

Power

by E.S. Strout

Zeta-2 Reticuli is a sunlike star in the Reticulum constellation. It forms a binary system with the Zeta-1 star. It has planets, one of which is occupied by an intelligent race of beings, who have developed faster than light technology for spacecraft based on interaction between radioactive elements uranium and plutonium. The process is limited in scope to fuel for nuclear energy plants, spacecraft and public utilities. They have been unsuccessful; in attempts to produce a small-scale nuclear engine to power military land vehicles, civilian automobiles and aircraft.

Recently the Z2R space probe *Alpha Epsilon* has approached planet Earth and discovered a scientist who had developed a cold fusion process to power a small ground vehicle. Their government, after much discussion, approved a plan to acquire the technology.

“You mean steal it,” the leading minority faction member accused.

The senior council member was quoted later as saying to the dissenting members, “These aliens do not have faster than light interplanetary capability. Even if they detect us, *Alpha Epsilon* will disappear before they can react.”

1.

Monday, 3 December 2018: Encoded transmission from Z2R *Alpha Epsilon*:

We remain invisible, stationary within third planet's atmosphere. Subatomic particle signature confirmed. Location is alien scientist's research laboratory. His compute is impenetrable to us.

Z2R Space Command to Probe *Alfa Epsilon*:

Use of cerebral cortical probe authorized.

2.

Space Corps/NASA Complex, Cape Canaveral, Florida. Tuesday, 4 December 2018.
1033 hours:

The two year-old green Toyota Prius suddenly careened, spun and impacted a light pole. Its driver side window was a spiderweb of cracks and the door crumpled. Paramedics and base security personnel arrived within minutes.

3.

Base Infirmary, 1230 hours:

“You were lucky, Professor Maas,” thirty year-old slim, blond and ice-blue eyed Susan Grant, M.D. said. She completed suturing the last of severafacial lacerations, gave him a reassuring smile. “EMT’s said you were conscious.”

“I was dazed.”

“Any recollections, Dr. Maas?” 48 year-old stocky and dark haired Security Chief Aaron Blake asked in a concerned Georgia-Florida drawl.

“I sensed numbers, Aaron.”

“Numbers?”

“Yes. In groups of four.”

“He has a mild concussion,” Dr. Grant said. “Such hallucinatory events are common, but transient.”

Thirty-four year old subatomic particle physicist Adrian Maas interlaced tremulous fingers in his lap. “I do not hallucinate, Susan. What can you tell me about your fancy test results?”

She scanned results on her desktop computer screen, “Your cranial x-rays are negative but the MRI shows some odd frontal lobe activity, Dr. Maas. I’d like to keep you here overnight as a precaution.”

“I’ll be okay. Mr. Blake insists I give him a statement.”

Dr. Grant nodded. She swabbed the suture lines with antiseptic, then held up a hand mirror. “What do you think?”

He gave her a faint smile. “Looks like I’ve been attacked by Betsy Ross on LSD.”

A raised eyebrow and blue-eyed wink. “I really hate working on you Mensa types. These should heal without scarring. Please come by my office at about nine on Thursday morning so I can check my embroidery.”

4.

Security Office, 1325 hours:

“Dr. Maas, We’ve gone over your car,” Blake said. “Brakes and steering are okay. Something must have distracted you.”

“A major headache, Aaron.” He massaged his temples. “Our computer hacker has been a distraction.”

“I know. Multiple attempts on your classified research files.”

Maas nodded. “I’ve been lucky and blocked them all so far. What have you found?”

Blake gave Maas an odd grin and handed over a printout. “We picked up this transmission. Groups of four numbers, like you said. Source still undetermined. Whoever this guy is, he’s a pro.”

Dr. Maas studied the page for several seconds, handed it back. “It’s a numeric code, Aaron. I’m sure of it.”

“NASA and CIA cryptographers are working on it.”

“Have them run foreign languages as well.”

5.

Wednesday, 5 December. 0927 hours:

“You gotta be kidding,” Maas said as he massaged his temples with stiff fingertips. He chewed four Tylenol tablets and swallowed them with a gulp of tepid coffee. “Bitch of a headache.”

Security Chief Blake said, “No luck on the code so far, compadre. They’ve run it in Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Farsi and Arabic. Been working on it all night. But we know where it comes from.” He aimed an index finger at the ceiling. “Out there somewhere.”

Maas shook his head. “Not too precise, Aaron. Aircraft? Satellite?”

“Neither. We’ve checked. The Air Force concentrated on the local area. No hits on their most sophisticated radar. No fighter jets were scrambled. No target.”

Maas shook his head in bewilderment. “Come on, Aaron. A UFO?”

“You got a better idea, Doc?”

6.

Thursday, 6 December. 1115 hours. Dr. Grant's office:

She finished her examination of the suture lines, swabbed the bridge of Maas's nose with peroxide. "A bit of redness here. I'll give you some stronger antibiotic cream. Three times a day, now don't forget," she warned. "Can't have a hotshot scientist coming down with a staph infection. What kept you?"

