

The Capsule

Is anyone out there?

A short story



By

Maurice Ellis

The Capsule.

A Science fiction Story

By:

Maurice Ellis.

Edited by David Ellis B.Eng. (Hons), M.Sc.

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Chapter 1 - Discovery

During the Blitz on London from 1940 to 1941, the German Luftwaffe dropped over 30,000 tons of bombs and more than 40,000 people were killed. After which London enjoyed a period of relative calm. Then, without warning, on the evening of January 22nd, 1944, at around 8.45 pm, they came again. More than four hundred German bombers dropped a massive number of incendiary bombs and high explosives. The Germans called it 'Operation Steinbock'.

With such a huge number of explosives being dropped, and with people running for cover, no one noticed the incongruous object which landed in the River Thames about three hundred metres downstream from Tower Bridge. It didn't explode but sliced through the water and sank into the river bed to about ten feet below the silt and mud. It lay undisturbed for the next ninety-five years.

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On July 12th, 2039 a small motor launch with a married couple on board caught fire and exploded approximately three hundred metres downstream from Tower Bridge. The river police were soon on the scene and rescued a middle-aged woman who had been thrown clear. She suffered serious but not life-threatening burns and was quickly taken to the nearest hospital. There was no sign of her husband. After fifteen minutes of searching the police diver found the body of the woman's husband. He was lying at the bottom of the river, straddled across what looked like a large rock. After the body was raised to the surface and placed in the police launch the diver said he was going back down to have another look at that rock.

The rock was not completely exposed. The diver worked his way around it. As far as he could estimate the part that was showing was about one metre high and three metres long. It was not possible to say how much of it was buried in the river bed. It had an oval shape and, when he touched it, felt that there was a slight warmth to it. This didn't make sense as the temperature of the river should have kept it cold. When he returned to the launch and told the other officers what he had discovered, they decided that the rock posed a threat to shipping and would report their findings to the appropriate authorities.

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A few days later a large barge with a crane on board was brought in and manoeuvred into position above and slightly to one side of the rock's position. Two divers went down and secured it to a harness with which it was easily lifted up and onto the deck of the barge. It could now be seen that it was about three metres long and two metres high, in a teardrop shape, and deep blue in colour. According to the crane operator, its size belied its weight. He estimated that it should have weighed at least seven tons but was nowhere near that.

The barge moved downstream and finished up at St. Katherine Docks. It was unloaded onto the back of an eighteen-wheeler flatbed truck. The truck driver had been given instructions to take it to the headquarters of the British Geological Society just outside Nottingham.

Chapter 2 - Investigation

Two of the society's geologists studied the rock. They both quickly came to the same conclusion: Because it was much lighter than it should have been, warm to the touch, and not a colour associated with normal rocks, this was a manufactured artefact. But why, by whom and for what purpose were at this point questions without answers. They hit it gently several times with a hammer and realised that it was not solid because of its hollow, metallic sound. For all they knew, it could be an explosive device and this was something out of their field of expertise, so they decided to get in touch with the Ministry of Defence in Whitehall.

They were told to keep it under wraps, literally, until an army bomb disposal unit arrived. Within an hour the bomb disposal unit turned up. The rock was loaded onto a truck and taken to a nearby army base.

The men of the bomb disposal unit inspected the rock carefully and came to a quick decision. It was not a rock. It was man-made, apparently hollow, but could easily house an explosive of some kind. They found no point of entry, and it appeared to be seamless. They could blow it up but to render it safe, but decided against this since they had no idea of how much, if any, explosive it contained. After some deliberation, it was decided to call in the radiographer and try to see what was inside. Radiography can be used to inspect most materials and is especially good at finding internal features, including hidden objects. It can also measure the thickness of materials.

It didn't take the radiographer long to make a discovery. It was nothing like a rock, it was a capsule. Not one oval shaped object but two. The outer shell had no entry point but the inner one did. It appeared that the outer shell was moulded around the inner one for protection and perhaps to stop anyone from gaining access. He also discovered that there were several compartments built along each side of the inner shell. Each compartment was giving off enough heat to keep the whole object warm to the touch.

Should they try to gain access or was that too risky? Was there explosive material in the hidden chambers? The more the group discussed it the more convinced they became that to open it was worth the risk. After all, nothing like this had ever been seen before. The most puzzling thing was that the material of the object was not anything they had come across before. It was more than likely a composite alloy of two or more metals. But the fact still remained, what was its purpose?

