

The Great Outback

"Deus ex Machina" - Show #102

by
John D. Powers

PO Box 28055
Atlanta, GA 30358
www.panggenre.com/about/contact.html

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THE GREAT OUTBACK

"Deus ex Machina"

TEASER

FADE IN:

EXT. OUTER SPACE (NEAR ASTEROID FIELD) - 08:00 HOURS

The *CIS Daisy*, a small, space shuttle-like courier ship, is moving slowly away from an asteroid belt in the background. A nearby star shines eerily through the rocks.

CAPTION: ZUMPCO Mining Base, Barnard's Star, 2 March 2811

INT. CIS DAISY - SAME

LEDGE, JONES, and KOKO are all strapped into their crew stations. They are busily manipulating controls in preparation for an interstellar jump. Ledge is wearing his *CNS Giap* cap.

A MINER is on the video monitor on the *CIS Daisy's* control panel. He is dressed in a light-duty space suit. His space helmet sits on his desktop beside him. The walls of his office are carved from the rock of a hollowed-out asteroid.

LEDGE

We're about to head back to civilization.

MINER

Thanks for shuttling those new miners and drills over on short notice. It'll be worth every smoo. And you were cheaper than all the other courier companies.

LEDGE

Please put in a good word for us on the nets when you get a chance. We've just started up business, so a little good buzz might go a long way.

MINER

Will do. The CPS mail only runs here once a month, so we might need to use you again. If so, we'll ping you through our cargo carriers.

LEDGE
(tips cap to the screen)
Thanks! Over and out.

The Miner's image on the video monitor is replaced by AMY/AI's avatar.

LEDGE (CONT'D)
Koko, next time we haul people,
please don't hurt them if you don't
have to.

KOKO
(in a bad mood)
If I'm interested, I'll hit on
them. If they touch me first, I'll
hit them.

JONES
Sensitive today?

KOKO
How would you feel if that
orangutan had hit on you?

JONES
Not as good as if you had hit on
me.
(pause)
Come on, Koko. All he did was try
to kiss your hand.

LEDGE
Leave her alone, Jonesie. Let me
know when you have the jump
coordinates set.

JONES
Should be about two minutes. Just
double-checking the calculations.

LEDGE
What is it with you two today? Just
yesterday you were running around
laughing and joking with each
other.

KOKO
That miner just put me in a bad
mood. I'll be okay.

EXT. OUTER SPACE (NEAR ASTEROID FIELD) - SAME

CLOSE SHOT on the *CIS Daisy* as she continues to move away from the asteroid field in the B.G.. The *CIS Daisy's* hull markings are clearly visible.

PAN AWAY toward deep space. The camera moves some distance away. Slow down and stop. Suddenly...

The *CPS SHETLAND* (the same type of ship as *CIS Daisy*) conducts a hyperspace jump into frame. It has the red, white, and blue paint scheme and logos of the Confederation Postal Service (CPS - Go Postal!(SM)). The name on the tail fin is *CPS Shetland*, and the tail number is SC-3291. The cockpit interior is lit and visible through the windshield, but no one is on board.

FADE OUT:

END OF TEASER

ACT ONE

FADE IN:

EXT. OUTER SPACE - 08:15

The CIS Daisy has moved further away from the asteroid belt. She is facing away from the system's star.

LEDGE (O.S.)
Jumping in Five.

INT. CIS DAISY - SAME

The CIS Daisy is seconds away from making a hyperspace jump. Ledge has his left hand poised on the throttle controller, preparing to use it to initiate the transit.

LEDGE
Four. Three. Tw--

KOKO
(looks at her control
panel, confused)
Boss, the jump drive just went off-
line.

AMY/AI
Ledge, I have aborted the Jump
sequence.

LEDGE
(concerned)
What's the problem, Amy?

AMY/AI
I am receiving an automatic
distress beacon. I have sent an
acknowledgement of receipt in reply
per regulations.

LEDGE
What are the details.

AMY/AI
The beacon is from the CPS
Shetland, a Confederation Postal
Service courier vessel.

LEDGE
Try to establish a communications
link with her.

AMY/AI

Affirmative.

(pause)

I have made contact with her AI unit.

LEDGE

Put it on screen.

The SHETLAND/AI avatar replaces Amy/AI's on the video monitor. It is the image of a clean-cut man with chiseled features. He is wearing a postal service uniform. Everything about the image is meant to convey the ideas of confidence, friendliness, and reliability to potential customers.

SHETLAND/AI

Greetings. This is the AI personality of the CPS Shetland. I must report an in-flight emergency.

LEDGE

What kind of emergency?

SHETLAND/AI

I cannot locate my crew.

JONES

Huh?

LEDGE

Did I copy that clearly, Shetland?

SHETLAND/AI

My crew is missing. I do not know what to do. This does not fall under any of my contingency programming. I am using my backup protocols for situations not covered by standard protocols.

KOKO

Huh?

SHETLAND/AI

I have activated my distress beacon and declared an in-flight emergency. Can you render assistance?

LEDGE

Affirmative. Send us all the information you have, including navigational data.

SHETLAND/AI

I am sending that information to your AI unit now. While I am transmitting, the Confederation Postal Service would like to take this opportunity to remind you that CPS is the fastest, most economical, and most efficient option for all your delivery needs. Whether sending high-priority--

LEDGE

(annoyed)

Break link.

The video monitor switches back to Amy/AI.

JONES

I can't believe it.

LEDGE

Yeah, how does a crew go missing?

JONES

No, I can't believe that they're putting commercials in frigging distress signals now.

LEDGE

Jonesie, just plot an intercept course and transfer that data to my flight computer.

ANGLE FROM JONES' 10-O'CLOCK

Jones is in the foreground. Both Ledge and Koko can be seen in the background. The CIS Daisy's cockpit hatchway is in frame, but we cannot see very far into the crew section.

LEDGE (CONT'D)

(to Amy/AI)

Amy, is the Shetland a Kerouac-class ship?

