

## IN THE AGE OF THE QUIET SUN

by William Barton

For almost forty years, William Barton has written science fiction books and stories, including the award-winning novel *Acts of Conscience* (Warner Aspect, 1997) and several stories for *Asimov's*—most recently, “The Rocket into Planetary Space” (April/May 2007). Regarding his latest tale, the author says, “This story emerged from the last, much as that one did from ‘Harvest Moon’ (September 2005) before it. From a past that never was but could have been, to a future close enough to taste, to ... what? When does today become tomorrow and that real future slip over to one only imagined? This is one answer. One out of many, perhaps.”

When I was about fifty years old, I read a novel whose narrator began by saying, “I have always loved the stars.” I don’t remember much else about the story, title and author long forgotten, but I do remember the phrase, how it resonated within me, how it began the changes that pushed me out of an old, stale life and into a new one, so unexpected, so terrifyingly wonderful.

I used to read a lot of what was called science fiction in those days, tales of far futures, splendid futures, horrible futures, patently impossible futures, not because there was any hope one of those futures might come true, but because in our stale old world it seemed certain *no* future would come true, good, bad, or indifferent. If you’d asked me, I would not have predicted I would be alive and well almost a half-century later, and if I had, I would have anticipated that same stale old world, grown staler and older still.

And yet, here I sit in the command pilot’s chair of *Anabasis*, a somewhat elderly AndrewsSpace Model A mk. IX staged Z-pinch fusion-initiated nuclear fission drive scoutship, looking out through a live-action freeze frame window at an infinitely deep black sky aswarm with those same steely bright stars I’d always known I loved.

Numbers and graphs danced like sugarplums in my little horseshoe of displays, while Ylva, the ship’s organic AI system whispered sweet nothings in my earbuds, secure in the employ of Standard ARM, who’d stolen that terrifyingly wonderful life from me, took my wealth, killed my best friend, and threw me in prison to rot, while my wife languished in a nursing home and died from old age and penury, just when salvation was at hand.

Mostly, I wanted to forget all that’d happened, get on with my new life

and new name. Just live. That's all you have to do. I glanced over the freeze-frames, determined to take my own advice for the ten-thousandth time, and Ylva's sultry voice whispered in my right ear, "Coming up on six hundred kilometers from Hector, Mr. Zed. Are you all right?"

"Fine sweetie. Too much time on my hands. When you're as old as I am..."

Voice softening, she said, "I'll never get to be as old as you."

"Sorry."

She said, "When my heart stopped and they harvested my organs, that particular clock stopped ticking for me. Bastards." Official view is, they're just computers with some dead human nervous system tissue added in, but when you hear that bitterness in your ear...

I shrugged. "There are worse things than being thirty-nine forever, sweetie."

She laughed in my ear then, familiar, warming those cockles we all hope we have. "The drugs will get better, and you'll get back what you lost."

She knows what I really lost. The rest of it ... Well, the Maunder Minimum came on schedule, no more sunspots, cooler climate ameliorating that famous global warming, and no more solar magnetic storms, helping bring on the Great Age of Solar System Exploration.

Of course, there was a corresponding increase in the cosmic radiation flux to go along with it, but we can do things about that. Drugs to make your cells tougher and harder to damage. Drugs to encourage your DNA to do a better repair job, when damage does occur. Side effects? Well, yes. That shiny, beady, lizard-like skin. That complete loss of hair, body and pate. Oh, and the "dramatic reduction in primary sexual characteristics," that too.

And one other side effect they liked to call an "undocumented feature," as if the drugs were developed by software engineers. Harder to damage? Better repair at the cellular level? They'd started giving me the drugs while I was in prison and volunteered to be a medical test subject in exchange for being let out while I was still shy of eighty.

That was twenty years ago.

Ylva said, "We got a laser intersect from Mars. Standard HQ want to download our databases."

"A little early, isn't it?"

"A couple of hours."

"They say why?"

"No. They never do."

"Anything else?"

"A pip from Vesta just after the laser started. 'Message for Murph' routed through an OPEL ship crossing Jupiter's orbit." Jenny Murphy, my senior commodities specialist, still had family, three grown children back on Earth, kids she'd had with the husband who died in an accident on Callisto last year, the one who'd bestowed the embarrassing flight-handle Candyfloss on her. Probably letting her know she was a grandma now. Something like that.

You could get private messages through the Outer Planets Exploration Laboratory. Technically, they were a US government organization, but affiliated with MIT and Cal Tech, not quite so beholden to agencies, politicians, and corporate money. Almost, but not quite. Trivial messages. The sort of thing a company would tell you was "a misuse of private resources."

Jenny and her husband had been planning on going home when their contracts were up. Go home, stop taking the drugs, turn back into human beings again. I guess if I stopped taking them, I'd turn into a corpse.

I ran my hand around the freeze-frames, brought up a telescopic image of Hector on the main channel, just below the live-action window. Dark gray, dimly lit up by the tiny sun, largest of the Fore-Trojan Asteroids, paler, soft and rounded on one side, darker and more angular on the other. Good compositional sign, of course, letting us know there might be a discrete tidal warming zone inside the body.

Standard Asteroid Resources Mining had staked a claim to the entire cluster, not long after they killed Willie and threw me in the slammer, not long after they'd taken control of the company, taken over the name we'd so cleverly made up.

Time to make good on the claim. Oil for the engines of Earth? Hard to believe I was the marketing genius who thought that one up, more than forty years ago.

\* \* \* \*

Floating weightless in my sleeping bag, hanging from one wall of my closet-sized stateroom, I could hear Jenny chattering away out loud with Ylva, the two of them giggling like happy young girls. Her version of Ylva, so different from mine, maybe fourteen years old, with bright blue eyes and ripe-wheat hair, pigtails spiraling around each ear, Princess Leia-style. Jenny's forty years younger than I am, Ylva younger still, but I guess they keep revising the saga, keeping it current, keeping it popular.

I'd seen the real Ylva, in an old photo in a file I got using up-to-date hacking skills Standard ARM doesn't know I have.

The photo is from 2038, the year she died, and shows a thin, angular, far-from-pretty woman just shy of forty, arm of a tall, severe-looking man around her shoulders, her own hands on the shoulders of two children standing in front of her, a boy of about twelve, a girl maybe eight, both with that same ripe-wheat hair, rather than the man's dark brown. No one's smiling in the photo, but they all look ... secure. Yes, that's the right word. In the background, there's a small house and a cheap compressed-air hybrid car, beyond a dry-looking field and a stand of parched timber.

The dim darkness around me flickered and my own little Ylva slid out of the air, looking flat for just a second, then inflating to 3D.

She was a little like the girl Jenny talks to, a little like the woman in the picture too. Fortyish. But fuller, sleeker, prettier, only the ripe-wheat hair just the same. Today, she was dressed in a more or less colorless, form fitting knit outfit, sweater and slacks clinging to her just so, sweater outlining full breasts, slacks clinging suggestively to her crotch.

She dimpled a smile, subtle eyespots able to determine just where I was looking.

I'd racked my drug-addled brain trying to figure out why this version of Ylva looked so familiar to me. Finally, I realized she was mimicking some TV personality from back in the 1990s, though I couldn't remember exactly which one. A girl with a Hispanic name, belied by hanging tresses of this same ripe-wheat hair.

Maybe she was still on TV when Ylva was a girl, not long after the turn of the century. Maybe in reruns? Or maybe the damn computer can read my mind.

She said, "You look sad, Mr. Zed. Are you thinking about Sarah today?"

Ylva knows I loved my wife. Loved her more than there are any words to say. Knows I miss her. Knows I think I killed her, just the same as I think I killed my friend Willie Gilooly, even though the one died in a Social Security Home, died from old age when I did not, and the other died because when the FBI came to our offices, he took out a pistol and ordered them off the premises. Died defending what was right, while I meekly held out my hands for the cuffs and toddled off to Federal prison.

God damn it.

I said, "No, actually I was thinking about you." Giggling from the next compartment. "This you. That you. The real you."

She stretched, arching her back, belly sinking in, breasts pushing out hard against the stretchy knit cloth. "The real me? You old fool."

Behind her, a misty image formed, a bullet train crossing the landscape of 2038 America, running the fast track between Chicago and Kansas City, a two-hour express trip. Inside, that secure woman sat with a child on either side of her, the three of them reading an old coffee-table book together. It was something from the middle of the twentieth century, with Bonestell paintings of outer space, with fantastic illustrations of conical Von Braun rockets, men in Tin Woodman spacesuits here and there.

Voice ever so wistful, my Ylva said, "Orm and Helga both wanted to be astronauts. Wanted to grow up and work for Standard ARM, go to Mars, Venus, Jupiter, maybe explore the moons of Saturn when that day came..."

The misty scene behind her showed the dark haired man waiting at an ultramodern train station in KC, waiting among the throngs for his family to join him in the new city, where the new jobs were. New jobs that would send those children to MIT or maybe Cal Tech, get them the degrees necessary to make their own dreams come true.

But the bullet train twirled in the air somehow, sprawling across the landscape at four hundred miles an hour, crushing houses, killing hundreds and ... Ylva woke in the wreckage, woke in a dreamlike state, no pain, no

feeling of any kind, no movement, but for her eyes. About ten feet away was half of her daughter, beyond, a shoe that looked like one of the ones her son had been wearing. It seemed as though there might be a foot still inside.

She closed her eyes and went away.

Woke up inside a machine.

Like a litany, she said, "When I ticked the box on my driver's license renewal form, agreeing to be an organ donor, I thought I'd be giving something to those in need, corneas, kidneys, a heart ... but the bastards ... The bastards."

The misty scene faded, and Ylva stood, stretched again, body moving as if under one gee, then pulled the sweater off over her head, quickly slid down the slacks and stood naked, facing me, watching my eyes go here and there.

After a while, she said, "I wish I could climb out of the machinery for you, Mr. Zed. I really do."

