

A Star is Born
by Rob Lawes

“Aurora this is Houston, ASC to Aux.”

“Roger that Houston, ASC to Aux.” Joanne Lucas, Commander of the Global Space Agencies Aurora spacecraft, reached up to a panel above her head and flicked the appropriate switch in response to the radioed request. Turning to her colleague in the right hand seat she enquired, “How’s that Checklist coming along Sasha?”

In the co-pilots seat, Sasha Markovitch worked carefully, comparing numbers written on a small plastic card with those scrolling across a computer display.

“Almost there,” she said.

“Warp engine levels are nominal and we are showing greens across the board.” chipped in flight engineer Clem Vanveldt from his station in front of the engineering consol, immediately behind the two pilots.

“Aurora this is Houston,” the radio once again crackled into life, “OK guys we are polling all flight controllers for a go, no go, for a 100 percent warp drive run, at this time, please standby.”

“Roger that, Aurora standing by,” Jo looked across to Sasha and Clem, “Ready guys?”

“That’s the checklist complete. We are ready on Houston’s say so.” Sasha looked at Jo and smiled. “Get this run cracked then back in time for Christmas eh?”

“As easy as that?” joked Clem from the rear seat.

“We’ll see,” said Jo as she pulled against the webbing straps of her seat belt, more out of nervous anticipation than for any other need. Anyway, at the speed at which the Aurora was about to travel, should anything go wrong, tight seat belts would make no difference to the eventual outcome for the crew.

“Come on, come on!” muttered Jo under her breath. She and her two crew mates had spent three years in training for this mission and were set to become the first crew to run a warp drive ship. Interstellar travel would be possible for the first time in human history. For all her eagerness to succeed Jo, much like Sasha and Clem, had a family waiting on Earth whom she couldn’t wait to get back to. After having spent so much time in training for this mission, she owed them a Christmas they would never forget.

A burst of static in her headset made Jo look up and indicated another radio message from mission control was inbound.

“OK Aurora this is Mission Control, you are go for maximum warp drive run. Good luck and God Speed Aurora”

“Roger that Mission Control, commencing maximum warp drive run now.” Jo flicked a series of switches on the commander’s console to engage the warp drive units and transfer from the conventional system that had been powering the craft until this point. From the engineering display Clem watched the output gauges to ensure the power transfer went smoothly.

“That’s all 4 units engaged Jo.”

“OK Clem, report the numbers for me as we power up and lets try and smooth it out through 95 percent, it got a little rough there last time.”

On the previous test run the craft was taken successfully up to 96 percent power however, Jo and Sasha were both concerned at the buffeting the craft suffered in the trans warp stage. Mission control was satisfied that this would smooth out as they moved into the full power range but Jo was taking no chances today.

“Acceleration steady and power climbing, all systems normal.” Sasha, from the co-pilots chair, scanned a host of dials, relating to the supply of the essential systems that kept Aurora alive, leaving Jo to concentrate on flying the ship.

“That’s 50 percent passed and power rates are steady, 4 warp drive units are all green on the board.” Clem called out the next set of data points as Aurora leapt forwards through the darkness of space. Jo pressed accept on the guidance computer to run the next set of figures and spoke to her colleagues.

“I’ll make the abort call if I judge there are any significant problems guys, just keep feeding me the data.” Both Sasha and Clem were absorbed by their tasks but confirmed their agreement.

“80 percent and rising,” called Clem “all green on the board.”

“Passing 90.” The power continued to rise.

“We’re entering the trans warp phase!” called Sasha. Aurora began to shake as if it were being driven over a cobbled street.

“That’s 96 percent,” Clem reached out and adjusted the power trimming levels to all four engines and the vibration perceptibly reduced, “just trimmed out some excess power boss,” he told Jo.

“Thanks Clem, feels good now.”

“98.....99.....100 percent power!” Clem leaned forward and looked over Sasha’s shoulder to confirm the speed-readings on the display. As suddenly as they’d started, the vibrations stopped leaving Aurora soaring through space as smoothly as a marble rolls across a sheet of glass.

“That’s it!” exclaimed Sasha with a beaming smile on her face. She turned to Jo and said, “See, told you it would be easy!”