Based on the radiographer's findings they marked out an area around corresponding to the inner entry point. The size of the cut was large enough for a man to get through and far enough away from the sides of the inner opening so as not to damage it with the heat from the oxyacetylene torch.

It took them the best part of an hour to cut away the first section. The outer shell was only loosely fixed to the inner one and was quite easily prised away, leaving the inner shell entry panel exposed. There were seven unusual bolts holding the entry panel in place. They were not of a type that any of the crew had seen before. They used a diamond-tipped drill on the bolts and within forty minutes had drilled through them all. The crew were beginning to tire by then, but were able to lever off the entry panel. As it fell to the ground they could see inside the capsule with the aid of a torch. The officer in charge of the bomb disposal unit made the other men stand well back from the capsule. He was concerned that it might contain something radioactive. Another thing which worried him was the heat coming out through the opening. He donned a hazmat suit for protection against the possibility of radiation and approached the capsule holding a Geiger counter.

Chapter 3 – Inside the capsule.

The Geiger counter showed only a faint trace of radiation. Not enough to cause any long-term damage. The officer put the torch through the opening and followed through with his head. He could see a total of nine separate compartments. Four on both side and a slighter larger one to the rear. It was warm inside the capsule, about twenty-nine degrees Celsius, but was starting to cool down now that the hatch was open, and the warm air could escape. He reached for the larger box and found it unmovable. It was attached quite rigidly to the hull. The most practical way forward was to put a small man inside to see if the box could be removed. He called the corporal forward and asked him to get inside the capsule and see if he could open any of the compartments.

Once inside, the corporal shone his torch towards the largest compartment at the rear of the capsule. As the beam rose above the box he noticed something he was not expecting. There was writing on the wall. Not English or any other languages he was familiar with. It was written in a series of totally unrecognisable symbols. Not unlike ancient Egyptian but with no pictures of animals, just symbols. He asked for a camera and the officer handed him one. The corporal took several pictures and climbed out of the capsule. He showed the digital photos to the rest of the crew.

No one had any idea what the symbols meant. The officer decided to inform his commanding officer of their findings. After studying the photos, the C.O. suggested calling the archaeology department at Cambridge University. They advised him to keep a close watch on the capsule and wait for Professor Maynard, a renowned archaeologist and linguist, to visit them the next day.

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Professor Maynard arrived at the army base at ten-thirty the next morning and was taken to where the capsule was being kept under guard. Having looked inside he asked for some tools and, not being a big man, managed to get inside the capsule. He studied the script and noticed a line pointing down from the bottom of the writing to the sealed compartment underneath. To him this was a message to open it, which he immediately set about doing. It took him about twenty minutes to open the compartment. Once open, he looked inside. He saw several pieces of what looked like parchment. He removed them carefully, made his way out of the capsule and laid out the items on a nearby table after studying them for about two minutes he turned to the watching crew. "My God, you won't bloody well believe this!" he exclaimed loudly.

The Professor explained what he had just found. The parchments showed drawings of human-like figures, another showed pictures of strange looking buildings and the third parchment was clearly a map. It appeared to be an astronomical map of the Milky Way. And one of the planets on that map was circled and had what appeared to be a name written underneath it.

The Professor took a deep breath. "Ladies and Gentlemen, for many years we have been searching our galaxy for signs of intelligent life. I now believe that the search is over. We are not the only ones with this ambition. It looks like other intelligent beings have beaten us to it. And it's possible that they may have been looking for hundreds of years. This is the greatest find ever. The capsule must be sealed and transferred to the UK Space agency immediately for a thorough investigation."

Chapter 4 – Deciphering.

The capsule was transferred the next day to a secure hangar at the UK Space Agency. It was put under a twenty-four-hour guard with the help of the British SAS. It would not be long before the world's press would be arriving in their droves. Professor Ian Maynard was about to become world famous.

Within three days the hangar was a hive of activity. Professor Maynard had invited a selection of some of the finest brains in the world to participate. There were two astrophysicists, two world-renowned linguists who specialised in forgotten or unknown languages, and several specialists from the European space agency. This was a challenge of immense importance and the world was waiting for answers.

Their first job for the assembled team was to open the other eight containers and see what surprises awaited them. To make their job easier they decided the best thing to do was to cut away the top half of the capsule.

It took the engineers almost eight hours to complete the task and one of them climbed inside and set about opening all the compartments. Once they were all open he climbed out and let Professor Maynard get in to inspect the contents.