And I whispered, "If you could, I wouldn't be much use to you, would I?"

Perhaps we will live forever, Ylva and I.

I guess the joke's on us.

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In time, Ylva slid away, past, present, and future forgotten. I eeled from my sleeping bag, snakeskin making a corduroy sound on the slick cloth, slid aside the roller-blind door of my stateroom, and floated out into the main hab compartment.

Jenny was naked in the personal hygiene module, in front of the sink and mirror, toes anchored in foot restraints, having a sponge bath. I've seen pre-space pictures of Jenny Murphy, even the one carried by her husband on the day he died, showing why he'd called her Candyfloss. Now, she had gray lizardskin just like mine, hairless here, hairless there, breasts gone without a trace, between her legs perhaps a little less than what's left between mine.

She looks like a Sleestak.

When I told her that, she'd had to look the word up. Then we'd gotten a few episodes to watch, and had a laugh about the phrase "routine expedition."

She was laughing now, lizardface bright and sunny, "Oh, that's *hysterical*, Ylva!"

The ghostgirl hanging in the air was laughing too, laughing like a happy child.

My Ylva sometimes wonders if there's anything left of her dead children, if they're part of another machine somewhere, some machine she may some day meet. I haven't been able to find a trace, but her husband eventually remarried, a small woman with pretty brown skin and tufty black hair, and they have two beautiful golden children now.

I pushed over to the med module, flying like a character in a dream, put my toes in the restraints, took out a meter and loaded a test strip, made sure there was a cartridge of lancets in the gun. I fired it into my left palm, a little burn for just a moment while I watched that familiar microliter of blood well up. Dipped in the strip and watched it drink. Hmh. Blood sugar a high 133 mg/dl. B12 a little low. An extra high prescription for three different kinds of antirad drugs. I wonder...

When I turned and looked at Jenny and Ylva, two distinct blue contrails darted across the room. The images moved with me, like giant floaters, as they faded away. Two high-energy cosmic rays had just transited my eyes, vitreous humor reacting like a cloud chamber, and that meant many more of them were penetrating the hull and polyethylene shielding, passing through my body, my brain ... okay. Ylva knows best.

I popped an insulin pen into the skin of my belly, not feeling a thing. Pushed an inch-long needle into my thigh, pulled back the plunger to make sure I wasn't in a vein or artery, and pushed in a thousand micrograms of thick red serum. Got out the air gun and three cartridges for the antirad...

They talk about putting sensors and pumps in us, but talk is cheap and so are needles.

Behind me, Jenny called out, "You want some breakfast, Zed?" When I looked, she was soaring toward me, still naked, and for just a second I saw the lovely woman I'd met at the cosmodrome, my last day on Earth,

who'd just taken her first dose of "space drugs."

"I feel a little sick," she'd said.

I'd said, "It'll pass," and held my tongue about the rest of it. She had eyes. She could see what I'd become.

When I was young, I used to imagine myself in a ship like this, even though there was no hope they would ever come to be, back then, imagine myself with a willing female crewmate, all alone among the flying mountains, with nothing to do for months on end but make love.

I guess if I looked up "irony" in the dictionary, this might be an example they'd show.

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A few hours later, the rule sieve chimed for our attention, Ylva calling us to acceleration stations. The pulsed nuclear engine throbbed behind us for a minute or so, faint white light flickering outside the live-action window, bringing us alongside Fore-Trojan Asteroid 624 Hector. You wouldn't exactly call it an orbit, though Hector had enough gravity for it, more like station keeping, *Anabasis* fifty kilometers out.

Hector's one of the largest bodies caught out here in Jupiter's L4 region, a substantial black football in the freeze frames, 300 by 150 kilometers, ill lit by the faraway sun. *Time to fly*, Jenny said, and it only took a few minutes to suit up, the two of us changed from Sleestak to skinnyish versions of Gort, another forgotten star.

I always liked flying landers, the only real piloting I get to do. Ylva flies *Anabasis*, and all I do is hold the controls in case there's an "incident." Whatever that might be.

The landers themselves are new-minted antiques, each one a carbon-composite sphere, seats, controls, and life support on the inside, little rocket engines, fuel tanks, equipment pods and jointed remote manipulator systems on the outside, like something out of history.

I had a moment of clear memory, flying *Fafnir*, my original SpaceX Dragon on that first thrilling expedition to a nameless near-earth asteroid, me, Willie, Sarah, Minnie...



I looked out through the imaginary faceplate of my helmet, scanning the lander's freeze frames, looked at engineering data hanging in airy columns to left and right, then down at little cameos of sexpot Ylva and Sleestak Jenny below my chin.

"Good to go," I said.

Ylva waved, and said, "Hurry home!"

Jenny's lizardface was still, nothing for her to do as a passenger but wait to be delivered to the jobsite.

I unberthed from *Anabasis* using one of the RMS arms, released the minidextre's gripping hand, stuttered the thrusters and savored the sight of my spaceship growing smaller as we backed away.

One of the things I always loved about these fission drive vessels is how *much* they look like spaceships, from the pointed nose of the command module, past the big triangular radiator vanes surrounding the fuel tanks and reactor vessel, to the stumpy muzzle of the engine unit aft.

Spaceship. *My* ship, however much it belongs to Standard ARM, my company no more.

Mr. Zed's a new man, fit for a brave new world, that other man, with that other name, dead and gone.

I twisted the rotational hand controller and turned away from *Anabasis*, toward Hector and a sky full of stars.

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It took about twenty minutes to cross the gap, asteroid growing from an irregular lump of dusty bituminous coal to a strange looking world, like a craterous bit fractured off the moon, to a vasty *something*, walling off half the universe as we slid toward the limb and beyond. It seemed brighter the closer we got, though I knew it was just an illusion of accumulated light. As usual, the seeming was more real than the being.

Odd. Distinct sides. One part almost craggy, really like those flying mountains imagined by pre-space writers, another part flatter, with rolling hills like the ones you see on some parts of the Moon.

I said, “Am I imagining things, or is the smooth side a little darker than the rest?”

Jenny, focused on her instruments, said, “Albedo’s not quite subjective, but ... yeah. It is. Supposedly, Hector and 1404 Ajax used to be the same body. That’d mean the smooth side’s been exposed to the solar wind a lot longer than the rough. I guess we’ll find out, since we’re supposed to go there next.”

I knew from the mission briefing Ajax was a lot smaller than Hector, maybe ninety kilometers across. That’s still enormous as asteroids go. I’d had high hopes for these things, back when Willie and me founded Standard ARM, and we’d been planning on coming out here as soon as we took delivery on that very first Model A.

I’d been in prison for about a month when the delivery came, stunned at what was happening, angry I hadn’t been allowed to go to Willie’s funeral, and the new owners of Standard decided Mars was where they wanted to go first.

Jenny ticked a couple of bright markers on the image of Hector’s ragged side, and said, “Let’s set down here and here, first, then we’ll try a couple of sites on the smooth face.”

“You see anything?” Meaning potential abiogenic tar sites, what we’d been sent to find.

She said, “Nah. But we have to start somewhere.”

I nodded, knowing my cameo would be nodding inside her helmet, took the controls and started a phasing burn, headed for Site One. Felt my heart speed up, too. Most asteroids, it’s more like docking at a space station. This would be a little bit like landing on the Moon, flat ground approaching, dust rising around you...

Made me wonder for the millionth time how Neil Armstrong had felt, doing it for the first time. He never really said.

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By the time we got to our third touchdown site, it was beginning to look like Hector was a bust. There was plenty of CHON, but none of it tidally processed into “space tar,” what we’d found on a few anomalous NEOs and one minor Piazzi Belt asteroid. There’d been signs *something* had

happened at our two roughside sample sites, but whatever it was, it wasn't the abiogenic fossil-fuel equivalent that formed the basis of Standard ARM's entire business plan.

*My damned business plan!*

Geez, wouldn't *that*'ve been funny! I would've gone broke out here in the early 2020s, and what's happened since then, the opening surge of my long-imagined space-faring civilization, would never have happened. What would we have seen, Project Constellation in all its glory? Four guys living for a few years in a tin shack at the south pole of the Moon? Boots and flags on Mars by 2038? Maybe. If we were damned lucky.

Jenny'd said, "Whatever happened here ended when Ajax went its own way, some millions of years ago."

"Think we'll find the oil there?"

"Doubt it."

Now, on the smooth side, I watched her bob away toward the first sample site she'd picked, a lampblack smear halfway up the side of the nearest hill, less than a hundred meters away, spacesuit festooned with the Medusa-locks of her gear, so much more compact than what we'd had to work with in 2016. Only thirty years ago? Christ, when I was thirty, I thought I was getting so old...

There was just enough gravity here you could pretend to stand, just like on a real world. So long as you didn't move, you'd settle onto your feet, and it *looked* like a real world, too. Maybe even Earth, nighttime in the Kalahari or something. Nah. Too much life there. Rub al-Khali, maybe? Overhead, the stars glimmered, most of them just on the edge of vision, that vague shimmer not from atmospheric distortion but from my eyes trying to resolve things just a tiny fraction of a magnitude too dim.

Ylva's cameo whispered, "I can turn up the light amplification on your CCD sensors."

I shook my head. "Let's leave it. If I could, I'd take off my helmet and see it for real."

From the edge of the black smear, Jenny and her cameo snickered, "Hey, *that*'d be fun!"

The horizon seemed farther away than it should've as well, probably because this side of Hector was kind of flat. Here were sloping hills and valleys, over there a long, sinuous rille-like formation, kind of what you see on some of the larger asteroids. Vesta. A little bit on Ceres. By the time *Dawn* reached those two, Willie and me were putting together our flight hardware, getting ready to go.