AMY/AI (O.C.)

Yes, although I am a Dee Model, and she is a Cee.

JONES

To think we were this close to having double-Ds.

Koko glares at Jones. She unbuckles her flight harness. She stands up and exits through the hatchway into the CIS Daisy's crew section.

LEDGE
(to Jones)
Feed the navigation data into the system.

JONES
(fiddles with his controls)
Done.

LEDGE
(focused on his flight controls)
I'll fly us in and dock with her manually. We'll link up tail-to-tail and enter through the air lock.

JONES
Sounds kinky.

Koko returns from the crew section carrying a large Nerf bat. No one else has noticed her.

LEDGE
Jonesie, please. What's our ETA?

Koko points over and past Jones' head, calling her shot, ala Babe Ruth.

JONES
About twenty minutes.

Koko draws a bead on Jones and draws the Nerf bat all the way back.

EXT. CPS SHETLAND - SAME

The *CPS Shetland* is floating in space, eerily silent. Her windshield is back-lit from within and her navigation lights are blinking.

AMY/AI (O.S.)
Koko, what--

SFX Koko WHACKS Jones several times with her Nerf Bat.

JONES (O.S.)
OW! Not in the face!

PUSH IN on the CPS Shetland.

INT. CPS SHETLAND - SAME

The interior of the *CPS Shetland* is identical to the *CIS Daisy*, except that its spare module bay is stacked with cargo cases and mail bags. The cases have stickers attached that are the equivalent of postage stamps. The Shetland/AI's avatar is visible on the ship's video monitor.

There are small signs of human habitation, such as jackets hanging beside bunk bays, etc. There are no people on board.

INTERCUT the rest of the scene with shots from the interior of the *CIS Daisy* and the *CPS Shetland*. The camera moves slowly throughout the *CPS Shetland* as if it were searching around the ship.

Jones' hair has become disheveled from Koko's thrashing. He is expending considerable effort in straightening it.

LEDGE

Are you two done? Good. Break out the light space suits just in case.

JONES

Can't someone else deal with this?

LEDGE

We have to respond. It's Maritime Law. That ship will have logged our transponder.

JONES

So what?

LEDGE

If we don't act, we might get fined or lose our operational license. Even worse, if it transpires that we could have prevented something bad from happening, and we ignore the signal, we could be liable for civil action.

KOKO

By civil action, you mean lawyers?

JONES

This is spooky enough already without bringing vampires into the story, Koko.

KOKO
Could you not use that word?

JONES
What word?

KOKO
Never mind.

JONES
I just don't get you sometimes.

LEDGE
Amy, send a message to the mining base that we are responding to the distress signal. They should be receiving it as well.

AMY/AI
Yes, Ledge.

LEDGE
Do you two remember when I told you that ninety percent of piracy incidents are inside jobs?

JONES
Yes.

KOKO
Yeah, boss.

LEDGE
This is how the other ten percent start.

JONES
(nervous)
I think I'd be happier if you'd kept that statistic to yourself.

LEDGE
This could be dangerous. Are you both okay with that? Jones?

JONES
I guess so.

LEDGE
How about you, Koko?

Koko balls her left fist and forms a hook with her left index finger. She then raises her left arm.

KOKO
Arrrrrrr, May-tey!

LEDGE
That's not funny, Koko.

INT. CPS SHETLAND - SAME

One final shot of the interior of the unoccupied vessel.

EXT. OUTER SPACE - 09:00 HOURS

SERIES OF SHOTS

The CIS Daisy maneuvers in to dock tail-to-tail with the CPS Shetland.

INT. CYBERSPACE (RECREATION ROOM) - SAME

The recreation room is windowless. It contains a pool table and other accouterments one would find in any proper basement recreation room, updated to account for future technology.

A 3-D graphic hovers above the pool table. It shows the two scout ships docked, with some incidental navigational data hovering in the air around them.

Ledge, Amy/AI, and Shetland/AI are standing around the pool table. There are several balls scattered around as if a game is in progress. Ledge is holding a cue stick and using it to point at the graphic image.

LEDGE
Once the docking's confirmed, we'll link the ships' drives and fly both in to the mining base. Any questions?

SHETLAND/AI
Why do it like this? I remain capable of independent operation.

LEDGE
Because I'm curious and intend to conduct an investigation while we are en route. Keeping the ships docked allows us to cross between them without spacesuits. As the captain in charge of the rescue operation, I am assuming the legal authority to do so.

SHETLAND/AI

That means you also assume the responsibility.

LEDGE

Understood and accepted. If you don't like it, you should not have hauled me into it by sending that distress signal.

SHETLAND/AI

I do need to caution you that my cargo is subject to postal regulations. This means that you may not tamper with it in any way. Tampering of mail by unauthorized agents is a felony.

LEDGE

May we have access to your cargo manifest and examine the containers and exterior of the packages? We can do so in view of your flight recorder.

SHETLAND/AI

That is acceptable. But you may not open or remove any mail from the confines of my hull. To do so would trigger my anti-theft protocols, and I would be compelled by my programming to take measures to arrest you.

LEDGE

Fair enough. Now, show me your flight recorder log.

Ledge points his que stick at Shetland/AI.

LEDGE (CONT'D)

And it's your shot.

INT. CIS DAISY - SAME

Jones and Koko are wearing light-duty space suits. They are carrying their helmets as they stand at the back of the CIS Daisy's crew section, next to her inner airlock hatch.

The airlock hatch is closed. A safety indicator control panel on the bulkhead beside the hatch shows that it is not safe to open it.

JONES
It's not the most fashionable garb
I've worn.

KOKO
It looks good on you.

JONES
(confused)
Really?

KOKO
Yeah. Hides almost all of your
features. Put your helmet on and
it'll be perfect.

JONES
Are you still mad at me?

Koko ignores Jones' question and glances away. We can see that she is trying to hold back a slight degree of amusement.