Each compartment contained two or three engineering drawings, similar to blueprints. The instructions written on them were in the same language as the writing above the first compartment. The drawings were handed out and placed on a table. Underneath each of the drawings was something which looked like a large blue and green crystal which was very warm to the touch. There were five in total each weighing about fifty kilogrammes. These were also placed on the table. The remaining compartments each contained crystals of similar weights, but were of a different colour, mainly black and yellow. These, too, were placed on the table. Now all that remained was to figure out what the documents said and what the crystals were for.

A disused hangar was taken over by Professor Maynard's group and divided into four sections, each dedicated to a specific task. One for studying and translating the documents. A second unit to study the technical drawings and a third for analysing the crystals. The fourth group was tasked to find out whatever they could about the material used to manufacture the capsule.

Much time and effort were devoted to their tasks in order to assimilate all the information. Their work would take them into the middle of November, nearly four months. There were armed units of the S.A.S. on duty outside the hanger twenty-four hours a day. No one was getting near that hangar without a very good reason.

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Chequers is the UK Prime Minister's country residence, situated about forty miles from central London. It is not just a place for the Prime Minister to relax being frequently used to hold summits and other important meetings. On October 28th 2039 it would host a meeting like no other. The meeting would be chaired by Professor Maynard. Twenty-two people of varying importance were in attendance. At the conference table were the Prime Minister and his deputy, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the heads of MI.5 and MI.6. Also present were high-ranking members of the military and seven of the country's top scientists. The Professor stood at the head of the table. Beside him was a Flip-Chart. He called the meeting to order and everyone sat down.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he began. “I know you will all have many questions about what I am going to tell you, but please wait until I finish before asking them. You all have pen and paper in front of you so write your questions down and I'll do my best to answer them shortly.

“First of all, here's what we know. Somewhere out there, possibly deep within the Milky Way, is a race of intelligent beings, more than likely well in advance of humanities' development. We think we can tell their approximate location from the astronomical map we found in the capsule. It's quite possible that the capsule has been travelling for hundreds of years. We can't judge this because we have no idea of its speed.

“The next question is, do the beings who sent out this capsule still exist or even remember having done so? Perhaps the biggest mystery is how the capsule travelled through space with no means of propulsion. We're theorising the capsule is one of many. We think that a space vehicle was sent towards the solar system and, when it reached maximum velocity, ejected several capsules into different directions. Probably with the hope that at least one of them would find their way onto an inhabited planet with intelligent life. Maybe the designers of this mission noted a few possible targets which might be habitable to them. If this is the case then they obviously struck lucky.

“Now, “he continued. “Turning to the documents we found. They contained an outline of their language, instructions for putting together a propulsion unit, which we are still working on, and a general map of where they are situated. Our latest interplanetary space telescope has now found what is believed to be their home planet. What I must point out is that with our current abilities, our fastest space ship is not capable of getting there in our lifetime. So, unless we can increase that speed, it will take over four hundred years to reach them.

“The crystal-like substance we found in the capsule seems to be some kind of super-fuel. We are currently undertaking experiments with it at our laboratories on the Moon. We're testing it there, so as not to violate the current, nuclear treaty agreement, and in case of any hazardous reaction such as radiation. We don't want to kill off the remaining population on earth. We've already lost four billion people in the last ten years because of our severe pollution and climate change.”

The meeting lasted for about five hours. Many questions were asked and lots of theories put forward. Decisions were made and several plans put into place.

Chapter 5 – The Test Flight

It was October 14th, 2041. The past two years had been a whirlwind of intense study, experimentation and testing. The documents had all been deciphered and a small rocket was standing outside the space laboratory on the surface of the moon. Its engine was to be powered by a small amount of the crystal that had arrived inside the capsule. It transpired that the crystals had similar properties to that of fuel used in a nuclear reactor. When used in conjunction with electro-magnetic fusion, about half a kilogram would produce enough thrust to accelerate the rocket to speeds far in excess of even the earth's escape velocity. They were about to find out just how fast.

A spectra-analysis had been carried out on the crystals and all but one of the elements had been identified. Despite its similarity to nuclear fuel it gave out no radiation signature. As far as they were concerned there was no way of recreating the crystals unless they could figure out where the mysterious ingredient had come from.

One of the main advantages of this fuel was that it meant huge savings in weight and volume. Liquid fuel was heavy and all rockets needed a large supply of it. This required a large container, and the fuel had to accelerate its own mass as well as the payload. The current travel time to Mars was four months. The scientists hoped the very large weight reduction would reduce that time significantly, so the rocket was programmed to make the voyage to Mars and then enter into orbit around it.