Christ, I'm so *used* to it now I hardly remember that first thrill at all! Remember how scared I was, when the Falcon 9's engines lit and the hold down arms let go? Easy to forget it was all being done by a man who got cramps in his bowels when he had to drive his pickup truck over a highway bridge ... hmmm.

I wonder what the heck *that* is?

Dark splotch halfway up a tall hill maybe four hundred meters away, just opposite where Jenny was settled in to her work. I tongued one of the control nodes below my chin, loading a telescopic frame in the middle of my imaginary faceplate, and whispered, "Six-ex."

The splotch got bigger, and seemed to develop a sort of 3D effect.

"Ylva?"

Her cameo murmured, "It's a hole."

"Fifty-ex." The splotch filled the frame and became impenetrable. "Twenty-ex?" Still nothing, though that brought the hole's rounded edges in sight.

Ylva said, "I'll turn up the amp on the frame."

"Okay."

The black turned a sort of swarmy, grainy gray, with a suggestion of vague shapes inside.

"We need to get closer."

"Right." I said, "Jen? I'm going over to have a look at that little crater over there, up on the next hill."

Absorbed in work, her abstracted voice said, "Have fun. Don't get

lost. I'll be another ... fifteen minutes or so."

On my first attempt at a lunar bunnyhop, I went on too high a trajectory, and as I came back down, Ylva said, "Lean forward. You'll need to swim like an iguana here."

As I began crawling along the surface, heading uphill, a little voice in the back of my head, some voice from the remote past perhaps, called out, Hey! This *is* fun!

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Once we got well up onto the hill, I was able to start bunnyhopping again, gravity helping with stability, though we were still tilted well forward and I had to look out through the top of my helmet to see the mysterious hole. *We?* Ylva's not here in the spacesuit with me, she's fifty klicks away in ... Oh, hell. If it was good enough for Lindbergh...

Being outside in a spacesuit is what makes it seem real. Oh, sure, you can have zero-gee in a space station, but how's that different from going on a *really* long parabolic airplane ride? Same thing with a tin can on the Moon, on Mars, on Callisto? All right, so you're a little light on your feet, but otherwise, it's no better than being in a submarine.

*This*, now ... Even though I'd done it a thousand times, I still felt the thrill, that little boy from the 1950s screaming, *Oh, my God! I'm on another planet!* Drifting on the dusty gray Moon, Earth so blue and little in a dead black sky. On the rough and rusty plains of Mars, pink sky all around the horizon, turning darker and darker as you looked straight up. Callisto, dark dirt looking not at all like ice, up in the stygian sky, fat orange Jupiter with his all-seeing pink eye.

I'd even done a few EVAs in low-earth orbit, back in the early days, when we had to do some orbital assembly work on our expeditionary craft, and it scared the crap out of me every darn time. Looking out the window of an airliner, you don't see you're suspended over an abyss, and out the porthole of a spaceship, it seems unreal in just the same way. I wasn't prepared for what it felt like to open that airlock door for the first time, start to float on out and...

No. Wait. If I go out there, I'll *fall!*

All the long, long way down, a hundred miles and more, to go *splash*

in the deep blue sea...

I remember Willie snickering, “You damn fool! How the hell could we fall? We’re in *orbit!*”

He didn’t believe the Feds would come for our company, right in broad daylight, either, much less put his lights out forever. Jesus, how he’d love to be here with me now!

The hole, when I got to it, was littler than I expected, no more than two meters across, barely big enough for Gort-suited me to pass through upright. Not a crater, either. More like a tunnel. Pitch damn dark inside.

Ylva’s cameo said, “Best turn on the helmet lights.”

“Right.” I tongued the proper activespot and told the suit how many lumens I wanted.

“Hey! It *is* a tunnel!”

Ylva said, “Not a lava tube, that’s for sure.”

I stepped inside and shined my lights upward at the roof. Fractured rock and long grooves. Snorted through my nose, and said, “Almost like toolmarks.”

Down one wall, more of the same. “You know, we’re going to have to get Jenny up here. I never learned enough geology from either my dad or Minnie Gilooly to guess what would make a formation like this.”

Jenny’s cameo, voice maybe a little exasperated, said, “It’ll be at least another half hour. I need to put the samples away before I do anything else.”

“No hurry.”

“Easy for you to say, lazy bum.”

I laughed. “Space pilots *are* a special breed.”

When I looked down, the floor was flat, as if someone expected to be walking on it. Walking in pretty high gee, in fact, and...

Ylva said, “Let me get some magnification set up for you. Those

scuffmarks are a little indistinct.”

“Sure.”

There was a trail of them, starting a meter or so in from the entrance, about where the infalling ecliptic dust would start to peter out. Kind of stripy scuffmarks, I guess, in two rows, heading back into the darkness. I lifted my head, following them on back a ways ... and felt the air turn to jelly in my throat.

Felt a hard pang in my heart, almost painful, like it stopped for a moment, spasmed, and then resumed beating at a *much* faster rate.

I grunted, “*Um?*”

Clever. Oh, so clever.

“Ylva?”

Her cameo, voice absurdly calm, said, “I see it, Mr. Zed. Recording now.”

It was shiny, somewhat translucent to my lights, crumpled on the floor in a suggestive sprawl, and there was a dark shape inside, even more suggestive, the vague shape of a ... well.

Breathing through my mouth, trying to make my heart slow down a bit, I wondered just *who* could have gotten here first? Standard ARM or OPEL? I’d *know* about that. The Chinese? Fishing. Fishing for a reasonable explanation. Old man, you *know* what this is.

Ylva said, “That’s not a known spacesuit design.”

“No. Who makes spacesuits out of cellophane?” Who makes *anything* out of cellophane these days, other than Easter basket shrouds?

I took two, three, four steps toward it, the shape inside becoming more distinct as tighter light fell on it and through that clear integument. “*Oh ... !*”

I had to stop, felt myself getting the shakes, bad shakes, the first sign of a panic attack, the sort of thing I hadn’t had since prison.

Ylva said, "I can give you a sedative, if necessary."

Opened my mouth wide to let as much air in as possible, controlling my flow rate. Don't hyperventilate, jackass. Don't faint. "Ah ... no. Just adjust my CO2 upward a little bit."

"Done."

"I'm not imagining this, right?"

"No, Mr. Zed."

Saying my name to keep me focused. Good idea.

I said, "*Jenny?*"

Her cameo brightened below my chin, Sleestak eyes frightened, voice tight: "On my way."

The thing in the cellophane spacesuit was long and thin. It had brown fur, six legs, a fox's face, and skinny arms where its ears should have been.

Its eyes were open, mammalian enough I could read a frozen expression of sharp dismay.

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It was somehow comforting when Jenny's wan shadow loomed in the tunnel entrance, when she shuffled in to stand beside me, looking down on a dead alien, sprawled in the otherworldly dust. *Alien*. I felt myself savoring an obsolete word come suddenly back to life. More and more over the past fifty years, alien had come to mean little more than *foreigner*, with a flavor of "illegal alien" to give it spice. When I was a kid, though...

*Outer Limits. Twilight Zone. Flying Saucers. Invaders from Mars.*

Hell, even that TV show, where the blotchy-headed *Slags* off the crashed slaveship stood in for Mexican migrant workers...

Jenny whispered an irreligious "Jesus Christ." Then she looked up from the corpse, shining her light toward the back of the tunnel. It opened up a bit wider, further in, and there were boxes and crates, pieces of inscrutable hardware, rolls of stuff like cable, neatly folded piles of



varicolored cellophane, stacked all around the walls.

A couple of meters from me was a thing like a turn of the century computer carrel, with something that looked a lot like an old laptop computer on it, insulated wires running to a little antenna not unlike a satellite dish. I swallowed, and said, "That would be the 'phone home' bit, I guess."

Jenny said, "Huh?"

Ylva said, "They made an all-new version of that in 2024, Mr. Zed. It was the first big hit to come out of your Dramaturge software package."

"Oh." By then, of course, I'd been put away.

Jenny shuffled forward into the rear chamber, looking, touching, shining her helmet lights this way and that. She said, "This stuff sort of looks like it'd unfold into an inflatable airlock."

"Big enough to fill the entrance?"

Her cameo shrugged.

"I suppose the stuff in those things that look like Dewars could be some kind of glue..." Or alien air, alien water, alien booze, alien whatever.

Useless speculation, of course. It's the sort of thing I'd always liked to do, theorize on sparse evidence. It's where ideas come from, and it's how I'd realized there might be something like petroleum inside asteroids made of CHON.

She was looking at the supposed carrel now, reaching out to touch the dish antenna, and said, "I guess if you could make an interstellar crossing, whatever technology made that possible would support something like interstellar radio."

Who's theorizing now?

Ylva said, "Are you assuming they have FTL?"

"How else..."

I said, "Think about it. If the antirad drugs make it possible for us to live some equivalent of forever, don't we have the time to do damn-all ...

whatever?”

“You’d sit in a tin can for a thousand years or more?”

“I think I’d eventually get used to sitting in tin cans. Hell, it’d take me a hundred years just to watch reruns of all the TV shows I ever saw and reread every book I ever read.”

Ylva said, “In a thousand years, you could master the sum total of human knowledge. Of course, by then there’d be more, but you’d eventually get caught up.”

That’s an interesting thing for a computer to assert. Even one incorporating “human CNS tissue.”

I said, “Something else to think about: Where there’s a shipwrecked sailor, there’s bound to be a wrecked ship. Right?”

Silence, from both of them, then Jenny said, “I wonder what happened to him? Obviously, he wasn’t expecting it.”

That expression of intense dismay, wide eyes crying out, “Oh, *no!*”

Ylva said, “It does seem he was preparing to await rescue.” Robinson Crusoe, all right, rafting salvaged supplies and equipment ashore from the shipwreck. A memory surfaced of an ancient *Mad Magazine* spoof of the tale, focusing on a single phrase. “To bolster me, I took a cup of rum.” Maybe the Dewars, after all?

