

DIMENSIONS

by E.S. Strout

Some theorists believe that a total of ten dimensions exists, including height, width, length and time . . .Space.com

1.

Delta Echo Space Station. Da Vinci ready room. Monday, 23 January 2051.

30 year old dark haired, slender Cassandra Gwen Marshall, veteran test pilot, tweaked last-minute adjustments on her specialized FTL flight suit. Satisfied, she relaxed on a couch modified to record her vital signs.

“How do I look, Don?”

Aerospace physician Donald R. Stephan watched the screen, nodded. “All in the green, Cassie.”

She blinked twice. A heads-up display popped to her upper field of vision and faded seconds later.

“Today’s date, 1024 hours, 14 seconds,” she repeated. “A bit more than half an hour to launch.”

“Doug is here for your briefing,” Dr. Stephan said. “All yours, Colonel.”

2.

“The Da Vinci is fueled up and ready, Cassie. Any questions?”

“No problems, Doug. Merlin will remember anything I forget.”

U.S. Air Force Colonel Douglas Frazier nodded. “Merlin. Interesting fictional name you’ve chosen for your, ah . . . “

“Merlin was King Arthur’s magician. Now he’s my companion computer. He’s interfaced with all Da Vinci systems, databases and my cognitive frontal lobe centers. The Round Table folks would be amazed at his powers.”

“This is the first attempted transit of the Sagittarius-A anomaly in a FTL craft. Any last minute concerns?”

“Four Lynch gravity drive missions i’ve flown, Doug. Last one was an easy flyby of the Reticulum binary star system. I want this one.”

Frazier nodded. “It will be a tad more hazardous, zooming around our local black hole.”

She smiled. “I know. Merlin will assist me in keeping clear of its event horizon.”

“Your defenses?”

My laser weapon is ready for any unlikely possibility of a hostile first contact scenario.”

“Good. Let’s get you strapped in.”

3.

Elapsed flight time, 45 minutes, 16 seconds:

“How do we look, Merlin?”

Our interfaces are good, Cassie. Sagittarius-A event horizon a bit unstable. Compensating now.

“Thank you. I’ll grab a cat nap, Wake me at the next check point.”

Copy.

Elapsed flight time, one hour, 10 minutes, 22 seconds:

Cassandra was awakened abruptly by an acoustic alarm and flashing red warning indicators. Inertial dampers screamed as they compensated for Da Vinci’s abrupt return to normal space. She swung to the command chair, mopped her brow with a sleeve, pounded keys.

There was no response from the command computer.

“What’s the story, Merlin?”

Meteorite hit. Starboard beam shield failure. Antigraviton cell compromise. Gravity drive propulsion off line. Graphics on your heads-up display.

The Da Vinci’s shields had deflected thousands of meteorites. One had

slipped past during a nanosecond electronic glitch of exposure before backup systems compensated.

“A perfect system,” Cassandra said with a sarcastic scowl. “Show me all systems, Merlin.”

On your heads-up display.

Secondary propulsion: On line.
 Nav and maneuvering: Nominal.
 Emergency beacon: No response.
 Tachyon COMM system and backups: Off line.
 Earth coordinates: No data available.

“Where are we, Merlin?”

Insufficient information, Cassie. We have glanced off the Sagittarius-A event horizon, direction not yet determined.

4.

PROXIMITY ALERT

“What is it, Merlin?”

External optics off line, Cassie. Switching to tactical display.

“Backups?”

Negative. Meteorite damage. There is a faint image coming through now.
 “It’s a solar system, Merlin. I see one planet with at least one moon.”
 I cannot say system, Cassie. No database match.

“Damn, I hate design engineers. No freakin’ viewports.”

Tactical view suggests possible oceans and landmasses.

“Are you okay, Merlin?”

All my facilities are available and intact.

5.

“Merlin, please bring up the file on Major Richard Thayer’s FTL test mission from two years ago.”

Audio only available, Cassie.

Thayer had been a senior at the Space Academy in her plebe year. His FTL craft had suffered a sudden loss of power on a test flight, unknown cause.

“Please play it.”

She listened, stunned. Thayer’s voice over the tachyon link betrayed disorientation and confusion. There were schizophrenic ramblings about alien star fields, then static echoing in the stygian vastness of the cosmos.

The Space Agency report on Thayer’s disappearance was vague and inconclusive. Subsequent reports were classified.

Cassandra felt an odd chill. There had been rumors of bizarre alterations of spatial and temporal parameters following abrupt unplanned deceleration in hyperspace.

Experts theorized that small tears in the fabric of the space-time continuum had been involved in the disappearance of early unmanned intergalactic probes.

Space Agency vehemently denied such hypotheses, According to them all major glitches in intergalactic transit had long since been resolved. No cause for alarm, the brass reiterated.

“So where did Major Thayer and the unmanned probes go?” Cassandra wondered aloud. “Lost in some galactic Bermuda Triangle?”

Merlin did not respond.

6.

“Looks like we’re stuck here, Merlin. Recommendations?”