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At 10.30 that morning the rocket took off on its pre-programmed trajectory to Mars. It was to fly at high speed and continuously accelerate until halfway and then turn around to face back towards the moon. The thrust of the engine would now decelerate rocket. They hoped to put it into orbit around Mars then bring it home. They had chosen this day to launch because Mars would be at its closest, which only occurred about every two hundred and twenty five days. This meant a round trip of about eighty million miles. However, not knowing how fast the rocket could go, details about transit time and so forth would not be known for some time yet.

Back on Earth professor Maynard and his team were in the operations room of the UK Space Agency. They all stared at the screens as the countdown began. A powerful telescope, on the Moon, was trained on the rocket and would automatically follow its path. The firing button was pressed and the rocket engine came to life. It ignited and, after three seconds, took off. Unlike Rockets sent from earth there was no tremendous roar or clouds of smoke from the fuel. It was silent on the moon's airless surface, but the method of propulsion made no sound anyway. Rapidly accelerating, the experimental spacecraft was out of sight in less than a minute.

All eyes were fixed on the TV monitors as the telescopes and radar tracked the rocket. It was accelerating away at a tremendous velocity. The engineers had programmed it to go into a wide orbit around Mars while they collated telemetry transmitted on arrival. After processing, they would know whether adjustments to the return flight plan were required. After arriving back at the moon they hoped to be able to bring the rocket down safely onto the surface

The tracking station on the Moon was fully automated and required very little attention now the computers were in control of the rocket. Only two engineers remained in the control room while the others returned to other duties in the main living area. Back on Earth professor Maynard and his crew turned their attention to further investigation of the crystals and documents.

Chapter 6 – The Return

Professor Maynard had just finished his usual Sunday breakfast of four rashers of bacon, two fried eggs and fried tomatoes. He was scrutinising one of the alien charts when his phone rang. The call was from the head of the UK Space Agency. To everyone's amazement the rocket was back and currently in orbit around the Moon. They had calculated that the average speed was in excess of two-hundred-thousand miles per hour. It was ten-thirty in the morning of October 29th, 2041, seventeen days after the rocket was launched.

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Professor Maynard and eleven of the UK's top scientists gathered at the UK space agency. Two extremely important points were raised at the beginning. Would it be possible to make a rocket go at a much higher speed and, how much fuel would they need? The trip to Mars and back had used only two-hundred and fifty grams of the one kilogram they had placed in the rocket. The round trip had taken only seventeen days at an average speed of two-hundred-thousand miles an hour. The rocket had been programmed to cut out after half an hour and then to give a short burst once every hour. If the engine was providing thrust constantly, was there a limit to the rocket's speed and range?

The next item on the agenda concerned the documents found inside the capsule. The easiest to understand was the one showing the alien planet, in what appeared to be an area inside the Milky Way. Many planets and stars surrounded it, which was one reason it hadn't been spotted before. Also, there were giant gas clouds obscuring the general area.

The documents showed a drawing of twenty space rockets which had lifted off in different directions, probably carrying identical capsules. It was likely that each one would be jettisoned after it reached a certain altitude, or speed, sending the capsules into the unknown, perhaps with the hope that at least one of them would land on a planet with intelligent life. If that was the case, they had succeeded at least once. What no one on Earth could know is how long their capsule had been travelling. It could be months, years, or even centuries.

The technical drawings, for the most part, had been deciphered. There were certain elements of the information which were a mystery to everyone, but the document had made it possible to figure out how to use the fuel supplied. They had not yet worked out what the black and yellow crystals were for, so more work was needed in that area.

The final documents were obviously an attempt to explain more about the aliens, their planet and language. This was not too difficult to understand as it was very much like ancient hieroglyphics. Perhaps they had no other way of communicating with a written language. The most surprising thing was that the drawings of their people showed them to be very similar to humans, Had they actually evolved over the same time period as humans?

Everyone agreed that further tests should be carried out as soon as possible. More test rockets would be launched from the Moon to determine speed, distance and how best to utilise the fuel. The black and yellow crystals needed further testing to find out their purpose. They would not have been sent unless they were very important. Plans were drawn up and the team members left with a deep sense of excitement and purpose.

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Many tests had been carried out to ascertain the purpose of the black and yellow crystals, to no avail. Then, on April 20th, 2042, it happened. Doctor Walker, a prominent physicist, was testing a small piece of the crystal. He placed the crystal on the bench then reached for a bottle of cola. As he sipped at the drink he began thinking about what the team had achieved so far. His mind was elsewhere when the bottle slipped from his fingers and tipped over as it hit the bench, spilling some of its contents over the crystal.

