I just knew it.

But it wasn't. Quite the opposite, in fact.

High Command requested that we continue the unorthodox reports - *demanding* that we do so, and in no uncertain terms. In the face of the other failures, they needed a successful mission to show the public, presented in a way that would guarantee the comprehension of the lowest common denominator. The Adventures of the *Wandering Jew* were, simply, good PR. And the possibility that the whole exercise had helped the psychological stability of the ship as a

whole was not lost on them.

So that's how I became the honorary 'Soap Operator', and how the Adventures of the *Wandering Jew* began in earnest...

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#### Episode 4: Omicron Boötis

##### *Synopsis:*

This, the ninth port of call for the spaceship *Wandering Jew*, tests the mettle of the crew. In the face of bad news from Earth, morale becomes a serious concern. While the extensive (and therefore demanding) O-Boötis system is explored, charted and studied, the narrator, Alek Maas, follows the ongoing hopes and aspirations of the crew.

The friendship between Captain Gabe and Freedom Maxwell continues to develop. Will they ever consummate the relationship? Can pretty, young Sara Mravinsky survive the terrible pressures of space-travel and still find time to discover herself? Does Andre Passant know more than he's saying, or was the mysterious disappearance of insulation wrap from Storage Bay 14 really just an innocent mistake? Myrion Hemmelling holds in her hands the life of everyone aboard the *Wandering Jew*, many of whom she does not like; does this account for her bitterness, or is it related somehow to her hidden past? What if, as Steve Jefferssen fears, something terrible goes wrong with the engines? Will the crew be stranded in deep space, beyond all hope of rescue?

The Mission itself remains as always the focus of this episode: the ongoing plot to which everything else is pinned. What new discoveries await the *Jew*? What unforeseen dangers? Will the attempt to maintain morale fail? The pressure on the crew is enormous. They have approximately six weeks in which to study an entire solar system. Given that scientists have been studying the home system for two thousand years and still haven't finished, is this task humanly possible ...?

\* \* \* \*

And so on.

Each 'episode' consisted of about three hours of footage, interspersed with panoramic views of the particular system. In the case of O-Boötis, there was more than enough material to fill the pauses: turbulent gas giants, cloud-covered moons, tumultuous asteroid belts, *et cetera*. Where I couldn't find enough dramatic footage to manufacture a satisfactory plot, I narrated bridging material. A couple of crew members - Andre in particular - resented this dramatisation of reality, but reluctantly went along with it. If he was so often cast as the villain of the piece, then didn't that represent some aspect of him that needed to be dealt with?

Three systems later, at Kappa Corona Borealis, a white AO ninety light years from home, we received our fourth reply capsule. High Command was ecstatic. They forwarded the final cut of the O-Boötis episode for our enjoyment, including the commercials. One of the leading composers of the day had written a theme, and there were credits featuring footage of our training, transfer to orbit and final launch. Someone had touched-up the odd scene or two, overlaying the bad acting with computer-generated expressions, but it was otherwise pretty

much as I had put it together. Gabe looked a little more dapper than usual, but that might have been my imagination.

Viewed from a distance (it had been ten weeks since I had put it together), Episode Four was dramatic, inspiring, personal and very human. Here were a handful of people (it was hard to think of them as *us*) trapped in a metal and plastic coffin trillions of kilometres from home. The citizens of Earth couldn't help but care about us, which in turn meant that they cared about the deep-space exploration program. And that was a Good Thing for all involved.

It turned out that the re-edited versions of my reports had been bought by five of the multinational broadcast networks. Advertised as the 'human face of space exploration', the Adventures of the *Wandering Jew* were reaching seventy-five per cent of the population.

We were stars. The idea took a lot of getting used to. And it meant that my role as Soap Operator became yet more central to the day-today running of the ship. What had started as a game had become the means of saving the space program, and maybe our sanities along with it - all thanks to a flair for the dramatic that I had never before realised I had. Who would have believed it?

But weirdest of all was the fan mail...

\* \* \* \*

So, when the alien ship buzzed us at Mu Boötis, our sixteenth stop and eleventh episode, my first thought was: how does this affect the series? I could hardly edit the Event from the episode; it was too good a scene to leave on the cutting-room floor, quite apart from its historical significance, but it was too ridiculous to be believed. A flying saucer, in *space*?

As the survey of Mu Boötis rolled on and the deadline rapidly approached, I sought opinions from the rest of the crew.

\* \* \* \*

'I don't know what to think,' said Steve Jefferssen, the first I approached. 'I saw what I saw, but what I saw doesn't make sense. Best to ignore it and see what happens when, or *if*, it comes back. What else can we do? There's no point dwelling on it.'

'Really, Steve?' I had expected more from this pragmatic pillar of a man. 'Don't you even wonder - ?'

'Sure, Alek. Sure I wonder. I wonder if we've all gone crazy.'

\* \* \* \*

'The timing is what bothers me,' confessed Myrion. 'We're a third of the way through the mission - less than that, actually - and there have been few in the way of major discoveries. I guess we were all hoping for at least some sign of alien life by now, but, apart from the false alarm at Beta Serpens, everything's dead, dead, dead! Maybe we're externalising our expectations. The flying saucer is a common enough archetype, after the hysteria of the twentieth century. Did you ever read about the abductions that supposedly took place in the eighties and nineties?'

'Yes.'

'They stopped when SETI folded. The pressure on the communal psyche shifted back to the internal and we started seeing ghosts again. Maybe we're experiencing the re-emergence of the UFO syndrome.'

'So we're crazy?' I didn't mention that I'd had, in essence, a similar conversation with Steve.

'No. We're hallucinating.'

'Same thing, isn't it?'

'Ask someone on LSD.'

'I will,' I promised, 'just as soon as I get home.'