“I never doubted you for a second,” added Clem.

“Yeah right!” joked Sasha.

“OK guys, calm down. I want a full systems check and let’s just make sure that these guidance figures are good, one second out and we could slam into the Sun!” Jo didn’t have time to celebrate but she did allow herself a moment to smile. She looked at the picture of her husband and children, which she had taped to the side of the console, and gently rubbed her hand across it.

Sasha set to work confirming the guidance figures running several comparisons through her palm top computer. Each set of figures scrolled across the heads up display showing up as a warm green glow against the black background outside the window.

“Engines are running a little hot, all four are showing around 102 percent above idle.” Clem looked at Jo.

“Right, ease them back. It’s probably a residual surge after breaking through trans-warp,” Jo replied “How’s the guidance looking?” she added.

“The computer says we are a little ahead of our estimated position and our speed is higher than predicted but other than that we are right down the middle,” Sasha responded.

“That’s not right...” It was Clem again. His voice sounded concerned as he worked the warp drive controls from the flight engineers panel. The digital display for each engine showed the set level and, below it, the actual engine level for each of the

four power cores, which create the huge amount of energy, required to thrust a spacecraft in warp drive. All four gauges were now showing a power rating of 104 percent above idle. Clem lowered the thrust setting to 98 for each engine but there was no movement on any gauge.

“Jo, I think I may have a panel problem here. I can’t get the core power levels back down,” he said.

Jo turned her systems display to show the engine power levels before reaching down to her side and punching some figures into the guidance system.

“Blast it!” she cursed, “Why won’t they respond?” Aurora continued to accelerate. “Guys,” Jo turned to the others, “Time to call it a day, once we drop back out of warp I’ll get Houston on the horn and let them know the problem.” She then turned to Clem. “Knock off 1 and 4, it may be a little bumpy but it should slow us down quickly, you can then pull down on 2 and 3. Switch to conventional thrust around the 30 percent level, Happy?”

Clem nodded and set to work at the controls. Sasha and Jo began to update the guidance computer programme to let the system know what they were doing.

“Aww Hell, Skipper they won’t disengage!” with a little panic in his voice Clem rapidly tapped another series of commands into the engine management system.

“What the hell is that?” Sasha pointed over the pilots console and out of the cockpit window. The others looked up to see what she was pointing at. In front of Aurora, what should have been the black shroud of deep space now contained a glowing and swirling burst of light. It looked for all the world as if Aurora was heading into the heart of a whirlpool. As the craft sped closer to the glowing mass, fingers of light reached out from the edges and began to stream past the ship, drawing it further in.

The startled crew were snapped back into reality by the sound of the guidance system warning alarm. The loud claxon punctured the momentary silence before Jo finally opened her mouth.

“Guys, we are in serious trouble!”

The time rotor made a slight sighing sound as it glided up and down. Sarah leant against the console thumbing through the pages of her diary while the doctor, flat on his back, tinkered with some unseen element of the TARDIS control system.

“I don’t think I’ll have much further use for this,” Sarah mused as she turned each page.

“Sarah, would you be so kind and turn the dial on the magnetic fluctuation sensor unit exactly forty degrees clockwise?” From where she was standing Sarah could see the Doctor’s legs poking out from under the console. His hand thrust upwards, a finger extended, pointing to the appropriate place on the control board. Sarah put down the book and made her way around the console.

“I take it that’s the blue one next to the green button?” she asked.

“Yes, now turn it exactly forty degrees clockwise,” the Doctor replied.

Sarah did as she was told. “Is that close enough?” She enquired.

“Sarah,” the Doctor scolded, “It has to be exact.”

“It is exact!” Sarah replied huffily.

“Well that’s close enough then,” the Doctor said, in a loud voice. There were a few more sounds as various units were slotted back into place and then after one final click, the Doctor stood up and dusted himself off. Standing at the TARDIS controls he looked at Sarah and asked “So where would you like to go?”

Before Sarah could open her mouth a white lamp on one of the console panels began to flash accompanied by the sound of a buzzer.

“Oh...” the Doctor said, but before he could finish his sentence the whole console room seemed to lurch over at an angle before righting itself. It was as if the TARDIS had been picked up and tossed forward like a small boat crossing the path of a bigger vessel.