There was an immediate reaction. A fine mist started to rise from the crystals and surrounded the four people in the laboratory, who couldn't help but breathe it in. They all panicked and headed for the door. Once outside they stood looking at each other expecting the worst. At first nothing happened then they all began to smile. One by one they all said the same thing: they felt great, even rejuvenated. Whatever the mist was it didn't seem to have harmed any of them, quite the opposite. The next task was to get all of them checked out medically and the set about finding out exactly what had happened.

All four of them passed their medical with flying colours. The substance they had inhaled was obviously designed to improve their health. There was really no other explanation as to why the aliens had sent the yellow and black crystals. A week later tests were started to ascertain which of the drinks' ingredients had caused the reaction when it came into contact with the crystals.

All the ingredients of the drink were tested by allowing each one to come into contact with the crystal. All failed to have any effect until the last one – phosphoric acid. When it came into contact with a tiny segment of crystal the same fine mist was given off. Phosphoric acid is also known as orthophosphoric acid, (H₃PO₄). It is produced by reacting sulphuric acid (H₂SO₄) with naturally occurring phosphate rock, found in abundance on Earth. More tests were carried out until they were absolutely sure there had been no mistakes. The final conclusion was that the mist was designed to keep people healthy whilst in space, maybe negating the necessity to exercise for hours each day to avoid muscle fatigue and a drop in bone density, a major problem with long space flights.

The Europa space station, flying four-hundred miles above the Earth, had been in operation for two years. It had been decided that a small piece of crystal would be taken up along with the phosphoric acid in two separate sealed containers. They were going to test the effects on two of the crew, a male and a female. The idea was to let them breathe in a small amount of mist before going to bed and do no exercises for a full week. They would be checked each day by the space station's doctor for adverse effects.

After a week of testing the mist proved to be exactly what they had hoped for. It was a rejuvenating formula which could be used to allow people to travel for long periods in space, without any physical downside.

Chapter 7 – Manned Flight

August 4th, 2041. At eight-thirty in the morning, Earth time, the manned space rocket, now known as Alien-one, was ready for launch. There were six highly trained astronauts on board, three men and three women. The mission target was Mars, which they would orbit for seven days before returning to the Moon. The round trip should take no more than three weeks at the speeds already achieved in the first flight, but an attempt would be made to increase the speed further to reduce the time factor. No exercise equipment was on board as they wanted to confirm that the crystal-mist would keep the crew healthy for the whole trip.

The countdown began at nine o'clock precisely. The engines started and the rocket lifted off, heading for Mars. The laser-guided telescope transmitted pictures to those in the Moon-base control room, who in turn relayed the pictures down to the Europa space control just outside London.

The rocket was gaining speed at an astonishing rate. Moon base had control of the on-board computers but there were manual over-rides. As Alien-one gained more and more speed ground control sent a message for the crew to cut the engines manually. They released themselves from their seats and went to their various stations. The chief engineer, Josh Metcalf, reached for the manual over-ride. He turned the switch to the zero mark and, a second later, there was a loud, blue flash. Manual over-ride had failed and the ship kept accelerating. Moon-base tried to take back control but there was no response from the ship. Neither was there any response to their radio calls. Something very serious had happened. As they watched the monitors it was obvious that the ship was gaining a phenomenal amount of speed. Then something strange happened. Out of nowhere the ship became surrounded by a blue bubble of light, and then disappeared from sight.

Back on Earth, Scientists in the Europa Space Agency couldn't understand what they had just witnessed. One minute the ship was there and the next it completely disappeared. What was the blue bubble and where had it come from? Furthermore, where the hell was their space ship? They tried for over an hour to make contact, but to no avail. They held a think-tank. Many theories were put forward but none that satisfied them. Josh Metcalf suddenly stood up and said, "I think I know what happened." All eyes were on him. "I think they're travelling outside normal space. I think they've broken through the time barrier and I don't think that they're heading for Mars."

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On board Alien-one they could see, through one of the tiny portholes, the blue light surrounding them. Nothing else was visible outside. The monitors showed nothing except the blue bubble via the external cameras. The engines were still accelerating their spacecraft. It took about half an hour, but they were finally able to stop the engines. The ship kept racing through space and the blue light stayed with them. The speed indicator had stopped working when the manual over-ride system went down. It would appear that their fate was now in the hands of the gods.