She smiled. She was always more cheerful when she thought she'd won an argument.

\* \* \* \*

'Jiggery-pokery,' was Andre's opinion. 'Some idiot's playing a trick on us.'

'How?'

'By seeding the AI network with incumbent viruses programmed to activate at a specified time in the mission. When they trigger, we see images through the screens of things that aren't really there: electronic ghosts, if you like. You'll have to ask Freedom exactly how they did it, but I'll bet it's something like that. After all, we found no evidence that the saucer ever existed, did we? No wreckage, no radiation, no particulate wake - nothing. Therefore it wasn't real; therefore it was a stunt. It'll be ghost-writing in the sky next. Some sort of propaganda, or a message to a girlfriend.'

'"Remember that night in Paris" ...?'

He didn't smile. 'Something like that.'

I knew better than to ask Andre if he doubted his sanity, so instead I asked him the question that really bothered me:

'Do you think I'm behind it? Be honest. I can take it.'

He thought for a moment before replying. 'No, I suppose I don't. I'm just angry at you for falling for it.'

Now *that* was a sobering thought.

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'I guess it all boils down to the fact that someone is really out there,' said Freedom, next on my list. 'Their motives may seem mysterious, perhaps even nonsensical, but they're *there* all the

same. And that's what counts.'

'So you don't think it was a prank, or some sort of glitch?'

'Absolutely not. I helped design half the information systems on this ship. I'd know if they were malfunctioning, or if someone had tampered with them. Same with my brain. Anybody who says otherwise is evading the issue.'

'But why only one ship? If they're as advanced as they appear to be, why aren't there hundreds of them out here?'

'Well, the Galaxy is a big place, right? The old SETI system - aiming an antenna at the sky and waiting - simply won't work. It takes centuries for signals from one civilisation to reach another, even if they're relative neighbours; by the time you'd know they were there, they might not be any more.'

'Yes, but -'

'The only way to find life, therefore, is to go out and look for it, system by system. This applies for any civilisation anywhere in the Galaxy, and especially out here in the Rim. Thus, the sort of aliens we'll be likely to meet will be wanderers like us. The odds are that we won't stumble across anybody's home system. It'll be just one ship, all on its own.'

I thought about it, nodded slowly. 'That makes sense, I guess.' And it did, although I'll bet she only thought of it *after* we met the saucer. 'But, if they're looking for life as well, then why won't they talk to us?'

'They might well have tried.' Freedom smiled wryly. 'You never know what life will be like until you find it.'

\* \* \* \*

'Do you know what *really* scares me?' asked Sara. It was late one ship's-night and we were sharing a coffee in her quarters. I hadn't actually approached her for her thoughts on the matter, but she offered them anyway. Word had obviously spread.

'No. What?'

'That it might be real.'

'Which?'

'The, you know, the flying saucer. The aliens.'

'What's so horrible about that?'

'Everything. They're obviously so much better than we are. They make us look like savages in comparison.'

'I know.' I didn't like to see her so worried. 'But think of all the things we can learn from them -'

... ‘That’s not what I mean.’ She leaned intoxicatingly closer. ‘Maybe they’re *toying* with us

\* \* \* \*

Jake laughed when I sought his opinion.

‘Does it really matter, either way? If it’s a prank, then whoever infiltrated the system is better than we are. If not, and the aliens are real, then they’re also better than we are. We’re helpless to do anything no matter how you look at it, so we might as well sit back and enjoy what happens next.’

‘And if it’s us? If we’re losing it?’

‘As I said: we sit back and enjoy the show.’

\* \* \* \*

Gabe said much the same, in a round-about way.

‘I’m going to sit on the fence for a while, Alek. Sorry.’

‘A three-sided fence,’ I said, ‘between aliens, sabotage and madness.’

A bit uncomfortable, isn’t it?’

Gabe smiled. ‘Yes, but I’m used to it. It goes with the job.’

‘And you’re welcome to it. Can I ask one last question, then, just for the record?’

‘Go ahead.’

‘We’re not armed, are we?’

‘Why would we be?’

‘And we have no escape capsules?’

‘Where would we escape *to*? That’s two questions, by the way.’

‘I know. But don’t you think we’re dangerously vulnerable out here, all alone and with no means of defending ourselves?’

‘Of course we are.’ His smile broadened. ‘That’s half the fun, isn’t it?’

As Honorary Soap Operator, I could only agree.

\* \* \* \*

So, opinion was divided. Only two members of the senior crew were prepared to admit that they

believed in the existence of the aliens; three were undecided, and two thought the saucer was an illusion. Had I been looking for a consensus, I would have been disappointed.

As for me, I had my own theory - a different one again. Like Myrion, the timing was what bothered me. It was too dramatic, too contrived. Months of editing had taught me that the universe didn't naturally work that way; it had to be nudged before it would perform. Like Andre, I thought it was someone human doing the nudging, not an alien - but, unlike him, I had both a motive and a suspect.

The saucer had appeared not long after our last package from Earth. That was the crucial clue. If our AIs had been corrupted by some sort of virus, then it must have arrived in that package; maybe hidden in Episode Four, dormant until we played the recording. If that was the case, then only one person, or group of people, could have been behind it.

Every package is checked and rechecked for aberrations before leaving Earth orbit; a virus, no matter how dormant, would have shown up eventually. If High Command had been infiltrated by a traitor, then that person could never have been certain the time bomb would reach its destination. Only one organisation could be sure of that - the same one that had the resources and the know-how to build a virus capable of getting past Freedom. Only this organisation knew the AI system aboard the *Jew* better than she did.

And that was High Command itself.