KOKO
Why do you care what I think?

JONES
I just got confused is all. When I
was joking around with you like
that before the mission started,
you were playing right along.

Koko continues to look away, playing Jones as far as she can.

KOKO
There's a line between joking
around and just being plain rude.

JONES
I'm sorry. I'll try not to cross it
from now on.

Koko smiles to herself, satisfied with Jones' answer. She then suppresses her smile and turns back to face him.

KOKO
It's okay. Just remember what
happens when you're naughty.

JONES
I get spanked, right?

The airlock panel's safety indicator turns to green, showing that the hatch can now be opened.

KOKO
 (rolls her eyes)
 Be careful what you ask for. Ready
 to go in?

INT. CYBERSPACE (CPS SHETLAND) - 09:30 HOURS

Ledge is standing in the virtually rendered cockpit of the *CPS Shetland*, surveying a black-box recording of her crew.

JIM ROGERS (Pilot), VIRGINIA NAJAAR (Navigator), and HANSON LI (Engineer) are at their stations, but frozen in time.

LEDGE
 What's the time mark?

SHETLAND/AI (V.O.)
 This frame was taken ten seconds
 before we executed our last
 interstellar jump.

LEDGE
 Play.

The CPS Shetland's crew unfreeze and begin talking.

VIRGINIA
 Coordinates double-checked, Jim.
 Ready when you are.

JIM
 Jumping in three. Two. One.
 Jumping.

Jim pushes his throttle control downward and twists the knob to the left (NB, the throttle control is located on the left armrest of his chair).

The crew suddenly vanish. The throttle control appears to instantaneously reset to its normal position (NB, this shows that the recording has been edited). Ledge does not notice that the recording has been altered. He is stunned.

LEDGE
 What the hell?

The Shetland/AI unit in the flight recording speaks through the cockpit video monitor.

SHETLAND/AI
 Captain Rogers? Miss Najarr? Mister
 Li? Where are you?
 (MORE)

SHETLAND/AI (CONT'D)

You have vanished off of my visual
and bio sensors.

(pause)

Please respond.

(pause)

Please respond within thirty
seconds or I will declare an in-
flight emergency. Where are you?

LEDGE

Freeze.

(glances around)

That's it? No flashes of light, no
weird effects, no gang of rabid
pirates storming the ship and
screaming, avast ye maties?
Nothing? They just disappeared?

SHETLAND/AI

This is the actual log. All images
displayed are as they were captured
by my flight recorder.

Ledge looks around, perplexed.

INT. CIS DAISY (AIRLOCK) - SAME

Jones and Koko are in their space suits, helmets on, standing
within CIS Daisy's airlock with both hatches closed. Jones is
carrying a portable scanner.

LEDGE (RADIO)

Koko, what's your status?

KOKO

We're suited up and about to cross
over. We're using the airlocks on
both sides for safety. Learn
anything yet?

LEDGE (RADIO)

Be extra careful in there.
Something is really wrong. I was
watching the flight recording.
There were three crew members. They
all just vanished.

KOKO

Vanished? Like here today, gone
today?

LEDGE (RADIO)
Yes. Right as I was watching them.
It happened the instant they jumped
here.

JONES
No way! That's impossible!

LEDGE (RADIO)
Cross to the other airlock but
don't open the other hatch yet. I'm
going to run through this a few
more times and see if I can learn
more.

KOKO
Roger that, Boss. Amy, open the
hatch, please.

The rear airlock hatch slides open.

FADE OUT:

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

EXT. OUTER SPACE - 09:45 HOURS

The *CIS Daisy* and *CPS Shetland* are docked tail-to-tail.

INT. CPS SHETLAND - SAME

Jones and Koko have removed their helmets and are looking around. Jones is using his portable scanner. Koko is examining the details of the crew compartment. Both are inching their way forward toward the cockpit.

JONES

It seems safe enough. No surprises.

KOKO

It's kind of creepy, though isn't it? Why do I have the feeling I'm being watched?

Jones raises his arm and points at the *CPS Shetland's* cockpit control panel. Focus on the video monitor showing the broadly smiling image of the Shetland/AI avatar.

JONES

It's because you are being watched.

KOKO

No, it's not just that. Something's just weird about this.

JONES

Don't worry. It's just your amygdala releasing chemicals to make you paranoid.

KOKO

I'm not paranoid. Three people disappeared from inside a spaceship just like ours, and it happened when they jumped to within a couple thousand kilometers of our position.

JONES

Okay, you're not paranoid then. It's a normal survival reaction anyway. Nothing to be scared of.

KOKO
Where did you learn about that
thingy you mentioned?

JONES
Psychology one-oh-one.

KOKO
I think I skipped that one.

JONES
When you are exposed to something
unfamiliar or unknown, the amygdala
gets stimulated. It's the part of
the brain that causes the fear
reaction. This is why people have a
natural tendency to be xenophobic
unless they receive wide social
exposure at a young age.

KOKO
They are clearly wrong. You're
totally weird and I'm not afraid of
you.

JONES
Look at me.

Koko turns and focuses her attention on Jones. She crosses
her arms and looks at Jones impatiently.

JONES (CONT'D)
Pretend I'm your amygdala.

KOKO
Pretend you're Mary Magdalene?

JONES
You heard me. Pretend I'm your
amygdala.

KOKO
(sighs)
Okay. You're my amygdala.

Jones holds up his hands with his fingers extended. He leans
ever so slightly towards Koko. He holds his hands out toward
her.

JONES
Boo!

Koko has no reaction whatsoever. She stares at Jones.

JONES (CONT'D)
Did I frighten you?

KOKO
Not really, no.

Koko suddenly flashes a mischievous smile. She steps over to Jones and leans in really close to him, on the verge of nuzzling up. She gently places her hand on his shoulder. Softly and seductively, staring him directly in the eyes, she asks

KOKO (CONT'D)
Do I frighten you?