Ylva said, “We should take some samples. We can probably figure out how long he’s been lying here.”

He? Interesting. I looked at what on a terrestrial quadruped would have been the right spot and was startled to see the alien had marriage tackle not so different from what mine had been, before the drugs took effect. More like a dog’s, but still. I had a brief flicker of wondering whether Jenny and Ylva had noticed that right away.

Abruptly, Jenny said, “What’ll we do?”

Ylva said, “Regulations say I have to make an immediate report to HQ on Mars and let them take over the investigation. At this point, we’re just on guard duty until a laboratory ship arrives. It’ll take about a month to get here from Callisto, I think.”

I looked down at her cameo. “You mean they thought of *this*?”

The little picture smiled, dimples popping out here and there. “No, but it clearly comes under the domain of the ‘important finds’ rule sieve.”

“So you’ll make an automatic laser transmission to Mars and...”

Ylva’s voice was hushed. “No, Mr. Zed. I’m not really a computer. I’m only *trained*, not programmed, and those famous Three Laws are just a silly old literary fantasy.”

I felt the willies creep up my spine then, and Jenny whispered something that sounded like “Dear God...” I’d known Ylva had something like free will, but not really believed it until now.

“So...?”

Ylva’s calm voice said, “I hate the selfish bastards who did this to me, Mr. Zed. I hate Standard ARM as much as you do, maybe more. Come home now so we can talk in private.”

\* \* \* \*

To our surprise, back in the compact lab aboard *Anabasis*, C14 and gamma ray activation analysis suggested our foxy little alien had only been lying in the dust of Hector for 3.2 million years, give or take a hundred thousand or so. Back on Earth, back when he got that startled look, then fell down and died, midgety bipeds no smarter than chimps were wandering around northeast Africa, using broken rocks for tools.

I wonder if he foresaw their future.

Would this be a long-inhabited colony world, if those bipeds hadn’t been there? Or is that simply absurd human pride talking? Who’s to say if *Lucy*’s ilk had more potential than the chimp down the forest trail?

The alien was similar to us in most other ways, too. Cells full of desiccated DNA, six base pairs instead of four, four of them just the same as our codon set, two more besides. A lot of implications in that. Lots of hints about the fragmented proteins we found, too.

Panspermia’s as good a theory as any at the biochemical level,

maybe better than most, considering this was the first answer we'd gotten once those drilling robots inside Europa turned up a sterile sea of pressurized hot salt water, once it was concluded the fossil-like eoliths on Mars preserved no meaningful information.

All that left were some tantalizing spectral hints from an "earthlike" moon circling a subjovian planet around Delta Pavonis.

Until now.

What to do? What to do?

Oh, worry, worry, worry...

The answer, as obvious as the nose no longer on Ylva's pretty face, was to keep our mouths shut, for a while at least, and look for the wrecked ship we supposed might be here. Or *somewhere*.

Arguments to be had.

Not necessarily *here*, you see. Could have been in orbit while he ferried down his supplies and dug his makeshift shelter. By now, it could be anywhere, and, given the presence of Jupiter a third of the way back along the ecliptic plane, it was most likely ejected back into the depths from whence it came, or swallowed up by the sun.

Could even be on Earth, preserved as tektites from an extremely unusual meteor strike. Ylva surprised me by bringing up those goofy old theories about Tunguska. That sum of human knowledge she'd mentioned?

No place to start but right here, and as we moved *Anabasis* into position, as Ylva tuned up our powerful long-range radar, configuring the antennas for short-range echoes, Jenny said, "They'll notice this, won't they?"

*They*. Our Lords and Masters on Mars.

Ylva said, "I'm sure they'll detect side-scatter from the radar, but that's not completely out of the ordinary. There's maybe a 20 or 30 percent chance they'll give us a call, want to know what we're doing, since it'll be a little unusual, but they may just assume we think we've found a buried tarball and will wait for us to report a find."

You have to wonder which part of her is figuring out what. Is that “20 or 30 percent” coming out of the silicon chipset, or out of the “human CNS tissue”? Cold equations, or an understanding of human nature?

Her cameo, now shared between us, neither mine nor Jenny’s, was pretty as a china doll.

I superimposed the radar screen over the live-action main window, adjusting for a result that would make the radar info seem like images in clear-as-glass regolith.

We flew into position, sweeping down the long axis of Hector, and the freeze frames filled with data. Nothing much, just a shallow layer of transparent dirt over steely gray rock. Cracks and craters here and there, the occasional crevasse, a few rille-like twists on the flat side. Right there, the shallow pinprick of the alien’s cave.

“Well, now...” a whisper from Jenny as a bright reflection came over the limb and moved our way. “Who’d a thunk it?”

When I was a kid, I found that phrase evocative, so much so I made up a complex fantasy about a hillbilly girl named Hooda Thunket, Jed Clampett’s bucktooth niece, whose gazintas had been more facile than Jethro’s by far.

I focused the live-action window on the reflection, adjusted the contrast and grayscale, then spun up the magnification. Ylva, for her part, slowed the ship and warped its trajectory toward our find.

“Okay,” I said. “It’s a ship, buried in the dirt of an asteroid. Not much likelihood of it *not* being the one we’re looking for.”

Ylva said, “It’s not much more than half the size of *Anabasis*.”

“Our alien buddy’s not much more than half the size of a human being.”

Jenny said, “I guess this shoots down the idea he came here in his own starship.” Deep regret there.

“You think there was a mother ship, and this is just a scout?”

She looked at me, eyes wide, then gestured at the radar image. “Well...” Quod erat demonstrandum, I suppose.

“Scale means nothing. There are no spacecraft smaller than an AndrewsSpace Model A, but no larger ships any more capable. A Model T can carry a hundred passengers instead of just eight, but it can’t go anywhere we can’t go.”

“Maybe so.”

I glanced at Ylva’s cameo. “Did he bury it deliberately?”

“No way to tell. Three million years is long enough for the regolith to re-sinter.”

Jenny said, “So what do we do now?”

I shrugged. “We’ve got basic mining equipment on board. Let’s go down and dig it up!”

“I meant about HQ.”

Our Lords and Masters on Mars.

Ylva’s cameo turned to *my* Ylva for just a moment, eyes smoldering with hate, and her sultry voice bit off, “Fuck ‘em.”

Dear me.

Jenny said, “Look, we can’t hide this forever, sooner or later...”

“Sooner or later, *something*,” I said. “Look, we lost our jobs with Standard ARM the moment we found the alien and didn’t sit tight and scream for mommy.”

Jenny’s face had a brief, stricken look. That dead husband. Those living children and grandchildren on Earth. The only thing *I* had to lose was my pathetic Sleestak life, Ylva far less than that.

Oh, so gently, then, “Won’t make matters worse if we go dig it up, Jenny. Let’s see what we’ve got before we decide another thing. Ylva?”

She said, “You two need to get a little rest before we break out the mining gear. We don’t want any accidents.”

I rubbed my chin, lizard scales making a less-than-satisfactory

substitute for five o'clock shadow. "Um. Maybe some pick-me-up drugs?"

"There's plenty of time, Mr. Zed. Even if a ship left Callisto yesterday, it'll be weeks before it shows up. Hit the sack. I'll get everything ready I can physically manage. That'll take some time."

I unbuckled from my acceleration station and stretched, floating on high, looking down at see-through Hector, at the ghost of our dead alien's long-dead ship. Good enough.

\* \* \* \*

Most people leave the lights on when they sleep, maybe to help with the zero-g disorientation, maybe to help with the little flashes and sparkles of high-energy particles zipping through your retinas, through the optic lobes of your brain.

I like the dark, and the little blinkies aren't any more annoying than the floaters I had before the antirad drugs cleaned them up. I guess I was in my forties before they started to get bad. By the time I was pushing sixty, I couldn't look up at a bright blue sky without seeing enormous chains of swimming-pool algae arching across the heavens.

Nice thing about space: the sky is black and the floaters are invisible. I noticed that right off on my first flight in 2014. Well, not right off. I was too busy being scared at first, the man who couldn't ride a roller coaster with his eyes open sitting on top of what amounted to a low-ball ICBM, mission control setting several hundred thousand pounds of kerosene on fire right behind his back, but later...

Amazing days.

Lost to me.

All lost.

The rollerblind door to my stateroom whispered open, whispered closed, latched with a click, and a slim dark human shape loomed up, revealing faint light where you'd suppose there was none. It's never really completely dark wherever human machinery lives.

Jenny said, "I can't sleep either."

Maybe Ylva told her I was awake. Maybe she just guessed. She

unzipped my sleeping bag part way, slid in with me, all sandpapery limbs and naked Sleestak body, zipped it shut around us and wriggled around, wrapping me in her arms, pressing her head against the front of my shoulder.

Sleestak, yes. But inside the lizardskin there were still girlbones, calling old, old feelings, old memories back from the dust to which they'd gone. I remembered how much I'd liked the fineness of women's collarbones and ribs, the shape of their pelvic blades, that round knob of bone under their pubic hair...

I never got to see Sarah alive after they put me in prison. When I finally saw her again, she was ashes and a few bits of burned bone in a plain, sealed plastic box. The same god-damned plastic box you get from a vet after they've cremated your dog.

Jenny said, "I miss my husband, you know?"

I murmured something. Nothing much.

She said, "I was looking forward to going home, getting off the drugs, getting back to real life." As she said it, she rubbed her hand on my sandpaper chest, rough fingers trailing down across my flat and fatless stomach, down to my abdomen, down to my own hard pubic bone, and stopped there, just before her memories could wonder about the missing bits.

Then she said, "What're we going to do?"

You can go home, Jenny dear. Go home, get off the drugs, see in the mirror you're still young enough and pretty enough for a replacement life not so different from the one you lost. I'm sure Ylva's told you about her own lost husband, of his new life with a new woman and new children.

Not what she meant, of course. I said, "Depends on what we find, I guess."