The motive was a little more complex. For what possible reason would HC want to sabotage its own investment? The only answer I could think of was to redirect our pooled hostility outwards, towards an imaginary alien, instead of inwards at each other. Even with the success of the soap opera, they still had eleven failures on their hands. Maybe they could see signs of stress that I had missed. Perhaps they thought the risk of pulling a stunt like this was less than the risk of doing nothing at all.

Or perhaps I was being paranoid. At the very least, it was a plausible theory.

The only problem was, I couldn't tell anyone. If my guess was right, then HC would look poorly on the person who gave the game away - and made *them* the enemy.

So, like Gabe, I had to play the impartial observer and let everyone have their say, half-hoping someone else would guess. Only time would tell if I was right. Until then, all I could do was watch and, as Jake advised, enjoy the show.

\* \* \* \*

And that was how I eventually worked the saucer into the episode. On other occasions, Gabe had been the star, or Myrion, or Jake. One of the reasons why I had cast myself as narrator, apart from convenience, was because I hate the look of my own face. But I had no choice this time. My turn had come. There was no other way to present what had happened.

Episode Eleven (Mu Boötis) began, not with the encounter itself, but with the debriefing in Gabe's quarters. The interviews I had conducted followed, mixed with the survey of the system. On top of the astronomical footage, I publicly agonised over my dilemma: how could I portray what had happened without stretching the audience's credulity? This self-reference was planned to convince the viewers of my/our sincerity. That something unusual had happened



would be obvious in the way we spoke; that it was hard to credit, likewise. When the audience eventually saw the actual saucer, at the very end of the episode, they would be prepared for it. They would feel along with us, I hoped, a mixture of fear, amusement, awe, suspicion and total disbelief.

Gabe gave the episode his seal of approval and sent it on its way.

\* \* \* \*

Two days later, Freedom and Steve announced that we were ready for crossover to the next system. Gabe, instead of ordering us immediately on our way, announced a twelve-hour shutdown to give us a breather. We were two months ahead of schedule and there was no denying that we were tired, but it wasn't like Gabe to delay like this. He was always pressing on, pushing forward, over the top and no second thoughts, lads!

Perhaps he knew something the rest of us didn't, or guessed.

Either way, it was worth waiting for.

\* \* \* \*

*Scene:*

Control Bridge of the *Wandering Jew*, approximately seventy-five minutes to scheduled crossover.

JAKE: Uh, Captain...?

GABE: Yes, Jake?

JAKE: It's back, sir. Our friend, the bogey. Stationary, this time.

(Brief shot of the alien craft. It appears exactly the same as before: bright green, disc-shaped, spinning about its vertical axis.)

GABE: Position?

JAKE: High above the ecliptic, barely within range. We're getting a strong fix from one of the solar-survey satellites.

GABE: Is it broadcasting?

JAKE: Negative, sir. Just sitting there.

GABE: (To himself) Waiting for us to do something ...? (Into an intercom) All-stations, all-stations! This is an alert. Prepare for immediate crossover. (Intercom off) Sara, have us ship-shape in five minutes. Steve, warm us up. Freedom, any thoughts?

FREEDOM: I'll leave the decision up to you, sir. But please bear in mind what I said.

GABE: Yes. If we leave Mu Boötis, we'll be losing our last chance to make contact.

ME: (To Sara, thinking of the viewers back on Earth) Why's that?

SARA: It's theoretically impossible for one ship to follow another through hyperspace.

ME: So, if we leave now ...?

SARA: Then we'll lose them forever.

(Cut to:)

GABE: Any response yet, Jake?

JAKE: No, sir. We're still broadcasting on all bands; they must be hearing us.

GABE: And it hasn't moved?

JAKE: No, sir.

GABE: I think we've given them long enough. If they really wanted to talk they would have tried by now. Steve? Everybody? Two minutes. We cross on my command.

(Sara broadcasts the order throughout the ship. Deep in the bowels of the *Wandering Jew*, powerful energies stir, brewing the force that will rip the ship from this universe and take it safely to the next.)

JAKE: One minute and counting.

GABE: All in order?

JAKE: Yes, sir. All lights are green.

STEVE: Transformation matrix enabled.

FREEDOM: Coordinates confirmed.

SARA: Crew in position and awaiting your order, sir.

GABE: Good. Alek?

ME: Cameras rolling.

JAKE: Fifteen seconds.

GABE: Last words, anyone?

FREEDOM: (To the aliens, presumably) Farewell...

ME: Delta Boötis, here we come!

JAKE: Mark.

GABE: Cross.

(Cut to: External surface shot. The skin of the *Wandering Jew* burns with alcohol flames. In the background, the greenish primary of Mu Boötis begins to dissolve.)

(Cut to: Control Bridge. The air is full of the straining of engines. A shudder ripples through the ship, rattling bulkheads and causing frowns.)

GABE: Status?

STEVE: A-OK, sir. Just a flutter.

(The roar of the drive settles. Outside the ship, Mu Boötis goes out; the stars vanish. The *Wandering Jew* exits Einsteinian time-space.)

GABE: Fingers crossed, everybody!

STEVE: Drive steady.

FREEDOM: Coordinates locked and holding.

JAKE: ETA, ninety seconds.

(The rattle returns, more insistently this time.)

STEVE: (To himself) Come on, baby.

GABE: Problem?

STEVE: Nothing ... uh ... (He taps furiously at his board.)

FREEDOM: (Urgently) We're drifting!

GABE: Keep calm, and clarify.

FREEDOM: We have an instability in the transformation matrix!

GABE: Serious?

FREEDOM: Any instability *at all* is serious. (The rattle peaks again, and does not fade.) We'll be lucky to arrive in one piece if it gets any worse.

ME: (Thinking about the theory) I thought the trick was arriving in *separate* pieces, not one big lump?

ANDRE: Can it, would you?