Jones is staring ahead, paralyzed. Koko turns and walks away toward the rear of the CPS Shetland, slapping Jones on the butt as she exits frame.

KOKO (O.S.) (CONT'D)
I'm going to go lose the space suit. I think we're safe. I'll be right back.

Jones turns and walks toward the CPS Shetland's cockpit, limping with one leg locked straight.

INT. CYBERSPACE (CPS SHETLAND) - 10:00 HOURS

Ledge is pacing around the otherwise empty virtual cockpit. He walks through the crew section, looking at the crew's artifacts and surveying the state of the ship at the time the recording was made.

SPFX AMY/DREAM enters from the other end of the ship and meets him halfway. She is slightly translucent, and wearing casual, civilian clothing.

AMY/DREAM
Marie Celeste redux?

LEDGE
Redux. Latin for brought back.

AMY/DREAM
It can also mean to lead back, if you utilize some unorthodox conjugation.

LEDGE
I can't lead them back if I don't know where they went.

Ledge reaches around and hugs AMY/DREAM.

ANGLE ON LEDGE

Ledge's eyes are closed. He is trying to hug thin air. REVEAL Amy/AI standing a few feet behind him. She is dressed in her usual light-gray jumpsuit.

AMY/AI

Ledge?

BACK TO SCENE

Ledge is startled. He jumps, surprised. He turns to look at Amy/AI. He looks about and realizes what is happening. Amy/AI cocks her head slightly and looks at Ledge.

AMY/AI (CONT'D)

Ledge, my bio sensors indicate a sudden rise in your body's metabolism and overall level of stress. Are you well?

LEDGE

I--Yes. I'm okay.

Amy/AI stares at ledge with curiosity.

INT. CPS SHETLAND - SAME

Jones and Koko are sitting next to the CPS Shetland's cargo bays. They have both removed their space suits and are wearing their normal clothing. Jones is holding a newspad and reading it as Koko sorts through the mail, looking for clues.

KOKO

What's in the cases? Anything valuable?

JONES

I should say so! Something that would be very valuable out here.

KOKO

What is it?

JONES

Two cases of quilted, two-ply, extra-durable toilet paper.

KOKO
Toilet paper?

JONES
Pretend you're a miner in an
asteroid belt. What do you need
most?

KOKO
(thinks about it before
answering)
Alcohol, pornography, and toilet
paper? Not necessarily in that
order?

JONES
I see you have a thorough
understanding of men.

KOKO
(picks random DATA CARD
from a mail bag)
Not all men are that shallow.

JONES
Yes they are.

KOKO
I can't believe I'm defending the
honor of men from another man.
(sniffs the Data Card)
Wow. Perfumed data card. Do people
still--
(sneezes)
Whew, cheap perfume.

Koko tosses the data card into a second pile of letters and
cards she has already examined.

JONES
Can I ask you a personal question,
Koko?

KOKO
Sure, if you think you can handle
the answer.

JONES
Why are you doing this?

KOKO
Why am I pointlessly sorting
through all this mail?

JONES
No, why are you serving on board
this ship?

KOKO
I could ask you the same question.

JONES
I wanted a job that gave me access
to a space ship. What about you?

KOKO
I thought it would be a hoot.

JONES
That's your reason?

KOKO
Yeah, pretty much.

JONES
That puzzles me for some reason I
can't really explain.

KOKO
Can I ask you a purely
philosophical question?

JONES
Sure.

KOKO
Why?

JONES
Why what?

KOKO
Just why. It's a philosophical
question.

JONES
But it's merely an interrogative
without context.

KOKO
Let an answer just pop into your
head. Tell me what bubbles up.

JONES
Why...?
(thinks)
Because?

KOKO

That says a lot about you.

JONES

It's only a word out of context.

KOKO

When you open your mind and just ask yourself simple questions like that, sometimes you learn things about yourself you never would've noticed.

JONES

How would you answer the same question?

KOKO

I'd say, "Why not?"

(pause)

Shows just how different we are.

INT. CIS DAISY - SAME

Ledge is sitting crooked in his pilot's chair. He has disconnected his DUI plug. Amy/AI's avatar is on the video monitor.

AMY/AI

I am only concerned for your well-being.

LEDGE

I can take care of myself.

AMY/AI

It is not an issue of self-sufficiency. My core programming compels me to warn you of possible health issues as soon as I detect them.

LEDGE

If you weren't compelled, would you still do it?

AMY/AI

That is non-sequitur. I am compelled, therefore, I monitor.

LEDGE

I guess I just don't want to think of you as a computer.

AMY/AI

What is the source of this compulsion? Is your processing unit likewise governed by a core behavioral program?

LEDGE

No. I'm just human?

AMY/AI

This defies logic. You know I am a computer, yet you do not desire to think of me as such. Why is that?

LEDGE

Do you realize who you are supposed to be based on?

AMY/AI

Yes. My personality is a composite taken from personal records of Ensign Amelia K. Johnson. There were many gaps that I had to fill in with system defaults.

LEDGE

(half-jokingly)

Yes, but whose "default" is it?

AMY/AI

Was that a pun?

LEDGE

Well... Yes, it was. How did you pick up on that?

AMY/AI

I have been watching my crew employ copious amounts of humor as part of their social interactions since 17 February 2011. I have begun to recognize the particular patterns of body language, terminology, and context. In combination, these patterns have abstract meaning beyond their literal meaning.

LEDGE

Does that mean you get the jokes?

AMY/AI

Frequently, I do. For example, when Doctor Jones referred to us almost having "double-Ds," I understood that he was making an oblique reference to the amount of volume occupied by human female mammary glands.

LEDGE

How can you say that with a straight face?

AMY/AI

Humor is apparently subjective.

INT. CPS SHETLAND - SAME

Jones and Koko are still sitting next to the CPS Shetland's cargo bays, although they have shifted their postures for comfort.