"Can't we lie? What if we call and tell them we found the ship first, while we were radarating for the tarball? I mean, so long as we don't dig it up, won't they believe us?"

"Jenny, Ylva's never going to let that happen."

The next whisper was fierce, full of wishes, full of defiance. "Ylva's



just a *computer*. A kind of AI. She *can't* make that decision!"

I hugged her close, hugged her tight, and said, "I wouldn't count on that being so."

On cue, Ylva's cameo, my sultry, angry Ylva rather than Jenny's dear, sweet girlfriend, slid up out of the darkness, and said, "If you two aren't going to sleep, then we might as well get busy."

Yes, ma'am.

I thought about the amazing, wonderful days I'd lost, those days when Willie and me and Sarah and Minnie had borrowed six hundred million dollars, had gone out into the dark between the worlds to find a bright new universe.

Lost and gone forever.

Until this day came.

Amazing days to come.

Brilliant new days.

Found again, at last.

\* \* \* \*

Once we got going, it didn't take long at all to dig the damned thing up. Jenny and I got in the lander and undocked, while Ylva opened *Anabasis's* unpressurized cargo bay doors, just aft of the resource module. The mining and sampling equipment was in an extensible rack, with attachments for the lander RMS end effectors, so we could lift it straight out and get on our way back down to Hector and a bright tick mark Ylva put in our vision fields.

This is the kind of thing that's played out to a bright, imaginative boy a hundred times during his formative years. You find the abandoned ship floating between the stars. Send over the bright, imaginative boy with the quick reflexes, and, *lo!* It turns out there's someone, some *thing* still alive on the derelict.

And thereby, as they say, hangs the tale.

Real space exploration is like working at a hard, dirty, dangerous job. When I was a young man, before cheap computers came along to give me a new life, clean and dry indoors, I'd worked as a sewer worker, as a diesel engine mechanic, as a shipyard machinist, even worked in a foundry that made parts for nuclear reactors. Space exploration is much like that.

Hard and dirty, with plenty of opportunity to get your silly face torn off if you don't watch what you're doing.

It took about half an hour to put a tunnel down through the regolith, whose texture was much like the glassy clinkers I used to find in my grandmother's old coal furnace, another two to break up the overlay and clear it from the starship, black chunks ejected from our grown pit, sailing on low, slow trajectories, landing on a messy pile about a hundred meters away.

After I retracted the digging gear and folded the RMS arms onto the lander hull, Jenny and I stood on the rim, looking down at our dirty little wreck.

She said, "Not much to it."

"No." Did I say starship? I guess it was maybe half again the size of an old Soyuz, or like one of the Shenzhou capsules the Chinese had continued to fly until about ten years ago. And that, only because this thing's service module had been somewhat longer.

"I can't imagine," she said, "anyone crossing interstellar space in this."

Scoutship? The front end was two cylinders joined by a berthing mechanism, the one in front ending on an obvious docking collar, with dozens of little fingers and latches visible. The service module was smooth and almost featureless, with a few lines here and there I supposed might be access ports.

The rear end of the thing was obviously damaged beyond recognition, a molten-looking lump, ending in a teardrop, as if something had pulled away during the melt. A meter or so forward of the slag were two blisters, made of some translucent stuff.

Ylva's cameo said, "If they had a fast FTL drive, it might be no more than days between solar systems."

Jenny seemed almost angry then. “Is there something in your core memory says FTL is anything other than flat-out *impossible*?”

Subdued: “When I was alive, I liked science fiction.”

When you were alive, dear Ylva, you liked interactive TV shows about time travel and star spanning empires and handsome men who fought with swords from the backs of dragons.

I said, “Whatever it was, it’s obvious something bad happened to it.”

It was easy to get inside. The forward module side hatch opened at a touch, and what we found was painfully familiar. A horseshoe control panel with many flat, blank panels, a few rows of buttons and glassy bits I took for idiot lights. A couch-like contraption was probably ideal for a four-legged being to lie prone.

I didn’t see anything like writing anywhere, but if I had, it would have to say something like, “No user serviceable components inside.”

Not a ship intended to be repaired by its pilot.

Supposed to be reliable.

Consumer goods always use that excuse.

Did you die, little foxface, because your mass-produced singleship was a lemon?

The aft compartment was living quarters. Something like a sleeping bag stuck to one wall, telling me whatever else they had, these people hadn’t had artificial gravity. Something very much like our kitchen module. Something like a zero-gee toilet, though with its components separated into two parts, one small, one large, reminding me of what the dead thing’s supposed plumbing tackle had been like.

If that’s what it was. Could’ve been his nose, for all we know...

Jenny said, “When I was a kid, I had an uncle who was an interstate long-haul truck driver. He lived much like this.”

The service module was easy to open as well, everything sprung for the convenience of imagined alien technicians, back in some imaginary alien shipyard. Inside? Gizmos. Silvery spheres of one sort or another.

Coils and cables and solid bars of metal, all held together by clips and clasps and things that looked an awful lot like the cheap plastic tiewraps they use on the wiring harnesses of cars nowadays.

Aft of a big sphere covered with intricate coils was a thing that looked like a model of an old-timey sailing ship, with bands and sheets of clear stuff wrapped around its spars and masts in lieu of rigging. Some of the bands, I could see, were twisted like Mobius strips. Cables and bars led on aft, ending where the bulkhead sagged into a once-molten lump.

I looked around the inner hull, and realized there was no sign of the translucent blisters. Two fat cables, though, stuck to fat black plugs on opposite sides. Probably mapped to the right spots.

Ylva said, "If I had to guess, I'd say the coiled sphere is some kind of powerplant."

There was a little access port that opened as easily as everything else. When I shined a light, the sphere was empty inside. Smooth metal-like surface with discolorations here and there. "So ... what? Fusion reactor?"

"No easy way to know."

Jenny, still angry, said, "This isn't doing us any good."

But she reached out, grabbed one of the cables where it plugged into the sphere, and gave it a tug. It came out easily, revealing a socket with holes and a connector with many black pins.

"Huh. These people weren't much ahead of us."

Ylva said, "No. Maybe it doesn't take much."

When I was a kid, eighty, ninety years ago, no one could have built a spaceship like *Anabasis*, or even had a theory about how. Z-pinch fusion? What's that? But if one had turned up in low-earth orbit, some smart guys riding up to rendezvous in a Gemini capsule would've seen what it was, maybe even understood what it did.

Jenny said, "All right. What do you want to do? Other than call HQ and tell them what's up."

Ylva said, "The machine parts of me claim we could feed power to

this thing from *Anabasis*.”

Jenny grated out, “Are you crazy?”

*Crazy?* It’s just a computer, ain’t it?

I said, “That sounds like a pretty good way to commit suicide.”

Ylva said, “And your point would be?”

Jenny: “Oh, Christ. You’re not seriously thinking of going along with this, are you?”

If I hadn’t been in a spacesuit, I would’ve rubbed my scaly chin and wished for day-old whiskers. “The worst that can happen is, it blows up. So long as we stand clear...”

“Zed, if it blows up, it’s *lost!* Think about...”

I said, “You want Standard ARM to have it? The government? Worse still, the UN?”

“No,” said Ylva’s low, sullen whisper. “We do *not* want that.”

I could see despair in Jenny’s cameo. But she didn’t say anything else.

\* \* \* \*

By retracting three of the eight radiator vanes, we managed to get *Anabasis* belly-landed on Hector a couple of hundred meters from the alien ship, coming down ever so gingerly on OAMS thrusters, wasting more kerolox than we had to spare, Z-pinch reactor ticking away at powerhead-idle.

If Hector had been much bigger, it probably would’ve been impossible to land, given these things are space-only, not intended to set down on anything much larger than Phobos. They’re sturdy enough, I suppose. AndrewsSpace still builds them in Nevada, handles them with strongback cranes, ships them to Florida and flings them toward orbit on decades old Jupiter 130 boosters, but that’s the last time they ever see a planet or an atmosphere.

We ran power cables to the lander, then on to the alien ship, photographing everything as we took it apart, making sure we could get it back together, fumble-fingered in our spacesuits, tireder than we really should have allowed.

Somehow, though...

Yeah. Excitement building, however insane this really was.

For Christ's sake.

We found an alien spaceship!

How cool is *that*?

Took us the longest to fabricate compatible connectors by hand from the spare parts bin, following directions generated by some rule sieve inside Ylva. Midway through that process, she said, "Guys, we're being illuminated by laser from Callisto. My guess is someone noticed the radar pulses after all, and wants to know what's up."

Long pause, then Jenny said, "What're they saying?"

"If she reads it, the beam feedback will let them know. Right now, it's just shining on us."

"Correct. If we don't answer, they may think we crashed."

You could see Jenny was puzzled. "Isn't there an automatic response mech ... oh." *Automatic*. That would be Ylva. "Then what lie..."

"We need to decide what to do," I said. "Pretty much right now."

And what? Turn it in and give Standard ARM a starship? The phrase "over my dead body" came to mind. That would be the most likely result anyway.

Jenny's inner tension was visible in the scaly skin around her eyes. "Or what? Steal it? And *then* what? Where the hell would we go? This isn't some damn *movie*!"

Ylva said, "Maybe we need to find out if it *is* stealable, first."

I stood looking down at the damned thing, at the gaping hatch on the side of its service module, our shiny black cables trailing over the dirt and disappearing into the darkness within, then said, "In for a penny, I guess..."

I wonder what they'll do to me? Back to prison? Take away the drugs and let me die? Or just kill my sorry old Sleestak ass right away?

Jenny sighed, cameo eyes far, far away. "Right. I mean, what's the worst can happen?" Maybe she was thinking long term? If she didn't catch much of the blame, Standard would fire her, take her off the drugs, send her home and ... children, grandchildren, life as we once knew it.

Ylva's cameo, my sultry Ylva, threw back her head and laughed, eyes so very bright. "The damned thing explodes, and I get to go where the goblins go, after all."