STEVE: We have a problem, people. Stabilisers gone in three jump circuits, shorted out a whole line ...

GABE: Can you fix it?

STEVE: Once we shut down, yes. But we can't shut down until we arrive. All I can do is hold us here, between states, for a while.

GABE: Which places more strain on the matrix. How long do you think?

STEVE: A few minutes. No more.

GABE: Do it.

JAKE: Countdown halted. ETA TBA.

(The rumble of the engines, now indistinguishable from the everpresent rattle, steadies slightly.)

GABE: Freedom, what are the odds of us arriving safely if we just go ahead and finish the jump?

FREEDOM: Slim.

GABE: But worth a try ...?

FREEDOM: If you like long odds.

GABE: How about hyperspace? Can we go back?

FREEDOM: Unfortunately, the same conditions apply there.

GABE: So why don't we just stay here, then?

FREEDOM: Well, it takes energy to keep us whole, and the reactor's already under stress. If, or when, the matrix fails entirely, we'll be torn apart.

GABE: Understood. Any suggestions?

FREEDOM: No. I'm sorry.

GABE: Steve? How's she holding?

STEVE: Uh, barely, sir. There's not much I can do to delay the -

(There is a violent lurch. A siren begins to wail.)

FREEDOM: We've lost the reactor shielding! Over-rides cutting in -power dropping!

STEVE: I can't hold her!

GABE: Take us in! Do it now, while we still have a chance!

(Red lights spread across the drive-control board. The rumble of motors has become a tortured growl.)

JAKE: ETA, fifteen seconds.

STEVE: We're losing it!

MYRION: (From life-support, via intercom) Pressure-drop in sector four!

(The lights flicker. Smoke billows.)

FREEDOM: Total power-loss to all drive-systems! No, wait - that doesn't make sense! We're getting a power-surge - I can't tell what's happening down there -

JAKE: System failure!

(The lights go out entirely. The wail of the ship continues for a moment, then ceases as well. There is an explosion, so loud the recordings clip.)

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE VOICE: God help us!

(The recording whites-out for an instant.)

(After an unknown period of time, the lights flicker back on. An unsteady current brings partial life to some of the boards. The control Bridge is in chaos; people are sprawled everywhere.)

ME: (Holding Sara in an absurdly protective fashion) Are we dead yet?

JAKE: No. (He frowns, struggles to his feet and confronts his control board.) I think we, uh ...

ME: Think we *what?* Don't keep us in suspense, man!

JAKE: (Looking up) I think we're *there*.

FREEDOM: But we didn't complete the jump. (She sounds almost hurt) We should be dead!

(A screen flickers to life. On it is revealed the yellow Bright Giant, Delta 1-Boötis, hanging in space like a candle-lit Chinese lantern. But that's not all... )

GABE: Ho, ho. There's our welcoming party, folks.

FREEDOM: That's impossible!

JAKE: Apparently not.

(Hanging in the screen's top-left corner is the flying saucer.)

STEVE: The same one?

GABE: Why not?

FREEDOM: But the theory -

ME: Fuck the theory. The theory says we should be dead, remember?

JAKE: Captain, it's moving closer.

GABE: Steve, what's our status?

STEVE: Poor, sir. We're on emergency power. The fusion drive will burn up our reserves in no time. Give me a week and we'll be able to run, but not before then.

GABE: (Resignedly) So here we sit –

ANDRE: - Helpless –

ME: - And here they come!

\* \* \* \*

Afterwards, reviewing the tapes, it looked ridiculous.

The flying saucer drifted slowly closer to us, travelling at a little less than the *Jew's* intrasystem cruising speed. We nervously watched it approach. There was nothing else we could do. Closer and closer it came, as silent and mysterious as its archetypal counterparts, until it almost seemed within touching distance.

And then it vanished again.

\* \* \* \*

No one was seriously injured, apart from the two who had died in the explosively depressurised compartment. While the crew swarmed over the ship, repairing pressure-breaks and patching damaged equipment, the senior officers gathered in the Captain's quarters for a second emergency debriefing session.

Gabe scanned the assembled faces, some of them still the worse for wear after the near-disastrous crossover. There was a lot of dirt, worry, frustration and fear on those faces. I wondered if we would ever jump with confidence again.

'OK, Steve, give us the bad news.'

'Well.' The chief engineer looked harrowed. 'Fifteen seconds before she completed the jump, the *Jew* suffered a total system failure. She lost life-support, drive capability, everything. A total burnout, to put it crudely. How she made it back to realspace, I'll never know. Thirty seconds later, the backups kicked in. Thank God.'

'Can we repair the damage?'

'Probably. I'll need to go over the whole system piece by piece to find the initial fault before I can fix it. Then dry-run the patch before we attempt another jump. I'll let you know the odds when I've done that.'

'Are you confident?'

'Cautiously, yes.'

'Good.' Gabe scratched at his ear. 'But I guess I should ask this: have you *any* idea what caused the problem?'

'To be honest, sir, I think it was a combination of age and overwork. We've been pushing her harder than planned over the last eighteen months; the extra pressure must have put a strain on something.' Steve looked uncomfortable. 'Maybe we should slow down for a while.'

'Stop trying to hurry, you mean?'

'It's worth thinking about, if only for the ship's sake.'

Andre leaned in. 'Gabe, you're not seriously considering continuing the mission, are you?'

'Why not?'

'The drive is falling *apart*, for -'

'You heard Steve. He thinks he can fix it.'

'*Thinks*. And how long before it happens again? I say we should abort the mission and head home while we still can. Next time we might be stranded completely, if we survive at all.'