It was almost twenty-four hours since the team at Europa Space Agency had lost contact with the space ship. It had just simply disappeared. No visual or radio contact. No one had any idea what to do next. They would have to keep trying to make contact and hope for a breakthrough.

During this time, the ship's crew had worked non-stop trying to figure out exactly what was happening to them. They had no idea of their speed, nor did they know if they were still heading towards Mars. The ship was still surrounded by the blue bubble.

The chief engineer suggested they restart the engine and try to slow the craft down. It was agreed and they set to work. After a few minutes the engine was up and running. The ship started accelerating and gathered speed so quickly that the crew were caught by surprise and were thrown back against the bulkhead. They were soon back at the controls. To decelerate, they needed to turn the ship around using the side-mounted thruster jets. The thrusters did not respond. So they shut down the engines. Alien-one continued on its course, no longer accelerating but still moving at high velocity, destination unknown.

Chapter 8 – Lost in Space

August 19th, 2042, fifteen days since Alien-One had left for Mars. Moon-base had tried everything they could to find out where the ship was. No radio contact and no visual from the two space telescopes stationed in orbit around the Moon and Mars. All further tests, using the alien fuel, were suspended until they found a solution to the disappearance. There didn't seem to be much else they could do, except wait.

The crew still had no idea exactly how fast they were going. Neither had they been able to work out in which direction they were travelling. Had the ship stayed on course for Mars they realised it would be many millions of miles behind them by now. There was sufficient life support, such as food and water, to keep the crew alive for another three months. Nobody wanted to talk about what might happen once their supplies ran out. They went back to work, trying to fix the thrusters.

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Two months had passed since Earth lost contact with Alien-one. They now had no choice but to declare the ship as lost in space. They also had to declare the crew as missing and possibly dead. A decision was also made to stop experimenting with the alien fuel because of the unknown hazards. It was therefore locked away in a secure military facility.

Meanwhile, Alien-one continued to coast through space at an unknown velocity. They had been travelling into deep space for more than two months. No further contact with Earth or Moon base had been possible. The crew had one more month's supply of food and water. All efforts to make the side-thrusters work had failed. They had tried to go outside the ship to look for thruster problems but couldn't open the hatch. It was surmised that the bubble surrounding the ship was exerting too much pressure on it. There was nothing more to do but wait and hope. On the plus side, they were delighted to find their physical condition was excellent – the crystal-mist was definitely working.

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At 0530 hours on the morning of October 17th, 2042 (ship time and calendar) the crew of Alien-one were still asleep when a loud rumble worked its way through the ship. All were instantly awake. Nothing seemed amiss until the chief engineer told them to look out through the port-holes. The blue bubble had disappeared. They could now see clearly into deep space. As they stared out a planet came into view. They guessed that it was about five-thousand miles ahead on the port quarter. The ship suddenly changed course and headed straight for it. They now realised that they were no longer in control of their ship. Something, or someone, was guiding them down to the planet. The crew strapped themselves into their seats and waited.

As the ship was guided through the planet's atmosphere it slowed down to about five hundred miles per hour. A broad expanse of land came into view. They slowed down even more and the ship turned through one-hundred and eighty degrees. Their spacecraft finally came to a halt when it landed upright on what appeared to be a large concrete landing pad. The crew gathered at the portholes and stared out. Futuristic looking vehicles made their way towards the ship. Were they back on Earth, or had they landed on an alien planet?

There was a knocking sound on the outer hatch. With some trepidation, the captain opened it. A rush of sweet-smelling, fresh air filled the cabin, making the crew feel almost dizzy. They realised that, despite the carbon dioxide scrubbers and oxygen recyclers, their two months in space had considerably fouled their air.

Gratefully breathing in the new atmosphere, they saw a taller than average, fair-skinned human being standing just outside the open hatch. Certainly nothing like any alien they had envisaged. The man thrust his hand forward, smiled and said, "Tanna vi su". Which the captain took to mean something like welcome. They shook hands warmly and the man entered the cabin and shook hands with everyone on board. After the greetings the man led everyone out and ushered them into very advanced looking vehicles parked right next to the ship. The crew had seen nothing like them on Earth. They were quickly, and almost silently, whisked away and taken to a nearby building which turned out to be a medical centre. Many aliens were gathered outside, waving enthusiastically to the new arrivals.