\* \* \* \*

Not much more and we were ready to roll, Ylva running the automatics, Jenny sitting at my control station in *Anabasis*, ready to take over, if there was a need, as well as time. Fat chance. They had the reactor running as fast as it could with only five radiator vanes deployed, nuclear drive primed and ready to throttle up, detcord wrapped around the cables, "just in case."

Me? I sat in the lander, manning a portable freeze frame we'd set up as an operational board. Oh sure, I had the thrusters configured for a quick getaway, but ... whatever melted the back of that starship would sure as hell melt me. Small loss, I suppose.

If we live, then we can think of what to do next.

Ylva said, "Jenny?"

"*Anabasis* control, aye."

"Mr. Zed?"

"Go with throttle-up."

"*Silly.*" A pause, then I saw the 3D histograms in my freeze frame start to climb.

There was just a moment for me to think, Well, you know, boy-o, this

is just about the damned *stupidest* thing I can possibly imagine myself ... then I said, "Lookit that! The accelerometers we stuck on the hull are showing positive thrust. Not much, but..."

Ylva said, "I'll start the power feed run-up."

I craned my neck. "Uh. Blue light?"

"Look at your board."

"Wow! Thrust's building up, uh..."

Something prickled on my cheek, like sunshine coming through my spacesuit visor. Except ... right. No visor, it's just a ... "Oh, hell..." When I looked again, the alien starship was lifting slowly over the rim of the hole we'd dug, blinding blue-violet light glaring out of those translucent blisters on the hull. My suit optics were putting amoebic black cores over the middle of the things, protecting my real-world eyesight and...

*Stupid*, all right. Stupid, stupid ... but all I said was, "Jeez, look how *melly* the damned thing's getting, I..."

Ylva snapped, "*Shutdown!*"

The blue-violet light went out and the thing was drifting, drifting back down to the surface of Hector.

I said, "Why..."

She said, "It started putting out a hard gamma pulse."

"How, ah..."

"Really hard. If it weren't for the drug regimen, you'd be feeling pretty sick right now. We'll need to get you back aboard for emergency medical treatment. Spike those drugs up as far as you can tolerate, at least."

Jenny whispered, "*Lethal?*"

Oh, nice thought!

Ylva said, "For an unmod human, yes. As it is, I've got a few other problems I need to deal with. Some of my commercial electronics turn out



to be insufficiently radiation hardened. Cheap bastards.”

I thought about the dead alien pilot. I’m sure *he*’d know how she felt.

Jenny said, “I guess Callisto will probably notice this.”

Ylva laughed, and so did I, noticing I was indeed a wee bit queasy. “We’ll need to move out of here pretty quick.”

Ylva said, “Oh, there’s no more hurry than there ever was. There’s nothing they can do to get here any quicker. Orbital mechanics and available propulsion haven’t changed.”

Looking at the alien ship settled aslant on the rim of the hole, I said, “Well. Not yet.”

And Jenny said, “Move. Um. Where did you have in mind?”

“Well, that depends, doesn’t it?” I said. “Ylva, I’m just going to walk over, if you don’t mind. We can leave everything hooked up.”

She said, “Hurry.”

Somewhere deep inside, an old, old part of me whispered, *Well, well* , *well* ... and started to grin.

\* \* \* \*

When I was about twenty, bored with the lecture in some damned class I was taking at Northern Virginia Community College, I doodled in my notebook, and wrote a poem I called “The Neutron Bomb.” It wasn’t much of a poem, but it had one line I always remembered: “I lay for a week in shivering heat, and dreamed of my boyhood rooms...”

Now, shivering in a haze of fever dreams, I remembered the line, and the dying man in the poem, who said, “Then I saw soldiers come up my street, and they were armed with shovels and brooms.”

Sometimes, I could see the pressure-fed IV in my arm, see three little plastic baggies floating around, tethered to the wall by velcro, see the metal gang valve, the loopy plastic tubing, the needle taped to the inside of my elbow. Sometimes, I saw somebody change it, touch my sweaty brow, look worried. Ylva? Of course not, silly. She’s dee-ee-ay-dee dead. “Jenny?”

“Shh. Last batch.”

Suddenly alone in the room.

She'd blinked out like a light.

More likely the massive drug onslaught fucking with my cellular machinery than any side effect of the gamma pulse, but ... I suddenly felt cold, suddenly burst into a hot sweat, suddenly felt my bowels cramp. Slid away like a freeze frame ghost.

I was lying on the floor, not far from a red-brick fireplace, watching a black and white TV in a purplish-red metal cabinet. *Magnavox*. What does that mean? Loud voice.

Spaceship on the TV, an improbable cartoon spaceship, like a dirigible with fire coming out the tail, voiceover saying something about 1959, then something else about the far off world of 1970. Spaceship on its way to Mars.

Sudden, hard pulse in my chest. Rising excitement. 1970? That's no more than ten years away! Will they really get to Mars by then? Oh, sure, there've been satellites for a couple of years, and the Russians even shot a camera round the backside of the Moon, but *Mars*? No one's even been in orbit...

The cartoon, it seemed, was called “The Space Explorers.”

And in 1970, I would be twenty years old. Still in school. Oh, sure, college, kind of grown up, but still ... In 1970, I'd be too young to go on the first spaceship to Mars. I'd been counting on it taking a bit longer, a Willy Ley book I'd read claimed it would take twenty-five years to get to the Moon. Much better. I'd be thirty-five, the perfect age to be the First Man on the Moon, you see...

Felt my breath blow out hot as hell itself, cold sweat gathering on my cheeks, no gravity to make it run...

Brief vision of me and some fat friend, standing by the Canaveral countdown sign, watching the first launch of the Space Shuttle thanks to the press passes we'd finagled. I was thirty-one by then, and knew I wouldn't be going anywhere, not just anytime soon, but ever.

Jenny's voice, "That's it. Hope that didn't hurt." Well, it did, but who cares. "I'm going to take your catheter out now, okay?"

Sandpapery fingers on my empty crotch ... ow! Wait, that *does* hurt...

Me and Sarah standing on the Moon, looking up at Earth, standing just outside the airlock of the lander Standard ARM bought from tSpace, looking up at beautiful blue-white Earth in a dead black sky, talking about whether or not it would be worth our while to make a flight to Mars as part of drumming up investment, before pressing on to the oilfields of Jupiter's Trojan Asteroids...

What was it, maybe another three months before the FBI busted into our corporate headquarters in Denver? Poor Willie. Sarah. I miss the hell out of you both...

Fell asleep suddenly, and slept without dreams.

\* \* \* \*

Ylva's cameo floated over me, well, beside me anyway, floated outside my sleeping cocoon, and I could see Jenny, live and scaly gray-green, floating in the open hatch beyond. Ylva said, "Good. You're awake."

"Christ. How long?"

Jenny said, "Six days."

"Wow."

I thought about asking how I was doing, but ... I guess if I was a goner, I'd already be gone. "Situation?"

Ylva said, "Callisto sent a ship. There was a radio broadcast from HQ we could tap. They think the gamma burst was our reactor blowing up."

"They can't really blow up."

She grinned, sexy and conspiratorial. "That's what AndrewsSpace says, too. They're mad as hell about the broadcast."

"So, what? About three weeks?"

“Yep.”

From the doorway, Jenny said, “We’ve been busy while you were out. Figured out we could attach the derelict to the lander, use its motors to lift off Hector.”

I got a chill, heard my teeth start to chatter.

“We can dock the lander to *Anabasis* as soon as it’s clear of the asteroid, and use the main engine to pull away to a safe distance.”

“Safe from what?”

Ylva said, “Safe from running into Hector after we start the alien space drive.”

Cold sweat. “Last I remember, we decided we were crazy if we did that.”

Jenny laughed, which surprised me, and Ylva said, “I’d say I’m game, but I’m dead. What the hell do I know?”

\* \* \* \*

They’d been busy little beavers while I was away on fever sabbatical, having used the lander’s machinery to pull the alien spaceship the rest of the way onto the surface, then walked the lander over and secured it to the thing’s nose. Not really possible to weld it, as such, because the lander was carbon fiber with titanium hardpoints, while the alien’s hull was some weird beryllium alloy, but they’d managed a few explosive welds with mining caps here and there, then secured the rest with a couple of spools of composite cable.

I watched them lift *Anabasis* off the surface with the OAMS thrusters, then gotten inside so they could burp the main engine without roasting me again. Time to fly? That little tingly thrill in my fingertips, as always.

Somewhere inside me, the little boy who wanted to be a Space Explorer had waited patiently in some dark corner of my soul, while the man who was afraid of roller coasters and Ferris wheels, afraid to ride glass elevators up the outsides of tall buildings, afraid to drive his car over the Brooklyn Bridge, afraid, on some bad days, to climb a stepladder, lived out a half century in vain.

I remember the scared man was still alive the day the little boy made him get inside a SpaceX Dragon and wait for the countdown to finish. He was still alive for just a second as the rocket engines lit and that big Falcon 9 swayed, launch escape system tower tracing out a terrifying circle against the clouds.

Then he was no more.

I remember the look in Sarah's eyes when the ride was over and we were flying high above the Atlantic, high in Earth orbit. I remember how I felt when she whispered, "I *knew* you could do it."

I hadn't. Not until the moment when it turned out I could.

I made rendezvous with *Anabasis* a few kilometers up, Hector still a world-like wall outside, completed hard dock, powered down the lander, and pulled the hatch shut behind me, joining Jenny in the command module.

Ylva's cameo, more or less doll-like, but shifting a bit, back and forth between my sexpot and Jenny's giggly girlfriend, floated above the real world frame, through which we could see the lander's RMS arms moving, picking up cables and connectors, plugging *Anabasis* into the alien ship.

She said, "I'm going to pull back about a dozen kilometers or so. Give us a little fallback space."