'Look, we knew before we left that the mission would be risky at times. Yes, we've lost two people; yes, we might have to operate more cautiously in the future. But the mission doesn't have to be scrapped entirely. Nothing has happened that wasn't anticipated and prepared for in advance -'

'Except the aliens,' pointed out Sara. 'Don't forget them.'

'I haven't. And that's another very good reason to keep going.'

Andre turned away in disgust. 'For all we know, *they* were responsible for the system failure.'

'That's paranoid.'

'Is it? They followed us through hyperspace, didn't they? Maybe they screwed up the matrix somehow.'

Gabe looked uncertain, as though he hadn't considered the possibility. 'Freedom? What about the bogey? Any idea how it followed us?'

'No. You know what the theory says.'

'Maybe they know more about the theory than we do,' said Myrion. 'Or they have a different one.'

Freedom sighed. 'I'll concede that.'

'So it's possible the aliens interfered with us in some way?' asked Gabe, clutching for answers. 'Is there any way of finding out for certain?'

'I hate to say this, but... I don't think so.' It obviously hurt Freedom to admit her ignorance. 'If they're sufficiently advanced, they could do anything they wanted without us knowing.'

'But *why*? Why would they try to kill us in the middle of a jump, then not finish the job when they had the chance? It doesn't make sense.' Gabe looked as though he was about to hit the desk, a sure sign he was feeling cornered. 'And why the hell won't they *talk* to us?'

I rushed in to forestall a bad scene. 'I think we're getting ourselves a little overwrought. Perhaps we should take a step back and look at this from another angle.'

'Oh, yes?' sneered Andre. 'What exactly do you suggest?'

'Try and see it from the aliens' point of view. They might be as puzzled as we are.'

'I don't understand,' said Steve.

'Well, they've approached us twice now - three times, if you count when we came out of hyperspace - and each time they've disappeared. Maybe we didn't respond the way they expected us to. They could be so alien that *our* behaviour is nonsensical to *them*, just as theirs is to us.'

If Freedom resented the theft of her ideas, she didn't show it. 'I agree. We mustn't fall into the trap of interpreting an apparent lack of communication as evidence of hostility. The degree of alienation between them and us could be so great that standard methods of communication will prove to be insufficient.'

'I could believe that,' said Sara, 'if they didn't look so ... *ordinary*.'

'What if their real appearance is incomprehensible?' suggested Myrion. 'The semblance of a flying saucer might be nothing more than an hallucination superimposed by our own minds upon an unacceptable reality.'

'Good thought.' I nodded. 'But the main thing we must always keep in our minds is the fact that, for all their superior technology, they haven't destroyed us - and they've had three chances.'

Gabe looked grateful. 'Right. If they were hostile, they would have killed us by now. The fact that they followed us here suggests that they still want to make contact. Doesn't it, Andre?'

The security head said nothing, but I could tell what he was thinking: if a friendly greeting could be misinterpreted as a result of cultural incompatibility, then didn't the same apply to an act of aggression?

'Anybody else?' Gabe looked expectantly around the table. 'No more gripes? Then that's it. Back to work. We'll meet again in twenty-four hours, when Steve can tell us more, and decide then exactly what we're going to do next.'



\* \* \* \*

Back in my 'office', I shut down the security cameras and the bugs, thus isolating myself from the rest of the *Wandering Jew* and from the permanent record. For the first time since I had taken residence in the ship, I was completely unobserved.

Or was I?

Surrounded by distractions, it was hard to concentrate. I needed to be alone for a while, to think for myself. My small personal space was the only quarter of the ship where I could achieve the necessary isolation, and even with the cameras off I still felt crowded, watched.

On one wall, a coloured 3-D chart showed the constellation of Boötis plus a few close neighbours. Our path staggered like a drunkard's walk through the Herdsman, the Northern Crown and the Serpent's Head, with the occasional detour to Hercules, the Virgin and the Serpent Bearer. Legendary scenery, an itinerary of archetypes. One flying saucer hardly seemed conspicuous in such auspicious company.

Target stars were numbered in order from one to fifty, with red circles enclosing the ones we had already visited: Xi Boötis, first of all, one of the closest binaries to Sol System, was followed by other 'notables' like Arcturus, O-Boötis, Alpha CB, and Omega Herculis. Amongst the unringed systems were: Gamma CB and Epsilon Boötis (Mirak), both binaries; the white supergiants Theta CB and Nu Boötis; Kappa Serpens Caput and Delta Ophiuchis, the only M-type stars on our itinerary; and a seemingly endless number of Giant G and K systems: Beta Boötis, Delta CB, Yale 5601, Beta Herculis, Yale 5535, Rho Serpens, Psi Boötis, Epsilon Ophiuchis and Phi Virgo. Second to last was the system of Lambda Serpens, just thirty-five light years from home, which Freedom hoped would contain an Earth-like world.

We had come so far in such a short time. How could we possibly turn our backs on the rest of the mission? Would it make any difference in the long run if we did?

This was just the beginning of humanity's exploration of local space. There were thousands of stars within reach of the crossover drive. By leaps of twenty to thirty light years at a time, our sphere of knowledge had begun to expand, and there was no way we could ever turn it back. Exploration had momentum, just like any other social force.

But we were *the first*. No matter how much pressure Andre exerted, Gabe would not capitulate. The mission would continue. And if there were really aliens out here with us, then that was something we would have to learn to live with.

But *were* there aliens? My first theory, that High Command was behind the saucer, seemed unconvincing now. A new one was forming at the back of my mind. I was no longer completely sure that the aliens were a fake.

I needed to see my ideas in a concrete form, to get them out of my head. Calling up a notebook file, I began to scribble notes.