“What was that?” Sarah asked as she grasped the edge of the control panel worried that it may happen again.

“The proximity warning alarm,” the Doctor said with a quizzical look on his face. “Judging by the way the TARDIS rolled I would say we were almost involved in a collision.” The Doctor began checking several screens before flicking another switch to turn on a loudspeaker. White noise hissed and crackled from the panel until, abruptly, the sound of a women’s voice pierced the static.

“Houston.....Aurora.....Warp.....Control.....Unable.....Houston.....Copy... ..”

“It sounds like someone is in trouble.” Said Sarah

“It would seem so,” the Doctor confirmed as he continued to work at various controls on the console. He flipped the switch to open the scanner panel revealing a swirling array of colour that indicated the TARDIS was travelling through the time vortex. At first there was nothing else to see but slowly the shape of a large, silver coloured spacecraft appeared in the vortex before fading away again. Accompanying the arrival of the craft, the female voice again appeared from the console speaker before fading away again.

“Houston.....Warp.....Shutdown....”

The Doctor stopped pressing buttons for a moment and looked across to his companion. “Sarah, I do believe the crew of that space craft are in a great deal of trouble.”

“Well what are you going to do about it Doctor?” Sarah asked.

“Ah, well, I’m working on it,” he replied with a toothy grin.

In the Aurora crew capsule it was clear that the tension among the crew was rising with each passing minute. Sasha pressed one of the earpieces of her headset hard against her ear in a vain effort to hear any response to her repeated radio calls. Jo and Clem were huddled around the engineering panel locked into a heated debate as to their next move. The view from the cockpit window continued to show a swirling mass of colour and light, which would change pattern and shape every so often.

“OK Sasha, leave it for a bit. Somehow I don’t think Houston can hear us anyway,” Jo turned to Clem “I take it the power levels are still rising?”

“108 percent at the moment, we redline at 110, I reckon at 113 we won’t need to worry about our mission bonus!”

Clem had a knack of getting to the point.

“How long until we hit 110?” Jo asked.

“At the rate we are going, around 20 minutes I’d say, if we could just stop the engines phasing and get some stability back we could shut them down.” He pointed out of the forward window. “Whatever that is is dragging us forward and is affecting the engines”

Sasha took her headset off and joined the other two, “Any chance we could just dump the cores? Surely that would drop us out of warp and we could limp back on conventional thrust.”

Clem took up a pad and pencil and began scribbling some numbers on it; eventually he looked up at Jo. “Well, it would be one hell of a bumpy ride but I reckon if we pushed the thrusters up to maximum and dumped the cores of both engines that may take some of the sting out of the deceleration.”

“The trouble is,” replied Jo, “We don’t know if that will get us out of whatever that is and without the guidance system we won’t have any way of knowing where we are or which way is home.”

Back on the TARDIS, the Doctor worked his way around the console humming to himself. Occasionally he would tap the glass of a dial or press a button. Becoming impatient and growing concerned for the crew of the spacecraft that kept occasionally appearing on the scanner display Sarah decided she’d waited in silence long enough.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Hmmm,” said the Doctor absentmindedly before carrying on with his musing.

“Hmmm what?” Asked Sarah.

“An interesting name, Aurora. The Roman Goddess of the Dawn, every morning she would renew herself, fly across the sky and announce the arrival of the sun,” replied the Doctor.

“Fascinating!” said Sarah as she rolled her eyes.

“Yes, well I thought so!” The Doctor flipped another switch on the console and began speaking into a microphone built into the desk, “Hello Aurora. Can you hear me?” Static crackled back but there was no response, he tried again, “Hello Aurora, can you hear me?” Again there was no reply.

“Maybe they’re having problems with their radio?” Said Sarah.

“The question is, how long will that craft survive in the time vortex and how can we help them get out again. The time vortex is no place for craft that haven’t been built for time travel.” The Doctor began to look concerned as if an awful idea had just entered his head, “Tell me Sarah, if you were on an aircraft that had a problem with its engines, what would you get rid of before you tried to land?”

“The fuel?” asked Sarah.

“Yes,” said the Doctor “and if they did that, the resulting explosion would send ripples through time and space. I may be the Doctor but even I couldn’t put a stitch in time that big.”