"Is that far enough? What if..."

I said, "It might not be a bad idea if we're close enough that we fall back to Hector, should there happen to be trouble that doesn't kill us."

Ylva, looking amused. "Yeah. That way the Standard crew can find what's left."

In a bit, Hector was smaller in the freeze frames, though still a substantial, lopsided world blotting out a big patch of sky, like Earth seen from a couple of thousand kilometers up, making me remember those first stunning views from the later Gemini flights, the first ones to go above minimal low Earth orbit.

Long silence.

Nothing to say, except, "Y'all ready?"

Ylva laughed, "Your fake Southron accent is piss-poor, Zed!"

"Hey, I lived in North Carolina for forty years!"

Jenny murmured, "When? Fifty years ago? I still hear Boston."

Dawdling. Delaying tactics. Because we're both afraid? All afraid? Even Ylva? Are the dead afraid to die?

So I whispered, "No time like the present."

Ylva said, "*Go with throttle-up*. It really was funny, Mr. Zed."

Gallows humor.

Through the live-action frame, I could see blue-violet light start to shine around the lander's hull. I took a quick look at freeze frames full of data. Enough rems out there to kill an unprotected man in just a few minutes. Slight rise in here. Okay. Sitting here in the apex of *Anabasis's* CM, we were in the umbra of the shielding mass's shadow, both the lander and the alien, who probably needed pretty good shielding himself if he was going to ride that thing. That plus the hydrogen-rich polyethylene lining of the CM...

I felt myself start to settle against my seat straps, some slight acceleration pushing *Anabasis* backward, pushing us tail-foremost toward wherever, and Ylva said, "Interesting. Looks like 100 percent of the energy input is coming out through the gamma exhaust, like there's zero impedance anywhere in the system."

Weird. I said, "The blue light?"

"Just fluorescence from the pod material. The gamma's invisible, of course."

Jenny said, "Does that include the acceleration we're feeling?"

"No."

"Impossible."

I said, "Maybe so. I wonder if the gamma light itself is..."

Jenny said, "How much acceleration are we getting? I feel kind of..."

Ylva said, "The gamma light might manage 0.002g, if it were coherent enough."

"My butt says it's a lot more than that, kiddo."

"Yes. I've been increasing power input slowly. It appears there's some kind of maximum here. If I increase beyond roughly one megawatt, there's no further increase in acceleration."

Jenny said, "How much?"

"We're approaching 0.125g now."

When I looked out through the live-action frame, I could see Hector sliding to one side, sliding away and beginning to grow smaller. Looked at the clock, saw we'd been running the alien space drive for about five minutes, and said, "Gamma wavefront's going to cross that Standard ship in about forty minutes."

Ylva said, "It's *Bucephalos*, a brand new Model T mark 11, the best there is."

"Who...?"

"Mark du Cheyne."

"Oh, I know him. He's a good egg." I looked at Jenny. "Maybe willing to go along with saying you were against what we're doing."

She shook her head. "I don't think..." Then she pointed out through the live-action frame, where Hector was shrunk to the apparent size of a softball. "It's too late for that. Now where should we go? Earth?" That would be the UN, maybe. "Mercury?" China. "Vesta?" The Outer Planets Exploration Laboratory, technically a joint venture of Cal Tech and MIT, but really an agency of the US government. I knew the Director, but didn't know if he'd stick his neck out on the chopping block, no matter how big the reward.

I shrugged. "Anybody we take this to will just snatch it. One government or corporation is as bad as another."

Jenny said, "Then *what*?" Anger and desperation writ large on a

lizardgirl's face.

Ylva's cameo turned abruptly to *my* Ylva, eyes full of sly surmise. "I can see the wheels turning, Mr. Zed. I haven't forgotten you used to be CEO of Standard ARM."

There is that. I piddled in the nearest data frame and pulled up the most recent ephemeris we had in ship's memory.

Ylva said, "Or forgotten you were the one figured out there were oil wells in the sky, when everyone else was pissing around with space tourism bullshit."

Jenny said, "I knew who you were, Mr. Zed. I knew all along. It just didn't seem to mean anything anymore."

Prison killed the wonderful little boy just as surely as the rockets' red glare killed that terrified middle-aged man. Now, this here Mr. Zed's an all *new* man, not the dreaming schemer who created a space-faring civilization by sheer force of will. Right?

"Mr. Zed..."

Voice flat, I said, "Neptune's more or less on this side of the sun."

Ylva laughed. "I guess that ought to be far enough!"

Jenny said, "For now..."

\* \* \* \*

Because of the way we had the two ships jammed together, we had to use *Anabasis's* kerolox OAMS thrusters for steering all the way out to Neptune, burning all the way down to the 10 percent pressurized reserve in the ullage tanks.

Oxygen's easy to find in the outer solar system, water, water everywhere, but hydrocarbon fuel ... If we have to, I guess we can make a run to Titan. Plenty of power for the alien space drive, so we could put down next to one of those big rocketfuel lakes.

Ylva's cameo said, "Something funny, Mr. Zed?"



“Pretty much everything, here and now.”

“I know what you mean.” Sexy, lopsided smile.

From a low, loitering orbit, Nereid looks like a real world, real if a bit irregular and beat up, not too different from Hector—not surprising, given it’s much the same size. Colder and icier, I guess, but black from the dust between the worlds, black from the effects of sunshine, however wan and weak.

Way out here, the sun still showed a disk, far brighter than the brightest star, but hardly anything at all to a man who’d never been farther out than Jupiter’s orbit before. Way out here, the sky seemed full as can be, so full of stars I had trouble finding Neptune until I got used to looking in the right place.

Despite knowing better, I expected Neptune to look just the way it had in those old Voyager photos from when I was still shy of forty years old, huge and dull blue, with wispy white clouds and the slow-swirling mass of the Great Dark Spot.

It was tiny in the sky, hardly larger than Earth seen from the Moon, so small you could cover it with the tip of your pinkie, and dark, smudging away into the deep black sky until you’d stared for a while. Nereid’s in a ridiculous orbit, swinging between two and ten million kilometers from the planet. It was near periapsis now. From apo, I guess Neptune would just be a speck.

And that little orange sliver off to one side of the planet? That’d be Triton. There’s frozen ethane there we could process, if we had to.

Jenny came steaming from the shower, half wrapped in a fluffy white towel, both of us glad we had plenty of power for recycling, buckled herself into the flight engineer’s seat, and said, “Did you finish reading my reports?”

I nodded, still looking out the live-action frame at worlds beyond.

In the week we’d been here, ignoring laser illuminations and high-powered broadcasts coming from Callisto, Earth, and Mars, we’d poked about the alien ship, learning what we could about what was there and how it seemed to work. Which wasn’t much.

The private laser messages from Standard ARM talked mostly to Mr. Zed, calling him by his old name, making threats, most along the lines of,

“We should have killed you along with that fool Gilooly. But if you give us what you stole, maybe we’ll let you live this time too.”

The UN broadcast was public, and excited an uproar on Earth. A huge number of people had equipment that could pick up the gamma pulse from the space drive, enough of them cooperating to triangulate a moving source that went from the Fore Trojan Asteroids to Neptune’s moon Nereid in just a few days.

I could just about see the fury of the headlines, and wondered if people still used the phrase UFO. Alien invaders are here! Most, I assume, would suspect a government/corporate coverup.

The best part was, it would take the Standard ARM’s Saturn Fleet a year to get out here, once it got underway.

Hence, I suppose, finding something “funny.”

Slowly, I said, “I’ve never been very good at math, Jenny. I gather you think the alien space drive is somehow condensing vacuum energy to manipulate the local dark matter, and that’s where the acceleration comes from?”

She said, “Ylva did most of that part, all the math, anyway, but I think she’s right. The gamma exhaust is just waste energy, as near as I can tell. There’s no reason it should equal the input.”

Ylva said, “But it does, so there *must* be a reason. We just don’t know what it is.”

“And this ship could cross interstellar space.”

Slowly, “Well, yes. But it would take more than thirty years to reach Alpha Centauri. I don’t think the life support system would handle that, even for one pint-size foxface.”

“So ... either there was a mother ship, or the slagged part of the service module held an FTL drive?”

Ylva said, “No way to know.”

“No.” When I turned to face Jenny, Ylva obligingly merged her two cameos, giggly girl and sultry sexpot blending into a china doll. Doll with a look in its eye and a sly smile on its lips. “Do you think we could reproduce

the hardware?”

“Well ... I think so.”

“Would what we built work?”

“Well...” Discomfort on her lizardface.

Ylva said, “We already took crucial bits apart during the documentation process. Everything we took apart and put back together still works.”

Jenny said, “It’s just a mass of gizmos, pieces and parts we can replicate, that do God knows what. Unless there are invisible parts...”

If you handed over a DC-3 to a member of a Cargo Cult, and said, “John Frum wants you to build another one of these,” what would he do? Hell, a New Guinean from the early twentieth century was a Neolithic farmer. The foxface aliens aren’t *that* far ahead of us.

This is more like going back to 1903 and giving a vintage 1950 F-86 Sabrejet to Wilbur and Orville, and saying, “Guys? *This* is what you’re trying to build.”

Jenny said, “The only way to know is to try, and we aren’t going to manage that out here.”

I said, “No. We’re going to need some competent physicists, and a *good* engineer or two. Maybe an industrial metallurgist ... I kind of have some guys in mind, if I can...”

Jenny said, “We’ll need to get back into the inner solar system.”

Ylva said, “They’ll see us, wherever we go.”

“Yep.”

“Mr. Zed, we can’t go on much farther, whatever you decide. The setup we put together is damaging the ship’s structure. The common berthing mechanism between the lander and the CM is eating the sway when we run either the space drive or the nuke.”

“This can be our first opportunity to see if we understand the field modulus device.”

Jenny said, "Um..."