\* \* \* \*

THE STORY SO FAR:

1. Earth is a very powerful high-frequency radio-source, but has only been pumping out signals for two hundred years. This means that, for an alien ship to have detected these signals, it must be somewhere inside a bubble of space two hundred light years in radius with Earth at its centre. Gamma Boötis, our twenty-sixth system, will be the first we encounter of twelve outside this bubble. All the earlier ones are candidates.
2. An alien ship inside this bubble will be bombarded by radio and television broadcasts from maybe as far back as the early twentieth century, depending on how distant they are. But it won't be as simple as them switching on their own TVs and tuning in: they won't know anything about frequency or amplitude modulations, or wide-band digital transmissions or carrier waves or NTSC formats, and so on. They'll have to work it all out from scratch before they have something to study.
3. Then, of course, there's interpretation. We've never had the opportunity to study a culture from nothing but its transmission media. It might be harder than we think. It might take years. And, if I was an alien, I certainly wouldn't want to approach another world without first understanding its culture. Earth might be a world of rabid xenophobes. Or our religion might revolve around the ritual sacrifice of unexpected visitors. Or anything.
4. There might have been hundreds of visitors inside our bubble of space, but all we need is one. One curious explorer, as Freedom suggested. One to pick up the signals, to be studying them at this very moment. Although it might conceivably be drifting through deep space, it's probably safe to assume that it will be located near a planetary system. (Where else would you look for developing life?) And it hasn't had time to approach Earth. (If it had, we would have seen it.) Maybe it'll leave without doing so, because we're too aggressive or whatever. But it's there *right now* - and that's what counts. Studying Earth long-distance.
5. OK, now suppose that this alien ship is close enough to Earth to pick up our signals, but no further out than Mu Boötis (where we first saw it). That makes the bubble a little smaller, with a radius of one hundred and eight light years. An alien inside this bubble would be picking up transmissions from the early twentieth century.
6. Television, the largest broadcast-medium, is composed of two distinct streams of data: (1) information, and (2) entertainment. The first stream includes news, documentaries, current affairs and educational programs. The second contains sports, sitcoms, game shows and soap operas. Ever since television was invented, the second stream has been more popular - and therefore more substantial.
7. As the aliens sift through all this data, they will be attempting to create a psychological model of the way we think, rather than a technological model of what our world is like. They'll realise that their information could be as much as seventy-five years old (the time it takes a television signal to reach their location at the tardy speed of light). We might have advanced markedly since then, or wiped ourselves out. The only constant in all this info would be the way we *behave*, regardless of our level of technology. That's what the aliens will be after. Their motive will be more than simple curiosity; they'll be looking for the best way to approach Earth. They don't want to surprise us so much that we start a war over them.
8. If it was a human crew studying Earth, they would be watching the entertainment pretty closely - the soap operas in particular, because these offer a glimpse of what the real world is supposedly like, or how we would like it to be. If these aliens are *really* alien, however, they won't understand the difference between information and entertainment. They might not be able

to separate the game shows from the news from the soap operas from the documentaries. They might take it all at face value. All they can do is keep watching and hope that it will eventually make sense.

9. Then, one day, the *Wandering Jew* appears in their vicinity. With news a few decades out of date, they wouldn't know about the crossover drive or the revitalised space program. We'd just pop up out of nowhere. Unexpected as it is, they realise that this is the perfect opportunity for them: a shipload of live humans, handed to them on a platter. All they have to do is ensure that we don't see them and they can watch us to their hearts content. Which they do. And when we leave, they follow us, to continue their studies.

10. And what do they find? They find the Adventures of the *Wandering Jew* - another soap opera! The more they watch, the more they realise that this soap opera is helping us survive, by bleeding off our pooled tensions in a non-violent way. The soap opera is essential to the continuation of our existence.

11. The aliens look at our behaviour and say: 'Sure, why not? What we have here is a race of psychodramatic beings. They work through their problems by dramatising them, abstracting them from reality. What's so weird about that? If they want to deal with the real world by apparently circumventing it, then that's their business. If that's how they stay sane, more power to them. The Adventures of the *Wandering Jew* is just a microcosm of the larger pool of soap operas back on Earth. A soap bubble, if you like, cast aloft on the winds of space.'

12. Eventually, another alien says: 'Then I think that solves our problem. All this time we've been watching these people and trying to work out how best to approach them. Well, here's our chance. Let's reveal ourselves to these few, and they can tell the others. All we have to do to soften the blow of First Contact is dress up the encounter. We'll create a phantom flying saucer, just like something out of 'The Day the Earth Stood Still', and they'll take it fine. They'll be able to deal with it, if it appears as part of the soap. When we truly reveal ourselves, later, they'll be prepared. (And if they send a war-fleet after us, like some of the old films, we'll have plenty of time to get away ...) Simple, right?'

13. So, when the *Jew* arrives at the O-Boötis system, it encounters a green flying saucer. The apparition is an archetype behaving in archetypal fashion. We are supposed to interpret this unexpected appearance from the context of our psychodrama and report that we have been contacted by aliens. That the saucer makes no attempt to communicate (apart from simply *being* there) is irrelevant; our psychological make-up should allow us to understand the real aliens' intentions. We should instantly recognise an obvious cue for a change of script.

14. But we don't. We step out of the soap opera and question the authenticity of the vision itself. The aliens have guessed wrong. Their crude behavioural model doesn't include the possibility of self-reference. They don't realise that we are acting, and that we know we are acting. The soap opera is just a game with a bonus psychosociological kickback. We write a new soap opera about how the old soap opera seems to be falling apart at the seams.

15. But still they persist; they decide, perhaps, that we were genuinely frightened by the illusion's hostile behaviour. So, when we prepare to leave O-Boötis, the saucer appears again, this time behaving quite differently. Instead of as the conquering invader, it comes as the hesitant passer-by. We are supposed to remain behind to study it, again from the context of the soap opera.