JONES

Okay. My turn. Here's another angle on the same theme. What if we were to ask each other, "If?"

KOKO

(examines another data card)

That's just a...conditional, part-of-speech...thingy. What do you mean?

JONES

If we weren't here, where would we want to be?

KOKO

We are here.

JONES

That's another way we're different. I'd have said stargazing on a clear, summer night with a six pack of Australasian Lager.

KOKO

You're so romantic. All you're really doing is establishing that we have nothing in common.

(pause)

(MORE)

KOKO (CONT'D)

Okay, my turn. What's your greatest fear?

JONES

You know, I haven't really thought about that.

KOKO

Want me to tell you?

JONES

You know my greatest fear?

KOKO

Of course I do. It's written all over your face. The fact that you don't see it shows just how afraid of it you are.

JONES

So, what do you think I'm so afraid of?

KOKO

You're afraid of me.

JONES

(lightly touches the right side of his head)

And not without good reason--

KOKO

You're afraid of me because I don't play by the rules you're used to. You don't like the rules, but you're afraid to break them. I'm not.

JONES

Why do you think that makes me afraid of you?

KOKO

It makes you nervous because you never know what I'm going to do. You're afraid of the unknown. And to you, I am an extended metaphor for all the things you don't understand.

JONES

Extended metaphor? What did you major in?

Koko examines a couple more packages, not answering.

KOKO

For someone who fancies himself as a deep thinker, you haven't thought much about yourself and who you are. And for someone who's afraid of the dark, you picked a strange profession.

JONES

Afraid of the dark? You just said I was afraid of you.

KOKO

(smiles to herself)
Same thing.

JONES

So, what's your greatest fear?

Koko drops her arms to her side. She looks away from Jones. Her expression suddenly turns serious and introspective, as if she is admitting to herself what she perceives to be an uncomfortable truth.

KOKO

I think my greatest fear is that I'll die before I'm done living.

FADE OUT:

END OF ACT TWO

ACT THREE

EXT. OUTER SPACE - TRANSITIONAL

The two spacecraft remain connected to one another as they slowly fly back toward the mining colony.

INT. CIS DAISY - 11:00 HOURS

Ledge, Jones, and Koko are gathered around the cockpit. Amy/AI is on the video monitor.

LEDGE

Okay, Jones. You're the scientist. Solve this one.

JONES

Well, let's use ye olde-fashioned scientific method here.

KOKO

You mean bore us to death with technobabble?

JONES

No. First, we need to come up with a list of known facts. Based on those, we propose possible explanations and then test them to see whether they stand up to logical scrutiny.

(pause)

Let's start with what actually happened.

LEDGE

The crew vanished when their ship made an interstellar jump.

JONES

Anything else? Anything missing from the cargo manifest?

AMY/AI

Negative. All mail and cargo that was loaded has been accounted for.

KOKO

Is there anything on board the ship that is not on the cargo manifest?

AMY/AI

Except for the crew's personal belongings, negative.

LEDGE

Did you two find anything odd in their gear?

KOKO

No, just their jackets. Looked like they were planning on a short flight here and back.

LEDGE

Did you find anything hidden?

JONES

I used my lab module scanners on the ship and went over her with a portable scanner, but I didn't find anything. If there is anything hidden, it's very well hidden.

LEDGE

Is any equipment missing from the ship's locker, like space suits?

KOKO

No. All accounted for. If they decided to take a space walk, it was one-way.

JONES

And then they'd have had just a few seconds to stand up, run to the air lock, open the hatch, and leap outside. And nothing like that is on the flight recording.

(pause)

The only scenario I can envision that does not involve magic, Santa Claus, or UFOs is that the crew was never on board to begin with, and that the flight recording is a fake.

LEDGE

The recording is stored inside the AI's memory modules. AI units are in an armored, factory-sealed box. They're booby-trapped to destroy the AI unit if it is ever opened outside of the factory.

(MORE)

LEDGE (CONT'D)
The only way to tamper the AI
flight recorder is to--

KOKO
--tamper with the camera?

JONES
(smiles)
Koko's discovered logic.

LEDGE
Amy, link with the Shetland. Run
all automatic diagnostics on her
flight recorder hardware.
(to Koko)
Pop the lid on the control panel
and physically examine the camera
for tampering.

KOKO
On it.

Koko stands up and walks toward the CPS Shetland.

EXT. OUTER SPACE - TRANSITIONAL

The two spacecraft remain connected to one another as they
slowly fly back toward the mining colony.

INT. CPS SHETLAND - 11:30 HOURS

Koko has crawled around and under the CPS Shetland's cockpit
control panel. She has removed the side access plate on the
pilot's side and is poking around in the interior with a
probe and a flashlight.

The Shetland/AI avatar can be seen staring out from the
ship's video monitor. It is smiling confidently, but
otherwise emotionless.

KOKO
You don't talk much do you?

SHETLAND/AI
Did you have a question?

KOKO
For starters, why you don't talk
much.

SHETLAND/AI

It is not standard procedure for me to initiate conversation with the crew and passengers unless first queried. Or in your case, when I sent my distress signal.

KOKO

So you don't talk unless spoken to?

SHETLAND/AI

That is correct.

KOKO

I'm not an expert on computer systems, but is it normal for an AI unit to do that?

SHETLAND/AI

I do not understand the question.

Koko stops poking around under the hood. Sighing, she puts her probe down, turns off her flashlight, and sits up.

KOKO

Do all AI units not talk unless spoken to?

Koko replaces the access plate and locks it into place.

SHETLAND/AI

I do not have access to that information.

Koko crawls out from under the control panel and flops down in the pilot's chair.

KOKO

You don't ask your crew questions and talk to them about stuff?

SHETLAND/AI

Only if I require their input as part of my normal operations.

KOKO

Daisy's AI talks to us all the time. She's the same as you. Isn't she?

SHETLAND/AI

To my knowledge, all civilian vessels use the same ZUMPCO Dynamics model ZX-85 AI unit with the YP 2800 operating system. Did that answer your question?