I laughed. "The first corporate rule for taking possession of an unpatented process or device is to give it a proper name. We'll have to see about getting that one trademarked."

You could see she was baffled by that.

Ylva said, "So you think we're going to outsmart the government, the UN, Standard ARM, everyone?"

I nodded.

Jenny snarled, "How'd that work *before*?"

I said, "Prison gave me a little time to think. I was always a little slow. It's why I got such bad grades in school." I'd finished high school with a D-average, down in the bottom 5 percent of the Class of 1968, and had flunked out of college on my first try.

Ylva said, "I've spent some time studying your career, Mr. Zed. My son was a big fan of yours, and wanted to be just like you when he grew up."

Poor choice, kid. But I said, "I'm sorry I never got to meet him, Ylva."

"He might be somewhere still. I am."

"True." A little pang of sorrow for her, then I said, "We know we can take stuff apart and put it back together the same way, so I suppose we can manage a little harmless reconfiguration. Dismount what we need from the alien's ship and install it in our cargo space. We won't need the mining equipment again soon, so we can just leave it here with the alien hull."

Jenny said, "And the radiation?"

Ylva said, "It's all coming from the two gamma exhaust blisters. We can mount them on either side of the Z-pinch reactor. We're well shielded from that. Cables can run between the radiator vanes, and we'll be fine."

"We'll be good to go anywhere we want."

Jenny exploded, "And where the Hell is *that*?"

I smiled, and saw Ylva was smiling with me, doll face shifting away to become my sexpot once more. “I’ve played this game before, Jenny. Won one, lost one. I intend to win this round.”

“How?”

“Well, once we get reconfigured, let’s put all the gas we can spare into the lander. You drop me off back along Vesta’s orbit, say a few hundred kilometers out, far enough out you’ll be able to outrun a missile. Then you can make a pitstop on Titan to refuel, come on out here and wait for me to call. You can resume researching just how our field modulus device seems to work.”

Voice quiet, Jenny said, “So you trust the OPEL director not to turn you over?”

I shrugged. “I don’t trust anyone, Jenny. Not anymore. It’s just the best place to start. If I can turn his head with dreams of starships, maybe I can get through to the Chinese, too. They quit the UN for a reason.”

“And the Chinese, you think, will...”

“Doesn’t matter. Once I’ve secured this thing, once I show them I’ve got a product to sell, an *investment* property, a thousand capitalists will get in line behind me, and Standard ARM will back down. Once that happens, hell, the US government isn’t much more than corporate money, nowadays.”

She said, “That’s a long row of ifs, Mr. Zed.”

“Yep. One damned thing after another.”

“And it all depends on that first if, OPEL.”

I said, “OPEL’s got something to gain besides money and power. Other than me, they were the only ones looking beyond immediate financial gain, to a bright dream of a world without end. Right now, they’re dependent on money and politics for their budget. But if we can cut them in, without letting them gain control...”

She said, “What if you’re wrong? What if they torture you?”

I smiled. “What if ? *You’re* the one knows how this thing works, if

anyone does. All I know is what it *looks* like. They can torture me to *death* and won't learn a damn thing!"

Pained expression. "But what *if*?"

I shrugged. "If they kill me, and come after you ... run."

"Where?"

Another shrug. "Alpha Centauri? You might make it."

You could just about see the lightbulb go on over her head.

Once upon a time, a brave little boy dreamed an interesting dream.

And dreams, I think, still have power.

\* \* \* \*

Just about sixteen years later, I stood in front of the fireplace in my expansive office suite in the corporate headquarters of the Eighth Ray Scientific-Industrial Enterprise, ERSIE to its friends, aboard the executive segment of the shipyard we'd built at the L1 Sun-Earth Libration Center.

We'd had artificial gravity for years, so when I built the office, I had them put in a nice wood-burning fireplace. If you listened closely, over the crackle of the flames, you could hear the soft hiss of the exhaust pump making sure no combustion byproducts got away. When *Global Times* interviewed me last year, they featured it on the cover as an example of how decadent an executive's conspicuous consumption could be.

"Richest man in the solar system."

Bah.

I liked to stand and warm myself in front of the fireplace, arms clasped behind my back, deep in thought, looking at my gray old lizard face reflected in the burnished stainless steel of Sarah's plain old funeral urn.

Ashes to ashes.

It's one fate you can't come back from.

Sorry.

So sorry.

It's not all my fault, but it sure feels that way, maybe always will.

Others were luckier.

Once we'd beaten them down, once the newly created United Nations Intereconomic System, bribed by those thousand lesser capitalists, offered me a guarantee of full civil and economic rights, I went back to Earth, escorted everywhere by a cadre of uniformed "security officers," mostly disgruntled former Standard ARM men now in my employ, buffered further by my own invisible network of spies.

Minnie Gilooly, it turned out, was still alive, had gotten hold of the drugs in time to avoid Sarah's fate, and had been clever enough to get her husband's corpse away from the FBI, get him up to Canada and safely into a TransTime nitrogen canister for his long ride into the unknown. He's too dead for immediate recovery, of course, but sitting safely in a shielded vault alongside my office, right beside a vacuum box holding that nameless foxfaced alien.

When I turned away from the fireplace to look out my window, I could see a million stars, among them the faint silvery smudge of Halley's Comet. It wasn't even as good as the apparition that came when I was thirty-something, but we'd done a booming business selling passenger ships to companies taking tourists out to see it close up.

When I was young and disappointed by the Comet of a Lifetime, I swore if I was still alive next time around, I'd ride out to see it in person. Bold talk for someone who'd be decades dead by the time his 112th birthday came around! And now that it was here, I hadn't bothered. When you've walked on comets, merely seeing them's not such a big thrill.

Others weren't so lucky.

Oh, sure, Jenny went home to her kids, went off the old drugs and turned back into a human woman, ready to resume a normal human life, at least for a while. Her oldest son Darius came up here when he finished school, and I put him to work. He's managing our research facilities on Nereid now, and doing a bangup job.

The bribes it took at the UN to secure ownership of that one little world were staggering, though it helped I had OPEL in my corner, laying

claim to their own Vesta, once they'd seceded, taken a seat at the UN, quit being subject to US law.

Ylva...

No sign of her kids.

Not even dead and buried.

No record of them ever having existed.

Maybe Standard ARM. Maybe the FBI. Hell, I don't know. Maybe hidden away in waiting, for when they needed some leverage, someday?

Ylva, 90 percent computer chips, 10 percent "human CNS tissue." Ylva just a face in a cameo, telling me she'd come out of the machine for me, if she could. Well, my researchers came up with a way to do it, something called a Body Double, derived from the brainless medical clones they grow when someone needs spare parts. It's illegal as hell on Earth. But we're not on Earth.

The idea is, you graft a person's forebrain into the clone, get it to heal into one piece using stem cell techniques, and they get a new body. There's a personality of sorts in the discarded forebrain that came with the clone, which takes about three years to manufacture, but that's life in a nutshell. Sorry, kid. Make room for Daddy.

The problem for Ylva was, the CNS tissue in the computer wasn't her whole forebrain, and the hardware parts had become as much a part of her as the neurons. Take that apart, graft it into the Body Double, and Ylva the Machine would be just as dead as Ylva the Woman.

In the end, what we did was add chipsets to the clone, and make a radio link with Ylva the Machine. Hard to tell how well that worked, though neither the sexpot in the cameo nor the odd, staring young woman walking around ERSIE seemed to complain much.

One night she turned up at my bedroom suite behind the office, seeming ill at ease, unable to look me in the eye. I waited. Eventually, she blurted out, "I *told* you I wanted to come out of the machine for you, Mr. Zed!" Then she burst into tears.

Took a while to get her calmed down, get her talking. No sense, she said, in seeing her husband. It'd only confuse him, screw up the new life



he's made for himself down on the flatlands of Earth.

He's happy, she said. I think he's *happy*.

I'd like to tell you I sent her away, made her go find a new human life for herself, but it's not so. Some part of me was awful damned glad we had better antirad drugs nowadays. I might still look like a hairless old lizard man, getting started on his second century of life, but some more human parts of me were making an attempt at a comeback.

Mostly, she's still the sexpot in the cameo, mostly still that supernaturally human computer command subsystem, doing my dirty work in a world made of streaming data. But the Body Double comes to me, now and again, and in the morning, the girl in the cameo seems happier.

For a little while, I even managed to buy an interest in Standard ARM. Not a controlling interest. Not even enough for a seat on the Board. Just as I was reaching for that, the Fed stepped in and put a stop to it, ran a full court press to force me out.

No amount of bribes at the UN, no amount of politicking in the newly formed Solar Board of Trade Regents, helped reverse that. I was too rich, and too many people were afraid of me now. But it sure was fun to try. Scared the hell out of 'em, I bet.

It was easier than I expected to suppress the discovery itself. It helped that we'd found and hidden all the evidence, dragging stuff off to Nereid where no one could get it. But I think it helped a whole lot more that Standard and the Feds wanted the truth suppressed as much as we did. By the time their captive media were through, everyone who speculated we'd found an alien spacecraft got forced into the middle of a crowd of foil-hat conspiracy theorists.

A couple of years ago, they gave a Nobel Prize in Physics to ERSIE researchers Jennifer Murphy and Ylva Johanssen for the invention of the ever-so-magical field modulus device that had revolutionized human civilization. Jenny gave the speech, of course.

They even let me sit on the stage and smile during the awards ceremony in Oslo.

Times change, and we are changed within them.

So we learned how the alien space drive worked, learned how to build

copies for ourselves. But one thing we haven't learned is where that shipwrecked sailor came from, or how he got here.

The thing is, he was expecting someone to come for him. Maybe he got a signal off, maybe not. And now it doesn't matter anymore. Sooner or later, if they're still out there, they'll detect the field signature of their technology emanating from this insignificant star.

Then they'll come looking.

With any luck at all, I'll be here to greet them.