

# Terra in a Bottle



by R. K. Wigal

The alert sounded and the entire com-deck crew jumped. When a stern voice called out, "On screen!" the image displayed before them—the two images—filled them with awe. "Bring us to a halt!" ordered Mission Commander Theo Crane. "This bears looking into!"

The SRS Ranger came to a dead stop. Displayed immediately before them was an enormous panorama of landscape that had no place in space. It was as if an immense piece of paradise had been carved out of the surface of a planet and placed inside a gigantic transparent egg. Beyond the land mass lay a seemingly familiar looking vortex opening to...to where, was anyone's guess.

"Looks like the entire Los Angeles Basin from Earth orbit," remarked Flight Con LuAnn Arden. "It's beautiful!"

"Does resemble L.A. a little, and it *is* a sight to behold," said Science Team Director James Butcher.

"Jimmy, you scan the land form," instructed Crane, "Valea, the vortex."

The solidly built geophysicist from Chicago, Jim Butcher, and the petite, telepathic, Danarian astrophysicist, Valea Minara, both went straight to work.

"Sir, this is unprecedented. The vortex is neither a temporal rift nor a wormhole. It opens, not to another time or another region of space, but to someplace else entirely! Therefore, it must be interdimensional, opening into another universe. There may be more, but scans are yielding little."

"Keep on it, Valea," The lanky commander advised. "Got anything yet, Jimmy?"

"You know how, when you're in the desert, the mountains are so much farther away than they appear?"

"Yeah...what about it?"

"Well, here's a twist. That land form's a lot closer than it looks." His brows furrowed, Butcher was clearly mystified. "And you know what that means..."

"Yeah, it's also a lot smaller than it appears to be."

"Right! About a twentieth the size we'd expect!" And get this! Except for external dimensions, my sensors can't get any clear readings! It's like they're out of sync with the object! Commander, I'd like to go out and take a look."

"Sir," Minara interjected, "that might explain what I'm seeing through the vortex. I can't get any definitive readings from beyond the portal, but it wouldn't surprise me to find that there is a universe there more compact than our own. I'd like to accompany Director Butcher."

"Very well. When you go for E.V.A., tether yourselves to each other and to the shuttle. Anything goes wrong, I'll tractor the shuttle."

"Yes, sir," two voices responded in unison.

Minara arrived at the object first, the director a few seconds later. She touched the surface of the transparent shell with her thickly gloved hand. She wished she could actually feel it; to know and be able to fathom its texture. With a sigh, she activated her emission scanner.

"While you scan, I'll take a visual." Butcher took out his optical reader, maximized its magnification and began peering at the Earth-like surface below. Minutes passed before he again spoke. This time there was emotion in his voice. "Commander, this is incredible! That's not just a land mass down there, it's an island surrounded by water! Why, it's a whole encapsulated world! And get this! There are buildings! There are surface vehicles, air vehicles; I can even make out bipedal human-like beings on the surface! And everything moves at a much accelerated pace! Commander, it's a world unto itself!"

"Well done, Jimmy!" Crane was ecstatic. "Valea, what are your scans telling you?"

"Scans are mostly confusing, sir, but I can say unequivocally that every object below, bipedal humanoid included, is indeed almost exactly one-twentieth the size of everything we are accustomed to. And, Commander, I have two theories. First, the miniaturized nature of what we are examining here carries all the way down to the subatomic level. The atoms and molecules in the realm below are one-twentieth the size of the atoms and molecules in *our* realm. Second, this *island in space* came from the other side of the vortex."

"Understood. Keep me..." Crane began.

"Wait a minute!" Butcher cut in. "I think we're being approached. A small, airborne craft appears to be heading our way."

Minara instinctively touched the shell's surface once again with the fingertips of her right hand. Almost in a whisper she said, "They want desperately to communicate with us. I can hear one's thoughts; I can see pictures in his mind." Then, an instant later, she yelled, "There's no time! Minara to engineering! You've got to activate the repulse field and send that thing back where it came from! Now!"

Commander Crane barked into the Comm, "Do it, Mike!"

"Already on it, sir!" Lead Engineer Michael Stoddard responded.

Minara and Butcher hurried back into the shuttle and moved it quickly out of the way.

The Ranger, forward engines and repulse field engaged, began gently pushing the object back toward the vortex, gaining speed and momentum as she went. With but a hundred meters to spare, she veered off. All eyes watched as the *island in space* drifted back through the unstable vortex and returned to its place in the grand scheme of things, in just barely enough time before the portal closed in on itself.

Back aboard the Ranger, Valea Minara enlightened the mission commander and the rest of the crew. "What we encountered is a resort city housed in a virtually indestructible transparent composite shell. Called The Aerie, it orbited the centrally located planet Theros. People from many worlds vacation on The Aerie, entering and leaving via teleports not unlike our own.

"A few hours ago, a rogue neutron star ventured close enough to Theros to dislodge The Aerie from orbit. The interacting magnetic fields between the rapidly rotating star and Theros generated a powerful static discharge that opened the portal between our two universes and sent The Aerie through. Its thrusters having become disabled, The Aerie went dead in space. The people there knew that the vortex was about to close. Their matter, being incompatible with our space, would ultimately have disintegrated. They had to go back."

"Well done, everyone," the mission commander proclaimed, "Well done indeed! LuAnn, how soon can you get us back up and running?"

"Reengaging engines and resetting steering coordinates now, sir," Flight Con Arden replied. "We'll be at cruising speed and back on course in 90 seconds max!"

"Excellent!" Then, looking around the com-deck, Theo Crane winked and said, "Pass the word! Bar's open 'til 2200 hours!"