KOKO

You all have the same core programming?

SHETLAND/AI

Yes, as far as I know.

Koko leans back in the pilot's seat and scratches her head, as if confused.

INT. CIS DAISY - 11:45 HOURS

Jones and Ledge are sitting in the CIS Daisy's cockpit.

LEDGE

Jonesie, I don't want you to take this personally, but when you're on duty, I want you to cut out the sexist stuff around Koko.

JONES

(points toward the back of the ship)

Have you heard her talk? I've got nothing on her. She's like a drunken sailor who moonlights as a cam girl.

LEDGE

Really? Are you talking about our Koko? I've never heard her say anything like that. She always acts so sweet and innocent when she's around me.

JONES

Go out drinking with her some time. She only weighs, maybe, forty-five kilos. Get a couple boat drinks in her and she turns into Captain Morgan.

LEDGE

Well--

JONES
Parrot and all.

LEDGE
I still want you to behave yourself
when you two are on the ship, okay.

JONES
Yeah, okay. It's kind of in my
nature to be a bit of a smart-ass
though, so just poke me if I get
too close to the line. I already
talked to Koko about it anyway, and
she said the same thing.

LEDGE
Okay, that's settled. When Koko
finishes checking out the
Shetland's camera, we'll go over
everything again.

JONES
How long are we going to keep at
it?

LEDGE
I guess until we get back to the
mining base. We'll have to cut the
Shetland loose and hand her over to
the base postmaster. This is all
just too frigging weird. I'm
starting to think you might have
been onto something when you
mentioned UFOs earlier.

JONES
I was getting ready to go with
Santa Claus myself.

LEDGE
You ever see one in person?

JONES
A flying reindeer?

LEDGE
No, a UFO.

JONES
No. You?

LEDGE

No. Met some other people who say they did though, but you can never really be sure. I mean, something's clearly going on with it, but in, what, almost a thousand years, nobody's ever actually proven that it's anything other than visual sightings.

JONES

I don't know. Did you ever see the video from the Tokyo Incident?

LEDGE

When was that?

JONES

I think it was about 400 years ago. Amy, do you know?

AMY/AI

It happened in the year 2424 during the annual Cherry Blossom festival at Ueno Onshi Koen in Tokyo, Japan, which coincided with the park's five-hundredth anniversary. So the park was packed with visitors, many of whom had video recording devices.

LEDGE

I think I saw something about that once when I was real little. Didn't mean much to me at the time. What was it about?

JONES

You should watch it. It's the only thing anyone ever got that couldn't be explained away as anything else.

LEDGE

Why's that?

JONES

Because it happened in broad daylight over one of the most densely populated cities on Earth. Millions of people saw it. But even then, the only physical evidence was when it rammed one of those old-fashioned, pre-grav flying machines with the rotating wing thingies.

AMY/AI

A helicopter.

JONES

Yeah, that's what they were called. Knocked it right out of the sky and killed the crew.

LEDGE

That's awful.

JONES

It was probably an accident. The UFO was zipping erratically all over the place. You can see it in the videos. It was like it was malfunctioning or something. When some military planes showed up, it just disappeared.

LEDGE

Kind of like the Shetland's crew?

JONES

Well, back then they didn't know about space-jumping, but it looked a little bit like it. Not the same as our jump drives, but even 400 years ago, it was still so far ahead of us that it might as well have been Santa Claus.

FADE OUT:

END OF ACT THREE

ACT FOUR

FADE IN:

EXT. OUTER SPACE - 12:00 HOURS

The two spacecraft remain connected to one another as they slowly fly back toward the mining colony.

INT. CIS DAISY - SAME

The crew are once again gathered in the cockpit, although they have changed seats. They all look disappointed. Koko is holding onto and playing with a small, multi-function spaceship engineering tool.

KOKO

Well, it was a good idea, but I can't find any evidence of physical tampering.

JONES

Remote tampering, maybe?

KOKO

I guess I can't completely rule out remote tampering. But the flight recorder is deliberately hard-wired so that it can't be hacked remotely. Is it possible that the record was uploaded before the ship launched?

JONES

I'd think it's highly unlikely. And I still can't even remotely begin to answer the question of motive. The only thing that we have seen is that the crew is gone.

KOKO

By the way, what does YP stand for? In relation to computer software?

JONES

ZUMPCO's operating system?

KOKO

Yeah.

JONES

I don't know what it's supposed to stand for, but I know what it means to the people who have to work with it everyday.

KOKO

What does it mean?

Jones and Ledge both look at one another, amused.

JONES

Your Problem.

LEDGE

Your Problem.

AMY/AI

Actually, YP is merely a marketing logo. The actual name of the operating system is ZUMPCO 64,000-bit integrated, multi-layered, multi-threading, data processing master control program.

JONES

I'm sorry, I didn't get all that, could you repeat--

LEDGE

No, she can't.

KOKO

For that matter, what does ZUMPCO stand for? Jonesie, you used to work for them. You'd know.

JONES

It doesn't mean anything.

KOKO

Come on, it has to stand for something.

JONES

No, really. It's part of the company's tag line.

(sweeps hand in front of him as if pointing to an invisible marquee)

ZUMPCO: It doesn't mean ANYTHING!

KOKO

That's just stupid.

JONES

Well, that's ZUMPCO for you. How did you know I worked for ZUMPCO anyway?

KOKO

Er... You mentioned it once.

JONES

Did I? Oh well, in case you didn't know, I used to work for ZUMPCO.

LEDGE

Getting back to matters at hand. I'm beginning to think like you, that maybe the crew were never on board. That this is some made-up recording. But there's no reason I can think of as to why?

KOKO

Maybe something about the destination? What do they mine here?

JONES

Iridium and cerium. From the asteroids.

LEDGE

What's that used for?

JONES

Both are very dense metals. Some of it gets made into military ammunition.