16. A second time, we surprise them. We flee through hyperspace, thinking we can lose the pursuing saucer that way.

17. The drive explodes, but somehow we arrive anyway. And, when we regain our senses, there's the saucer again, doggedly determined to enter our fragile bubble of soap without popping it.

18. And here am I, trying to work it all out...

\* \* \* \*

I saved the file and browsed through it.

Everybody had been partially right: Freedom with her genuine aliens, Sara's game-players, Andre's illusory messages in the sky, Myrion's archetypes, my own early script-writers. Each had become a facet of a glittering new hypothesis.

But was *this* one right?

My theory was neat, I felt, but it wasn't complete. There was still something missing, something I hadn't taken into account. Something that had happened was bothering me - but when, and what? It was there in my head, I suspected; all I had to do was shake it loose. Somehow.

I collapsed back into the chair, thinking furiously. Something Freedom had said ...?

Turning to the terminal, I keyed it for voice-activation and reconnected it to the *Jew's* AI mainframe. This sole computer link became my only connection to the rest of the ship. Through it, I could access the security records. It was a long shot, I knew, but worth a try. Anything to jog my memory.

I skimmed through the first encounter, but found nothing. Same with the second and third. If the clue existed, then I was looking in the wrong place.

Instinct took me back to the moment when the drive had malfunctioned, when it had looked like we were going to die. The cameras on the Control Bridge had recorded our panic with unflattering detail. On the screen in my 'office', we milled like ants, helpless, waiting for the descending boot to crush us. The reactor had failed and the ship had lost power; we had been effectively dead from that moment onwards. Without power to complete the jump, we should have been torn apart by strong nuclear forces and utterly destroyed.

But, miraculously, we had survived. Why?

And that was it. So simple and yet so tangential that I almost missed it.

'We're getting a power surge,' Freedom had said. 'I don't understand what's happening down there!'

A power surge - just strong enough to push us just far enough, back to real space.

A power *surge*.

Where had it come from? Not from the reactor itself because that was down; not from the backups because they hadn't cut in yet. That left outside, except that there's no outside during a jump. Which meant...

*Which meant there had to be another power source aboard the ship that we didn't know about.*

Erasing the security records from the screen, I nervously cleared my throat and spoke into the microphone:

'Hello? Are you listening? Hello?'

The screen instantly lit up, as though it had been expecting me:

» HELLO, ALEK MAAS.

I stared at the words for a moment, almost daring them to disappear. 'This isn't some kind of prank, is it?'

» NO.

The simple negative carried the weight of a thousand words, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe I wasn't crazy after all. 'My God ... Where are you?'

» INASMUCH AS WE CAN BE SAID TO HAVE A TRUE LOCATION WE ARE AFT OF THE DRIVE SHIELDING.

'And how long have you been aboard the ship?'

» SINCE THE STAR YOU CALL SIGMA BOÖTIS.

'But we saw no sign of ... No, of course we didn't. That's not your home system.' I sagged back into the chair and ran my fingers through my hair. I was talking to an alien! 'I can't believe this is really happening!'

» TRUTH IS STRANGER THAN FICTION, YES, BUT NOTHING IS STRANGER THAN A SOAP OPERA.

I laughed, mentally chalking up another correct guess. 'True, very true.'

» HOW LONG HAVE YOU KNOWN?

'Since the drive failed, I think.'

» IT WAS THEN THAT YOU REALISED?

'Subconsciously, yes. But it wasn't until we arrived at Delta Boötis, here, and the saucer appeared again, and I had the chance to think it through that I was sure. The aliens weren't following us at all; they've been with us the whole time!'

» YES.

'Yes.' I sagged further into the chair, truly struck by the enormity of the situation. 'You saved our lives. Thank you, on behalf of all of us.'

» WE HOPE THAT YOU WOULD HAVE DONE THE SAME HAD THE SITUATION BEEN REVERSED.

'Of course, of course.' I took a deep breath. 'Freedom will be glad to know. She's been tearing her hair out trying to figure out how you tracked us through hyperspace.'

» SHE DOES NOT ALREADY KNOW?

'No. How could she? I haven't told anyone else.'

» NO ONE?

'Of course not, I - ' Stopping in mid-sentence, I stared at the bold, emotionless upper-case letters on the screen. A strange sensation crept up my spine. 'Why?'

» OUR LONG-TERM GOALS HAVE NOT BEEN ALTERED. WE STILL INTEND TO MAKE CONTACT, BUT WE DO NOT WISH TO REVEAL OUR LOCATION UNTIL THE TIME IS RIGHT.

'Of course not, but - '

» THE TIME IS NOT YET RIGHT. YOU REALISED SOONER THAN WE EXPECTED.

I began to feel cold. 'So what happens now?'

» NOTHING. WE WAIT.

'But what about me? If I promise not to tell anyone, will you trust me?'

There was no reply. The screen remained blank. 'Hello? Are you still listening?'

» WE ARE CONFERRING.

'About what? Whether to get rid of me because I know too much?'

» YES.

I gripped the edge of the desk so hard my fingers bent the plastic. This was insane! I had to *do* something.

To my left was the red depressurisation alarm, the surest way to get an instantaneous response from anyone nearby. If worse came to worst and I could hit the switch fast enough, then someone might arrive in time to save me.

Otherwise, I would have to talk my way out of it.

'Look, come on, guys - or whatever you are. This has gone beyond a joke. You can trust

me. I won't say anything, I promise. No one would believe me anyway. You really don't need to -'

» ALEK MAAS?

The single line of text silenced me as effectively as a slap to the mouth. 'Yes?'

» THERE IS LITTLE TIME LEFT. ALTHOUGH IT PAINS US TO DO THIS WE HAVE NO CHOICE. YOU WILL UNDERSTAND LATER.