Chapter 9 – The Onawans

Six months had passed since the crew of Alien-one had landed on the planet; it was now April 14th 2043. They had learned the planet they had unintentionally travelled so far and so long to find was called 'Onawa'. During their six month stay they had gathered a great deal of information about the aliens and their planet. They concentrated mainly on learning the language at first, which turned out to be quite basic and simple. They had also managed to teach the Onawans a lot of the English language, so communication was fairly easy.

The planet itself was approximately twenty-five percent smaller than Earth which meant its gravity was lower. Because of this the inhabitants would grow taller than those on Earth. All the adults had the willowy look of some of the East African tribes from Earth. But they were also weaker than their shorter, stockier guests. The main effect of this difference was that the Onawans could reach higher and run faster, but the Earthmen were stronger and had more endurance.

There were three land masses on the planet, plus about one hundred islands. The total population of the planet was in the region of forty-million. The ecology and geology were similar to Earth, but more stable, with less seismic activity and calmer weather patterns.

All of the people on the planet spoke the same language. There was a very good reason for this. About two-thousand years ago the planet was populated by a completely different race of beings. They were highly intelligent and very advanced technologically. However, they were dying out rapidly because of an extremely vicious virus. Concerned that their race would be completely wiped out, they decided to experiment with interbreeding. They sent a spaceship out into the galaxy to find others similar to themselves for this purpose.

What the visitors learned next astounded them. The Onawans had searched for over one-hundred years until they found Earth. The Aliens landed in northern Europe and forced five-hundred humans to go with them to Onawa. At that time the Earth's population was low, technology had not been developed, and it was easy to persuade those they wished to take that they were going to a far better life. In spite of such massive preparations, all attempts at interbreeding failed and within fourteen years of the return the Onawans became extinct.

The people captured from Earth were not affected by the virus. Over the next two-thousand years they flourished. Their offspring adapted to the lower gravity and evolved. They grew taller than they would have done on Earth, they were healthy and rarely suffered any illnesses. Their original language was forgotten and they now only spoke Onawan. Meat was never eaten and there were no such things as tobacco or alcohol.

They had been taught technology by the Onawans and had become extremely advanced. Knowing their roots they wanted to let others know of their existence. Over the past one two-hundred years they had sent out hundreds of capsules hoping that someday one might land on their original home planet. And, of course, they had now succeeded.

“So we are actually cousins!” the Captain said with wonder. Our differences are no more than the differences between Earth folk who have adapted to varied environments on their own planet – pygmies versus the very tall Maasai, for instance.”

The Onawans were also filled with wonder to see the Earthmen and know this was how their ancestors had looked before the exodus all those thousands of years ago.

Chapter 10 – The Solar system revisited.

Three ships was made ready for the return trip to Earth. They were far in advance of anything produced on Earth and had been fitted out with rejuvenation pods so that the crew could sleep for most of the journey. There was sufficient space on board to carry one hundred travellers on each ship for the return journey to Onawa. Two crew members from the Earth ship would accompany each alien ship, along with four Onawans.

“Will you be making use of the “Blue Bubble” technology for the journey to Earth? And if so, please explain how it works.” the Captain asked. The whole crew were paying close attention; they were keen to understand this apparently miraculous technology.

The same Onawan who had greeted their arrival over half an Earth year ago, and whose name they later found out to be Elnoa, answered this important question. “Yes, Captain. It's the only way to cover the enormous distances involved in a reasonably short time. We don't fully understand the technology ourselves yet.

“But what we do know is that once your speed enters the region above about 95% of the speed of light, the rules of physics themselves are bent by time dilatation. The Blue Bubble is generated as the space itself begins to curve due to a vessel's immense speed. Once that vessel is enclosed, the whole thing enters what you may like to think of as another dimension.

“In that dimension, the Newtonian concept which says distance = velocity x time no longer holds completely true. Consequently, very large distances can be covered in much smaller times than outside the Blue Bubble. But outside the Blue Bubble speed is limited to just below the speed of light anyway.”

This appeared to satisfy the Earth crew. None of them were physicists, so they were unable to take the discussion to a higher level. It didn't matter that much to them anyway – the technology worked, and that was enough to get them home.

It was hoped that more people from Earth could be persuaded to make Onawa their home. The gene pool and been somewhat limited when the present-day Onawans first came to Onawa. And the social and intellectual mix would greatly enrich both societies.

Finally the crew members were strapped in ready for the return journey. They were not expected to return in less than a year. The three space ships left the ground at ten-minute intervals. They all reached an extremely high velocity quickly, and were soon lost from sight. The monitoring equipment kept them in range until the blue bubble developed around the three ships just before they disappeared. Now it was purely a matter of wait and hope for those left behind.