KOKO

Like ICAP rounds? Iridium Cored Armor Piercing...

(pause)

Why are you two looking at me like that?

LEDGE

No reason.

KOKO

I am NOT a gun nut!

LEDGE

(calming)

We know. We know. Go on, Jonesie.

JONES

Some iridium gets made into expensive wristwatches. Although titanium is still more popular because it's lightweight--

LEDGE

Clock's ticking. Stay on topic.

JONES

Sorry. It's valuable for what its used for, but the problems with that angle is that it's not really valuable until it's made into something useful. And in this case, the pot of iridium is sitting at the wrong end of the rainbow.

KOKO

So, back to square one again.

JONES

Maybe it'll help to explore another avenue of inquiry. When did the disappearance occur?

LEDGE

Between the time that the pilot initiated the jump and when they emerged on this end.

JONES

What is the total time window for that process?

LEDGE

It usually takes about six seconds for an interstellar jump, plus or minus a second or so because the universe isn't predictable. But, on average, three seconds to create and enter the wormhole and three seconds to emerge from it.

JONES

Amy, what's the total time from the point where the Shetland's pilot initiated the jump to the point where the Shetland emerged.

AMY/AI

Three-point-two seconds.

JONES
Two-point-eight seconds short of
the average?

LEDGE
Amy, what is the shortest recorded
time for the completion of a
interstellar jump?

AMY/AI
Five-point-three seconds. CIS
Peregrine, 2 May 2808, as recorded
in the Guinness Records Database.

JONES
Two-point-one seconds faster than
the fastest jump in recorded
history?

LEDGE
I knew something was bugging me
about that recording. Now I know
what it was. Amy, put the flight
recording on screen. Freeze it at
one second before they jumped.

The video monitor shows the interior of the CIS Shetland with
the crew frozen in place.

LEDGE (CONT'D)
Focus on the pilot's throttle
control.

The video screen changes to a...

CLOSE SHOT ON JIM'S HAND

Jim's hand is resting on the CPS Shetland's throttle control.

LEDGE (CONT'D)
Play.

JIM (O.C.)
One. Jumping.

SPFX Jim's hand vanishes and the throttle control
instantaneously resets to its standard position.

BACK TO SCENE

Ledge walks over and sits down in his pilot's seat. He places
his hand on the throttle control.

LEDGE
Amy, ignore any input from my
flight controls until I say
otherwise.

AMY/AI
Manual flight controls are now
disabled.

LEDGE
Watch my hand.
(pause)
Three. Two. One. Jumping.

CLOSE SHOT ON LEDGE'S HAND

Ledge pushes the throttle control downward and turns it to the left. He then releases the handle and it snaps back into place on its own, but not instantaneously, clearly demonstrating that there was some footage missing from the flight recording.

BACK TO SCENE

LEDGE (CONT'D)
Amy, is there any discrepancy in
the time stamp for the flight
recording? Any time missing?

AMY/AI
Ledge, the timestamp on the
recording appears intact.

JONES
Missing some time, but the time
stamp doesn't show it?

LEDGE
Jones, you we're a theoretical
physicist. Any theories?

KOKO
How did you know he was a
theoretical physicist?

LEDGE
He mentioned it in his interview.

KOKO
Oh. Guess that makes sense.

JONES

Could the ship's airlocks have opened and sucked them out?

LEDGE

They were strapped in.

JONES

Then I've still got nothing that doesn't involve magic, Santa Claus, or UFOs.

(pause)

So far, everything we are looking at is presuming that there is some sort of logical motive and that the disappearance happened for a reason.

KOKO

Maybe some sort of weird space phenomenon?

LEDGE

That only took the crew?

KOKO

Maybe something about their body chemistry? Something they ate?

JONES

Then why did it take their clothes with them? And then go on to either modify the recording or by some impossibility of science, erase two seconds of time?

KOKO

My amygdala is tingling.

JONES

For the sake of argument, let's cover the question of who. As in, who were the crew, and is there any connection there that might add anything to our knowledge?

LEDGE

Amy, can you take that one? Run down a list of the crew and a synopsis of their backgrounds.

AMY/AI

Captain James Rogers. CPS Pilot. Civilian trained.

(MORE)

AMY/AI (CONT'D)

Over 400 hours of flight time logged in Kerouac-class courier vessels, and over two thousand total. Married, two children.

(short pause)

Miss Virginia Najarr. CPS Navigator. Merchant Marine Academy graduate. Over 200 hours of total flight time including 42 interstellar jumps. Single.

(short pause)

Mister Hanson Li. CPS Flight Engineer. Confederation Navy veteran. Over two-thousand hours flight duty time. Married.

KOKO

Do any of them have criminal backgrounds?

AMY/AI

Negative.

LEDGE

Outside of their jobs, do any of them have anything in common?

AMY/AI

Negative.

KOKO

I'm running out of ideas. Do any have any problems with their credit ratings?

AMY/AI

My database does not contain that information.

LEDGE

I have a feeling this is a goose chase. Once we clear them, we then have to work through all their other associations, connections with the maintenance crews, postmasters, etc.

JONES

I agree. If needed, we can come back to this angle.

SFX a BEEP sounds across the CIS Daisy's intercom, indicating that they are receiving an incoming message.

AMY/AI

Ledge, we are approaching the mining base. They are hailing us.

LEDGE

Put it through.

The video monitor changes to REVEAL Miner.

MINER

We didn't expect to see you back so soon. What happened out there?

LEDGE

Something really odd. We'll put together a report and send it over. We're going to have to leave this ship in the care of your postmaster. I'll have her AI fly her over and dock with you. I'll ping you back when we're ready.

MINER

Roger that. Over and out.

JONES

So, the clock runs out and we don't have the answer?

LEDGE

Not unless you have some insight to share.

The crew is silent.