At exactly that moment, the door to my office chimed.

I didn't stop to yell for help, or to wonder what the aliens had meant by 'understand later'. The door was locked airtight, and there wasn't time to think.

I simply lunged as fast as I could for the depressurisation alarm, hoping against hope that my reflexes could outrace alien weaponry.

As I threw myself across the desk, something bright flashed out of the corner of my eye -

- the fingertips of my right hand brushed the smooth plastic of the switch -

- my skin tingled all over, as through a strong static charge had enveloped me -

- and I died.

\* \* \* \*

Sara rang the doorbell to my office four times before giving up. When I didn't reply, she went and found Andre, who used his authority as security officer to override the door's magnetic lock.

Gabe was summoned and a search organised. The entire crew (those few who weren't involved in the repairs, anyway) scoured the ship from fore to aft, without success. The life-support AI reported that it was supplying breathable atmosphere to one less person than before, but that the overall mass of the ship had not decreased and no airlocks had been activated. Andre subjected the security recordings of the corridor outside my room to intense scrutiny. No one had entered or left my room in the time between my arrival from the debriefing and Sara's visit. And the room itself was empty.

Which was very mysterious.

I had, it seemed, disappeared into thin air.

Sara cried. Andre was suspicious. Gabe agonised over how to report my loss in the mission log, Jake was philosophical. Neither Freedom nor Steve had time to think about it. Myrion was grimly amused.

And all the while I watched them, unseen and unknown, from my new home aft of the drive shielding.

\* \* \* \*

I wasn't dead, much to my surprise.

As it turns out, I was wrong about a lot of other things as well.

\* \* \* \*

The aliens are a little more forthcoming now that I am with them. They explain that my body no longer exists, that it has been broken down to its constituent elements and dispersed throughout the ship, that the 'I' remaining is an abstract template of the old Alek Maas, like an AI but infinitely more complex. I inhabit the realm of information, incorporeal yet very much alive, thanks to my alien friends: an analog of my former self, complete with emotions, irrational urges and an initial reluctance to fully accept my new status. Gradually it sinks in, however: the reality of my new life.

The aliens themselves have existed in this fashion for centuries. Their culture learned early in the development of its space program that it was far easier (not to mention cheaper) to send disembodied templates on long voyages than 'real' people who constantly eat, breath and excrete. A large proportion of the *Wandering Jew*, for example, is wasted on oxygen and water recyclers, waste processors and medical facilities, whereas their 'ship' is nothing more than engines and a sophisticated mainframe, with no life-support whatsoever. A source of power is all they require.

But, like them, their ship does not technically exist either; that's the part I have trouble understanding, and which they seem reluctant to explain. Somehow, the mainframe generates a model of *itself*, along with the rest of the ship - and the more I think about this, the less it seems possible. I wonder sometimes if they are ghosts travelling on a ghost-ship, with me as their guest.

But I am, of course, substantially more than that. They can learn more by interacting directly with me than they could from thousands of hours of covert observation. And I have certain other uses which only become apparent as the truth slowly emerges.

I was right about the flying saucer, but not entirely. It *was* an illusion and a crude attempt at communication, but for the benefit of one person, not the entire crew. It was an attempt to get the attention of a very specific individual.

As such, it worked, but only just. That I guessed the truth, or near enough to it, sooner than they had expected confirmed what they already knew. Their understanding of human nature was flawed. If they wanted to insinuate themselves into our reality without disturbing the contextual continuity of the soap bubble, then they needed help. Human help.

They needed, in short, a *Director*.

And there was only one of those for one hundred and sixteen light years.

\* \* \* \*

Time passes quickly. We watch the crew of the *Wandering Jew* explore the Delta Boötis system. The drive and the reactor are repaired, and my disappearance is made official. When the next package to Earth is despatched, I will be recorded as 'missing, presumed dead'.



In my absence, no one has assumed the role of Soap Operator - a fact which pains me. The reports are being assimilated instead by a dry, dead AI with no sense of drama. The reappearance of the saucer and the near-tragedy of the jump should have been exploited to the fullest - not to mention my own disappearance: yet another mystery to plague the brave crew! Had I been there, I could have produced a first-rate episode.

But, in a sense, I am still there, and I have more time now that I am not confined to the halting rhythms of the flesh. It is a relatively simple matter to prepare the episode for my own enjoyment - as an exercise, a dry-run - while my alien benefactors watch. They are intrigued by how I turn reality into melodrama.

So intrigued, in fact, that they allow me a small favour. When the AI finishes its freeze-dried report, they tamper with its memory. It is my work that issues from it, my work that is sent to Earth. My role as impartial observer continues unchecked. From my new perspective, I can integrate each episode into a much larger plot containing aliens, First Contact, and perhaps even a genuine romance.

Sara, the dear girl, refuses to believe that I am dead. My unexplained disappearance has made her suspicious. When she sees the report, her opinion is confirmed.

‘He’s still here,’ she insists to anyone who will listen. ‘He’s the ship’s ghost.’

I attempt to convince my hosts that she is a threat to their security and must also be kidnapped, but they aren’t stupid. They know that I am simply seeking the company of one of my own race. Besides, they are busy. The saucer must put in an appearance soon, in accordance with the new script I have written. An archetype’s work is never done.

But I don’t mind. We have our schedule and are sticking to it. Beta Herculis, one year away (the twenty-fifth system, the halfway point) is where and when we will reveal the truth to the rest of the crew. All I have to do is wait until then to get my body back, or a copy of it at least. Perhaps my role as ship’s ghost may be expanded to allow small messages to appear in the system. At least that way I could talk to her, tell her that there is nothing to worry about, that she will be safe.

We are all in safe hands now.

And the story continues ...

*First published 1994.*