* * * * *

At 0215 a telephone call woke up General Miles Fallon, head of mission control on the Moon. He sat up in his bed. “This had better be damned important” he growled into the phone. “It's the middle of the night!

It was indeed important. Several different astronomical observatories had reported that three unidentified space ships had gone into orbit around them. Details had first been received from the operations room at the UK Space Agency on Mars, who had been tracking them since they spotted the ships headed towards the moon.

The General dressed quickly and hurried to the operations room. When he arrived the control staff in turmoil. More off-duty controllers and just about anybody else who could walk were turning up every minute, many in various stages of undress still. Pictures of the three ships were being displayed on the monitors. He pulled the chief of operations to one side and asked for an update.

The story the chief outline was incredible. A Captain Skinner was on board the lead ship along with four aliens. His story was that six humans had left Earth approximately ten months ago, during 2042, and had reached a planet called Onawa. Apparently the aliens on the planet were direct descendants of travellers from Earth from over two-thousand years ago. The Onawan planet was peaceful and would welcome anyone from Earth who wished to make it their home. They asked for permission to land on the moon. The general didn't hesitate in granting it. He had to meet these aliens and debrief the human crew. There was something very wrong with their story which they were obviously not aware of.

* * * * *

The human travellers and the Aliens were seated around a large conference table in the control centre. It was located two hundred feet below the surface of the Moon. This was for protection from the lack of atmosphere and the extremes of temperatures from day to night.

General Fallon started the meeting by first questioning the humans and then the aliens. Recordings were made and notes taken. After two hours of questioning General Fallon sat silently in deep thought for several minutes. Finally he looked up and swept his gaze over the assembled Earth crew.

“Gentlemen, I have to tell you something very important. It will come as a shock to you. While we've been talking I ran a background check on you and your story. I believe everything you have said but there is something you are obviously not aware of. Our records show that you did leave on your little trip when you say but you have not been away for ten months. You have actually been away for over two-hundred years this is the year 2253.

“The Earth is virtually uninhabitable now because of climate change and a third world war. We colonised Mars over a hundred years ago. Earth is no longer a place for you to go. Professor George Moorfield will explain more.” The general sat down.

Professor Moorfield rose and addressed the meeting. “Well my friends,” he began. “It seems you managed to do the impossible. You've effectively travelled travel forward in time. Although Einstein's theory of relativity has been proved already, it was only for fairly low speeds and small distances. You've now proved it on the grand scale.

“I'll come to the enigma of your “Blue Bubble” travel in a moment. But we can explain how you have only aged a year or so in two centuries. For four periods in your last year, you spent time above 95% of the speed of light – once while accelerating on your outbound journey, then again while decelerating towards Onawa. And a further two similar periods on the return journey. At those speeds, significant levels of time dilatation occur. Your absolute speed doesn't really matter here. It's the difference in your speed relative to earth.

“Now we come to the Blue Bubble time. We still don't fully understand that, but we know you were outside time itself during that interregnum. So you could cover vast distances then without any Einsteinian effects. All those effects occurred just before and soon after your Blue Bubble “time”. General Fallon steered the meeting onto more mundane matters. The human crew and Aliens were given a brief history lesson about what had happened on earth nearly two-hundred years ago. Climate change had increased the planet's average temperature by four degrees. This had caused about eighty percent of the world's ice to melt. The resultant rise sea levels submerged thousands of low-lying islands and flooded large parts of the continents. Billions of people drowned. Survivors from near the shores had to resettle inland, resulting in crowding and shortage of food. Air pollution increased around the world.

People rioted and a third world war started. North America, Europe and Australasia formed a partnership and built ships which could travel to Mars and start colonisation. Hundreds of cargo ships were sent in advance with everything necessary to sustain life for over five thousand people. One hundred years later Earth was virtually abandoned and the Mars colony was thriving. The Moon-base was kept manned as a look-out post in case of something unforeseen happening on Earth.

The crew must now decide on their next move. They quickly reached a unanimous decision. They would travel on to Mars. Once there they would invite up to three-hundred people to join them on their return trip to Onawa. It would likely be a one-way trip.

One week later the three ships stood by ready for take-off to Mars. Four of the Moon's scientists were on board to learn as much as possible about the alien space ship. The three ships took off at ten o'clock in the morning. As mission control tracked them the blue bubble appeared and they were lost to sight. Would they make it to Mars? Only time would tell.

The End