

# THE PILOT

The set is out of adjustment: a green streak slashes diagonally through the viewing cube, impales the smiling host.

She tries to adjust it by softly licking a molar, remembers, curses economically, turns a knob until the streak disappears, another knob to sharpen the image. Host smiling goodbye to someone. Feel of cold metal sticks to her thumb and finger until she rubs it away on her thigh, disgusted, nose wrinkling. How many filthy traveling salesmen and conventioners and hotel maids have touched these knobs since they were last sterilized? Have they ever been sterilized?

"Our next guest is a woman with a marvelously rare occupation." *Occupation!* He smiles offcube and the picture scale diminishes to include her as well, not smiling, trying not to fidget on the filthy leather chair. "She is a spaceship pilot"—*I am a spaceship*—"but no ordinary rocket jock. She pilots a slowboat between the Earth and the outer solar system—the asteroids, even as far as Saturn. Her name is Lydia Meinenger and she's a fellow New Yorker." *New Yorker*. "Lydia, would you tell us something about slowboats: how they—"

"In the first place," she interrupts, "they aren't slow. They go much faster than anything you use in the Earth-Moon system. The name is a hangover from the old robot tugs that crawled along on Hohmann transfer orbits, to minimize fuel use. A Hohmann tug took six years to get to Saturn; I can make it in thirteen months. Nine months, with a Jupiter flyby. But I can't do that with passengers."

"Because of the radiation?"

"That's right." *Warm like summer sunshine*. "They can't wrap everyone up in lead, the way I am."

"That's probably the most fascinating aspect of your job, Lydia. The way you're wired up to the ship, you're actually part of it." *I am the ship, you actual fool*.

"'Wired up' is a little extreme. They don't use surgical implants anymore; just induction plates pasted over various organs. There are a few small wires associated with the somatic feedback system"—*O slow ecstasy*—"but they enter through natural body openings and you hardly feel them once they're in place."

"This feedback thing, this is how you control the ship?"

"That's right. There's an initial calibration that, well, as long as I feel good"—*Good!*—"then every system in the ship is working properly. If any system varies from its expected performance, I feel it as an illness or slight pain. The nature and intensity of the wrongness tells me which system is involved and gives me an idea as to the severity of the malfunction. For instance, a hydrogen ullage problem, where the fuel flow is momentarily uneven, I feel as a hot spasm of"—*screen goes white, low chime*—"tum."

Host smirking behind filthy hand. "Afraid the censor won't let *that slip* by, Lydia." *They live in shit so can't talk about it?* Chuckles. "It doesn't seem very precise."

"The important thing is sensitivity, not precision. Instantly knowing which system is hurting. Then I call up the appropriate system parameters and compare them to the ideal mission profile. I can usually fix the trouble with the help of the ship's diagnostic library. If not, I call Company Control on the Moon."

"So your main job is troubleshooting."

"Yes." *Like you troubleshoot your body? Filthy fool couldn't find your liver with both hands. "I make decisions regarding the maintenance of the ship."*

"It doesn't sound very exciting...."

"It is."

Looking at her expectantly: she doesn't continue. "You must have quite a technical background." *For a woman, say it fool.*

"No. I majored in classical Latin and Greek. The technical part is easy. Any reasonably intelligent woman could do it."

"I, uh, see . . . you—"

"There are no male slowboat pilots. I don't suppose your censor wants me to discuss that. You'll just have to go ask a twelve-year-old." She flashes him a bright metal smile. "Much nicer than—" Chime.

Weak try at an urbane chuckle. "There's an interesting side benefit to your job. I'll bet viewers would be surprised to know how old you are."

She lets him wait just long enough; as he opens his mouth to save himself: "Sixty-five."

"Now, isn't that marvelous? You could pass for twenty."

"As could anybody who didn't have to contend with gravity and sun and wind and this"—chime—"that passes for your food and drink and air. I've spent most of my life immersed in oxygenated fluorocarbon, weightless, fed a perfect diet, exercised by machines."

"But your job is dangerous."

"Not very. Perhaps one in thirty is lost."

"More dangerous than holovision." His image turns a little fuzzy; she touches the filthy knob to sharpen him. "The atomic drive itself must be hazardous." Carries her contaminated hand into the bathroom, listening. "Not to mention meteors and—" *Fool.*

"No, actual catastrophes are very rare." She washes the offended fingers carefully. "The dangerous time is turnaround, when the ship is going with maximum velocity. It's supposed to flip and slow down for the last half of the journey." Leaves the soap on warm clean fingers. "Sometimes they don't flip, though; just keep going, faster and faster. Too fast for the Company's rescue ship."

"How terrible." Standing in front of the set, dry hand tugs elastic, urgent. *Clothes!* "They just keep going ..."

"Forever." *Ecstasy, O!* "The pilot may live for centuries." "Well ... if ever a cliché was true . . . that does sound like a fate worse than death." *Fool.*

She nods soberly. "Indeed it does." *Fool, fool, O damn, doesn't last this way.* She sinks back onto the bed and starts to cry. *Fry them dead.*

He puts a filthy finger to his lips. "Well. Are you, um, going to be on Earth long?"

"Only another two days." Hurting herself, she stops, wipes eyes, soap sting brings new tears. "I like being back in New York, but the gravity is tiring. The air makes me cough. I look forward to going out again." *Last time, fry the bastards.*

"Saturn this time?"

"No, for a change I'm going to the inner system. Taking five hundred colonists to the new Venus settlement." *Taking them to burn.*

"Is that more dangerous? I mean, I don't know much about space, but isn't there a danger that you could fall into the Sun?"

She smiles politely. "No, none." Sharp metal teeth; she runs her tongue along behind her teeth but the switches aren't connected. "It would take as much energy to 'fall' into the Sun as it takes to escape from the solar system." *Less to skim it, though, fry.* "All that gravity. I suppose it might be possible; I've never made the calculation." *Characteristic velocity 17.038 emos, exit inclination 0.117 rad, goodbye solar system, goodbye filth.*

Blank stare. "Yes . . . oh, Jimmy's giving me the signal." *Right at perihelion, goose it all the way up, emergency override, nineteen gees, crush their dry baked bodies into dust.* "I'm afraid we've run out of time."

*Cargo shit baked to sterile dust.* "We certainly have enjoyed having you here, Lydia." He holds out his hand and she looks at it.

*Bound for the stars, forever young, the dear ship inside of my ecstasy.* "Thank you."

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