“Well we better save nine then!” said Sarah cautiously.

The Doctor began to fiddle with the radio controls again.

“If I could only sync the radio, right let’s try again shall we?” He leaned over the microphone and spoke.

“Hello Aurora, can you hear me?”

In the cockpit of the Aurora the tension was mounting among the crew.

“Jo, it looks like it’s the only option, we have to dump the warp fuel. We’ve lost control of the systems and it’s going to go super critical in a matter of minutes!” Clem looked at Sasha for support.

“Clem’s right, Jo...it could be our only chance.” Sasha nodded and waited for Jo to decide on what seemed to be a simple choice, between certain death and almost certain death.

“Guys, quiet for a moment and let me think.” Jo had to make sure she was making the right decision.

“Well don’t take all day!” Clem responded.

“Hang on a sec...” Sasha leaned down and picked up her headphones, “I though I heard something...” Reaching across, she flicked the switch turning the sound onto the cabin speakers. A strange voice boomed out into the cabin.

“Hello Aurora, can you hear me?” It was the Doctors voice.

“Hello! Yes, we can hear you! Who is this? Houston?” Sasha replied excitedly.

“Ah, well no, not exactly, there is no time to explain. What is your situation?”

“Give me the headset Sasha.” Jo leaned across and placed the headset on her head “Whoever you are, the situation is serious, we have lost control of our warp drive, the guidance system is down and we have 1 percent redundancy before our warp fuel overloads causing this conversation to end abruptly. Now if you can’t help us, put on someone who can!”

“Aurora, what ever you do, don’t, repeat don’t dump your warp fuel! The explosion would do more damage than you could possibly imagine. Please standby, I promise I’ll have an answer for you.” With that the Doctor ended the radio call and the cabin fell silent.

“Well what do we do know?” Clem asked.

“We wait I guess.” Responded Jo as she looked nervously at her crewmates.

Back in the TARDIS, the Doctor was moving frantically around the console, once again checking and adjusting various dials, buttons and leavers. As he did so, he mumbled to himself. “They must be stuck on a time wave, I can’t materialize around them, the computations would take an eternity, couldn’t match two time zones simultaneously, I wonder...I have to save that warp core...Think Doctor, think!”

“Doctor?” Sarah had a look that flitted somewhere between concern and crossness. “You’re blathering Doctor, is there anything I can do to help? I may not understand the gravity of the situation but I can try?”

The Doctor looked at Sarah then. Slowly, a smile crept across his face. It quickly turned into a big, toothy grin. He bounded across the control room and grasped her by the shoulders. “Sarah, the Gravity beam, well done.” And with that, he returned to the radio.

“Um, thank you, I suppose,” Sarah said, finding herself addressing the Doctor’s back.

“Aurora, this is the Doctor, listen very carefully, you are caught on the crest of a time wave that has pulled you through a time vortex. It has knocked your warp fuel out of phase between matter and antimatter. If you dump it into the time vortex the resulting explosion would tear a hole in the fabric of space and time.” The Doctor waited for a response. Eventually the radio burst into life.

“Well that’s reassuring to know!” It was Jo’s voice, with barely contained sarcasm. “And what are we supposed to do?”

“I want you to dump the fuel but I’m going to catch it in a gravity beam. I should be able to hold it out of the time vortex just long enough to materialise in normal space. The resulting jolt from the deceleration of your craft should be enough to bring you back into normal space at the same time.” The Doctor looked across and nodded at Sarah who smiled and nodded back, even though she’d only understood the smallest part of the Doctors radio message.

“OK, Doctor, I don’t mind saying, I have a feeling I’m going to wake up from this nightmare any minute, but right now, you are all we have between an explosion and getting home. Give us two seconds to get things sorted and we’ll let you know when we’re ready to dump the fuel, Aurora out.”

Jo clicked off the radio comm and looked around at the other two.

“Well guys, would someone please tell me I’ve not just had a conversation with a strange man about time vortexes and the fabric of space and time?” Jo didn’t know if she should feel relieved that they had a plan or even more concerned, but right now it was the safety of her crew and the will to see her family again that made her next actions an easy one.