Orbital transits may give us some clues.

“I’ll do three passes, Longitudinal, latitudinal and equatorial. Okay, Merlin?”

Sounds good to me.

“Any progress with the visual?”

None. I can give you suboptimal tactical views only. Range is limited to this

planet and any moons it has.

“Can you get atmospheric readings?”

Yes I can. Probe reports on your heads-up display now.

“Wow. Nitrogen, oxygen, carbon dioxide, trace elements and water vapor. Ambient temp 72 degrees Fahrenheit. Sounds like Earth.”

Size parameters indicate a planet at least ten times larger.

“Search again.”

Input data conflict, Cassie. Problem with size parameters. I’m working on it.

“Keep me updated. Commencing orbital transit program now.”

There was no response.

“Why, Merlin?”

There is an electronic disconnect related to the meteorite hit. No response from transit programming. Recommend switch to manual.

“Damn.”

Cassandra pressed SUBLIGHT ENGINES START. They fired right away. Orbital transits revealed no new information.

6.

“Any luck with the tachyon COMM system, Merlin?”

Negative. Backups remain down as well.

Cassandra took a deep breath, did a tremulous exhalation. “I suppose landing is out of the question.”

True. Da Vinci was designed for intergalactic flight only, not atmospheric transit. Buffeting and extreme frictional heat would terminate your human body in less than thirty seconds.

“Can you provide additional cooling in such an instance?”

8.4 seconds only, Cassie. After that, orbital decay commences and cannot be reversed. Da Vinci and all occupants will be incinerated. Survival probability zero.

“There is one outside chance, Merlin. Power up the escape pod.”

Negative option. I am programmed not to comply.

“You mean just sit here in orbit for millennia? Override sequence Hotel Bravo Zulu zero six.”

“I’m going to do a retro burn with the sublight engines, then eject the pod when we reach zero speed and achieve reentry.”

I copy under duress. Recommend avoid oceans. Landmass landing 0.07 probability of success. All other options zero.

“Re-entry in ten seconds.”

Cassandra sealed the escape pod hatch and locked her helmet visor down. A clear plastic rectangle enclosing a preserved geranium from her father’s garden was secured in a velcro-sealed pocket in her flight suit. She punched the escape pod release an instant before deceleration immobilized her in the G-force seat.

“Give me that 8.4 seconds now, Merlin,” she said, then blacked out.

Flecks of white hot metal left a glittering trail behind the Da Vinci as it disintegrated in the big planet’s atmosphere.

The heat shields of the escape pod glowed bright yellow, but held fast during the descent into terra incognita.

7.

Cassandra groaned, disoriented. She raised her helmet’s UV filtered visor and blinked.

Brilliant starlight shone through the escape pod’s minuscule viewport. Red and white parachute fabric billowed outside. Soft landing. She pumped a triumphant fist.

“Wow. 0.07 probability. Shoulda bought a lottery ticket.”

“Merlin?”

Entered in database as extraordinary event.

A tree had ensnared the pod’s parachute. Clusters of jagged edged green leaves

were punctuated by clusters of multicolored blossoms, each measuring at least fifteen feet in diameter. Light from the system's star sparkled from dewy foliage,

"Please confirm atmospheric components and temperature."

On your heads-up display.

Cassandra nodded. "Breathable air. No toxins. Compatible temp. I'm cracking the hatch, Merlin. Warn me of any problems."

The air was warm and humid. She shielded her eyes from the bright starshine, stood in the hatchway and did some deep knee bends.

"How odd. Feels like decent gravity. Merlin?"

Confirm adequate gravimetric levels.

"Ground covered by uniform green vegetation. Impressions, Merlin?"

No database match in catalog of eight hundred twelve investigated worlds.

"But not this one. Anything new on our COMM system?" Negative.

"Damn. There went our chance of a million New Dollar First Contact bonus." And a new neurosynaptic system installation for me.

"For us, Merlin. Is there any rope in our survival gear?"

Thirty feet, nylon reinforced.

"Let's have a look around." She rappelled to the ground.

"Solid ground, Merlin. A bit granular with many stones and pebbles, but adequate for walking. Vegetation reaches to eye level. Other trees in the distance, similar to the one we landed in."

8.

There was a sudden whirring sound overhead.

Airborne threat, Cassie. Defense response initiated.

Neurosynaptic targeting and guidance systems of her Merlin-linked personal defense system were on line in an instant. The cyberorganic laser lanced upward through

the tiny focusing lens in her left eye, spearing the airborne menace. There was a terminal squawk as the avian predator plunged with uncoordinated flapping of dark wings.

“Gotcha,” Cassandra whispered.

“I owe you one, Merlin. Any I.D.?”

Bird. Very Large. Not pterosaur, fully feathered. Yellow beak. Corvine species, crow or raven. Disproportionate in size to extreme. Nothing in our current database matches. No resolution of size conflict. Searching.

“Anything on the flora?”