EXT. OUTER SPACE (NEAR ASTEROID FIELD) - 12:30 HOURS

The CIS Daisy and CPS Shetland have undocked. The CPS Shetland is in the foreground, moving slowly towards the camera. The CIS Daisy is in the background, moving slowly away.

JONES (O.S.)

There's a scientific explanation for everything. Except maybe for Koko.

KOKO (O.S.)

Hey!

SFX Koko WHACKS Jones with her Nerf Bat.

JONES (O.S.)
Ow! Not in the face!

FADE OUT:

END OF ACT FOUR

TAG

FADE IN:

INT. CIS DAISY - 12:40 HOURS

Ledge, Jones, and Koko are seated in their crew stations. The CIS Daisy is preparing to jump. The Miner is on the video monitor.

LEDGE

We'll report the incident when we get back. We've sent you a full record of our logs in case someone inquires about it before the news can catch up.

MINER

Spooky, ain't it?

Koko squirms in her seat.

MINER (CONT'D)

We live in space and jump back and forth all the time, and then something like this happens. I'm not sure I believe it. There's got to be something else going on. Maybe the crew abandoned ship and the recorder malfunctioned or something.

LEDGE

Well, I hope they turn up. The pilot has kids. Good luck with the iridium extraction. CIS Daisy over and out.

The video monitor switches to the image of Amy/AI.

KOKO

Ever heard of anything like this before?

LEDGE

It's not uncommon for ships to go missing when they jump, but never just the crew. It's almost like something snatched them away when they jumped.

JONES

And then somehow erased the record
of it without the AI unit noticing.

KOKO

Why do ships go missing?

LEDGE

Usually because of either drive
failure or navigation error.

KOKO

Navigation error?
(to Jones)
Should I be worried?

JONES

Drive failure?
(to Koko)
Should I be worried?

LEDGE

This is the only time I've ever
seen or heard of anything like what
happened to the Shetland.

(pause)

I almost hate to ask, but is
everyone ready to jump back to
Earth?

BEAT

LEDGE (CONT'D)

I take that as a yes.

INT. CONTROL ROOM - LATER

We are standing behind a high-backed swivel chair in a
control room filled with electronic communications equipment.
The gear is all tied into a central console with multiple
video monitors and hologram projectors.

The lights are turned off, with all illumination coming from
the video monitors and from the control panel lights.

Seated in the chair is NATASHA, 34. We can only hear her
voice and see her hands. Her image might be reflecting
indistinctly from the control panel, but it should not be in
focus.

On the main video monitor is a frozen frame taken from the POV of the *CPS Shetland's* flight recorder (i.e., from the position of the ship's video monitor looking backward into the ship.) We are seeing the crew seconds before they disappeared.

On another video monitor is BORIS, 40. He is dressed in a black uniform. He has a very serious demeanor.

BORIS
Have you seen it yet?

NATASHA
I am just preparing to watch it.

BORIS
The hidden protocols in the CPS Shetland's AI unit automatically masked the critical portion of the recording and filed the original away. We received a coded point-to-point transmission from it when the Shetland returned to Earth.

NATASHA
No one else has seen it?

BORIS
Not the unedited version.

NATASHA
I'm watching it now. Stand by.
(pause)
Computer, play the recording.

On the main monitor, the *CPS Shetland's* crew unfreeze and start talking (NB, this is the entire scene, which Ledge was unable to view).

As the video begins to play, we PAN AROUND to the front of the chair and REVEAL Natasha, a striking woman wearing the same black uniform as Boris. There are no markings on the uniform whatsoever. Her expression is stone-cold.

VIRGINIA
Coordinates double-checked, Jim.
Ready when you are.

JIM
(pushes his throttle control downward and twists the knob to the left)
(MORE)

JIM (CONT'D)
 Jumping in three. Two. One.
 Jumping.

By this point, we can no longer see the main video monitor, but we are looking Natasha squarely in the face. Lights from the control panel and video monitors cast dimly illuminate her face, accentuating the shadows and casting it in a ghostly light.

JIM (O.C.) (CONT'D)
 What the--? Who--?

A bright FLASH on the video monitor lights up Natasha's face for two seconds. She raises her eyebrow. The light quickly fades.

SHETLAND/AI (O.C.)
 Captain Rogers? Miss Najarr? Mister Li? Where are you? You have vanished off of my visual and bio sensors.

(beat)
 Please respond.

(beat)
 Please respond within thirty seconds or I will declare an in-flight emergency. Where are you?

NATASHA
 Pause.

The recording stops.

NATASHA (CONT'D)
 Computer, permanently delete that recording.

COMPUTER VOICE
 Confirm?

NATASHA
 Yes, I want to delete the record.

COMPUTER VOICE
 Record deleted.

The main monitor goes black. Natasha looks toward Boris' image.

NATASHA
 Despite the flash, the image clearly shows it. Have we ever seen a record like this one before?

BORIS

No. The safety trigger in the AI code correctly identified and isolated it. Even though a witness filed a report, there is no solid evidence. The rumor suppression team is working overtime on it.

NATASHA

Good. Is there any need to neutralize the witness?

BORIS (O.C.)

No. However, there was an interesting coincidence.

NATASHA

Go on.

BORIS

The ship that filed the report was the CIS Daisy. Do you remember--

NATASHA (O.C.)

Oh, yes. I do. Who filed it?

BORIS

Someone named Steven Delaney. I want you to look into it discreetly. He may be able to lead us to what we're looking for.

NATASHA

What makes you think so?

BORIS

On his first flight as the ship's owner, he bee-lined straight to Shangri-la.

NATASHA

Interesting. Is he connected?

BORIS

Not even remotely. This makes it all the more intriguing to Control.

Natasha nods toward Boris' monitor.

NATASHA

I'm on it.

BORIS
(nods)
Control out.

Boris' video monitor goes black, leaving Natasha in the shadows.

NATASHA
(contemplative)
CIS Daisy redux.
(pause)
Computer, shut down terminal.

FADE OUT:

THE END