“OK guys, strap yourselves in and get ready to dump the fuel. Clem, run through the checklist as far as you can, Sasha, stand by to re-boot the guidance system. The rest is up to our mysterious friend out there.”

The Doctor pointed to a lever that Sarah was familiar with; it was the one that normally dematerialised the TARDIS wherever they were going to land. “Sarah, I’ll have to hold the fuel in a gravity beam. We will only have a second at most so when I say ‘now’, you must slide the lever to bring the TARDIS out of the time vortex, you understand?”

“Right, Doctor.” Sarah nodded.

The Doctor could just about reach the radio switch from where he was standing; he leaned over and pressed the comm button. “Aurora, are you ready?”

“Ready Doctor,” came the response.

“OK, on my countdown, at the command now. From three...”

Clem looked across at Jo who just returned his look with a nod. The speakers crackled into life again and the Doctors voice counted down as per his instructions.

“Three, Two, One, Now!”

Clem followed the set sequence for a warp fuel dump. His hands flashed over the controls as they had done many times in training.

“Fuels gone!” He shouted with nervous adrenalin.

The Aurora lurched and felt to those onboard as if it was about to hurtle forward end over hand. Jo felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach and out of the corner of her eye watched as Sasha grasped both arms of her seat and held on for all she was worth. As abruptly as it had appeared, the view from the cockpit window suddenly changed back to a more familiar and stable deep black, punctuated by the tiny white pinpricks of flickering star light. Caught briefly off guard by the sudden change in view, Jo snapped back to her senses, “Sasha, re-boot the guidance computer now!”

Sasha did as she was ordered and punched in the sequence of orders that re-flashed the system drives and ordered the whole main frame to conduct a location check based on the various star sightings in the database. Clem had run a systems check

of his own and reported, "Woo, don't make me go through anything like that again, all systems seem OK and we have normal power on the standard drive."

Jo looked out of the window, "I wonder where our Doctor friend has gone?"

Just as she finished talking there was a blinding flash from outside the cockpit window. A brilliant burst of white light appeared and then rapidly faded. Holding their hands up to their eyes all three of the Aurora's crewmembers were blinded by the appearance of the light.

"What now?" Shouted Sasha as she rapidly blinked to try and clear the white spots from her eyes. It was as if she had stared directly in to a camera flash only a hundred times brighter. Rapidly the white light receded and slowly their vision returned to normal.

Just as the Doctor had shouted 'now,' he activated the gravity beam. The TARDIS bucked widely as the beam caught the warp fuel in its field.

"Got it, now your turn Sarah!" the Doctor called out.

Sarah threw the dematerialisation lever as hard as she could, not wanting to make a mistake at this stage. The console room was filled with the familiar sound of wheezing and groaning that usually symbolised the TARDIS's appearance on some distant planet but this time meant that the TARDIS would appear in space. The instant the sound of the materialisation stopped, the Doctor reversed the polarity of the gravity beam and rapidly, the warp fuel disappeared away from the TARDIS. "Well done Sarah, are you OK?" He asked.

"Fine," Sarah replied. "What's going to happen to the fuel?"

"It's perfectly safe, it will keep going on that heading for a week or two and then burn itself out. Now let's find out if the others are OK." The Doctor stepped around the console and flicked the comm switch. "Hello Aurora, are you all OK?"

Jo's voice crackled back over the radio, "Fine Doctor, uh, just one problem though, we've reset our guidance computer and according to the system, it says we are 300000 miles above Earth but that the date is 0 AD. I think we may have a guidance system malfunction?"

"Ah!" Said the Doctor, "You'll have to give me a moment to explain it to you while I work out how to get you home"

Epilogue

It was a cold clear night with only a gentle breeze sweeping across the desert sands. Three men gathered together in a small room lit only by two small candles. On the table between them there were various papyrus covered in symbols, calculations and astronomical data. They spoke in hushed, almost reverential tones.

“You see!” said the first man, “A star has appeared in the night sky, just as we predicted!”

“It has!” exclaimed the second, “and our calculations show that it is heading west towards the city of Bethlehem.”

“Then as we have planned my friends, we shall follow the star for it heralds the arrival of a new king of kings, we must bring gifts for the new child, come, there is much work still to be done!”