Chlorophyll based. Single bladelike growths, closely crowded . . . wait one. Approaching alien presence. Land based. Ultrasonic image indicates multi-appendaged creatures. Cover your ears, Cassie.

The high decibel screech sent ragged fragments of alien foliage flying in swirls. Threat ended. Alien presences destroyed or departed.

“What were they?”

Configuration consistent with Family formicidae. Ants. Apparently natural inhabitants of this world.”

“We’re like the Lilliputians from Gulliver’s Travels,” Cassie mused. Satiric fantasy by Englishman Jonathan Swift, year 1726 . .

“These are real.”

A sudden rain squall broke. Cassandra sought shelter beneath one of the flowered trees. “What do you make of this, Merlin?”

Water rain. No toxins. Traces of chlorine and fluorides. The cobalt blue sky remained devoid of cloud cover.

9.

The storm passed in ten minutes.

Cassandra removed her boots and socks to cool her feet in a fresh puddle. She massaged the puckered scar on her right foot.

Childhood injury. Pain. Her father’s comforting arms.

She fetched the hard plastic enclosed pink geranium from a pocket and held it up to the warm starlight. Stroked the engraved sentiment, shed a nostalgic tear.

She stood, rubbed her eyes. “Enough. Anything, Merlin?”

Structure to the left, about fifty yards. A construction. No match in our database.

Cassandra gazed upward at the imposing edifice. It was composed of stacked layers of dark, rough-textured blocks. Each was equal to her height in size. Precise fit, like the centuries-old Mayan ruins she had studied in undergraduate school.

There were no carved designs or hieroglyphics, No windows or entryways. The rough surfaced stone afforded good grips. Cassandra climbed the wall. A number of the blossom-bearing trees rose on the other side.

Starshine glinted off huge rectangular reflective surfaces in the far distance. They were enclosed by massive structures composed of rough surfaced building materials. A wide, winding smooth pathway of unknown darkly pigmented material led in the direction of the structure.

“What alien culture had built the wall? The gigantic structure?” Cassandra wondered.

“Any thoughts, Merlin?”

Building is likely a dwelling place. I’ll attempt to refine search parameters.

Wait one. I’m detecting seismic activity. Richter Scale 4.4.

“I feel it, Merlin. How odd. Da Vinci instruments recorded no seismic activity.”

“Planetquake.” She scrambled down the wall, landed in thick, sticky mud from the rain storm. “Yuck. How gross.”

There was a brief diminution of brightness as though something had moved between her and the system’s star. The tremor abated seconds later.

A second wave of regular seismic activity was stronger, closer. There was sudden movement beyond the tops of the flowered forest growths. Blotting out the fading starlight and moving on.

Threat approaching, Cassie. Type unknown. Enabling laser targeting and guidance systems now.

The laser did not fire.

“What happened, Merlin?”

Threat parameters are off scale. There are dimensional and magnitude errors I cannot resolve. My programming does not include discrepancies of such proportions. This race of giant beings has created the wall and that building. They are not aware of us.

Sudden spaced bursts of light crisscrossed the alien tableau with weird twilight shadows. Scuffling sounds followed. A dark shape materialized overhead.

“Give me some help here, Merlin.”

Identification conflict, Cassie. Hostile response forbidden by my programming. I must revise inconsistent parameters . . .

“Dammit, Merlin. We’re under attack. I’m taking over. Emergency weapon system override Tango Delta six zero.”

Wait, Cassie. Identity conflict is size variation of familiar . . .

“Disconnect, Merlin. Now.” Cassandra eyeballed the laser’s focusing lens toward the center of the descending mass.

11.

There was another voice.

“Be careful, Cassie. That planter is muddy after the sprinklers shut off. You’ll be a mess . . .”

“Cassie? Oh God, no. Counteract override, Merlin!”

The laser fired. It was Cassandra’s final recollection.

12.

“Third degree burn,” the EMT said. “What happened?”

“Electrical short,” the firemen told me. “Auto sprinklers must have hit an exposed wire when the walkway lighting went on. “

The paramedic wrapped the child's foot in an antibiotic and tissue regenerative analgesic gel pack.

"She'll be fine, sir. A little scar on her instep. Have your clinic assigned medical professional check it in a couple of days."

Her father hugged the little girl. "You heard the man, Cassie. You'll be just fine."

Her smile brightened tear-stained cheeks. "Yes Daddy."

"I stepped on something in the mud when I got that shock."

"The firemen looked everywhere, love. Didn't find anything."

She clutched the toy she'd recovered from the brick-lined planter to her smudged playsuit.

"This was hanging from one of the geraniums."

Her father stroked its smooth surface with a fingertip.

"Wow. Perfect scale model of a Space Agency escape pod, complete with parachute. Accurate details. Some kid must have lost it."

Cassandra Gwen Marshall sniffled, wiped her nose on a sleeve.

"Richie Thayer, I'll bet. All his space toys . . ."

"He wants to be an astronaut, Cassie."

A secret grin lit her face. "So do I," she whispered.

The End