Maas hung his head, blushed. "Overslept, Sue."

She nodded. "You were only two hours late for your appointment. Anything you want to tell me?"

"I had lunch at the Officers Club yesterday afternoon. Some friends decided I needed more pain medication after seeing my face."

Dr. Grant regarded him with a penetrating clinical eyeball. "Your right hand has a tremor. How many?"

"Three or four. Maybe five."

Susan sighed, shook her head. "Why are you 180-plus IQ brainiacs always the worst patients?"

"Jack Daniels Tennessee sippin' whiskey on the rocks cured my headache, Susan. Shouldn't ethanol make it worse?"

"I would think so," she said as she paged through his clinical record. "You had a headache before your accident according to Mr. Blake."

He nodded.

"You're sure it was before the accident?"

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath. "Yes. Worst one yet."

"You've had others?"

"Yes. Starting about the time an unidentified hacker tried to break into my classified project files. I've been a little stressed."

"I'd say that's more like a major anxiety episode."

Maas nodded. "Very sensitive files. Security Level Q-7."

Grant gave him a pert grin. “Same as mine, Dr. Maas. I’m no hotshot physicist, but I treat and do flight physicals on all our astronauts.”

“Q-7. Hmm,” he said with a shy smile. “I could show it to you.”

She returned his grin. “Your project? You’re sure?”

“I am.”

“All right. I can swap days with Dr. Mitsuhashi tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow morning around ten. Room 101, Building E as in Echo. Don’t overdress. The lab is a bit scruffy.”

7.

Friday, December 7. 0955 hours:

Susan pressed the fingerprint pad and blinked at the retinal scan. Security Chief Aaron Blake nodded. “Q-7. Good. Come with me, Dr. Grant.”

“This is Professor Maas’s lab,” he said. A hand printed 3x5 inch card Scotch Taped to the door of Room 101 read: THERE IS NO GRAVITY. THE EARTH SUCKS.

Dr. Grant smiled. “He does have an odd sense of humor.”

Blake nodded. “Always has.”

Dr. Maas’s office held a government issue gray metal desk, two chairs and a desktop MacBook Pro. Stacks of paperwork covered the ink-stained blotter. A Mr. Coffee steamed on a shelf in one corner. A cryptogram and a Diabolical Sudoku from the morning *Orlando Sentinel* lay on the desktop, both solved.

“Dr. Maas? It’s me,” Susan called.

“Hi Sue. Grab some coffee. I’m in the lab.”

The five-foot ten sandy-haired rail-thin researcher smiled. “You dressed for the occasion. Good.”

She wore a windbreaker jacket over a blue NASA sweatshirt and Levi’s. Running shoes and heavy white athletic socks. “Gets a bit chilly here in December.” She held up the newspaper. “You do cryptograms and the toughest Sudoku in ink. I’m impressed.”

“They just pop into my head. Strange, huh?”

She sipped coffee. “You were a cryptographer according to your file.”

“A year at Langley. I was good, got bored. There are bigger challenges here. For one, this hacker is giving Aaron and I headaches.”

Susan massaged her forehead. “I’m starting to get one.”

Maas nodded. “Me too. I’m intrigued that Jack Daniels improved mine yesterday. Tylenol has little effect. Any ideas, Doctor?”

“I’ll work on it.”

Dr. Grant gave the laboratory a calculating eyeball. “Looks like my Dad’s auto parts store and garage. He works on sports cars there. Here’s some Chevy V-8 and Ford engine parts,” she said. “And transmission components. Stick shift. Not what I’d expect in a subatomic particle physicist’s lab.”

Adrian grinned. “I’m impressed. You know your cars.”

She sniffed the air. “Motor oil, transmission fluid. Odd. I don’t smell any gasoline.”

“Come with me.”

8.

He punched digits on a keypad in the green tile wall. A steel pocket door retracted to reveal a well-lighted descending stairway that led to a spacious garage.

A glistening black sports car crouched panther-like on the concrete deck. Grant blinked in surprise. “1968 Chevy Corvette. Nice restoration.”

“A hobby, Sue. Took me two years.”

An expectant gleam in her eyes. “May I . . . ?”

“It’s a five-speed transmission.”

“Automatic is for wimps.”

“Good answer.” Adrian pressed a wall switch and the outer garage door folded up. He opened the Corvette’s driver side door for her. “Press the red START button, left side of the instrument panel.”

She did, then again. “Nothing happened.”

“Takes a few seconds to warm up. Watch for a green light over the tachometer.”

“There’s green.” She donned a *Florida Marlins* baseball cap and aviator sunglasses from her spacious purse. “Let’s go.”

“Wait.” Adrian eyed a small dashboard screen. It read 0.00. “Good.”

Sue tapped impatient fingers on the steering wheel. “What’s good?”

“We’re ready. Watch for cross traffic, turn right.”

Susan eased the Corvette into first gear. There was a faint mechanical murmur as the transmission engaged. “I can’t hear the engine, Adrian.”

“Easy now,” he cautioned. “Base speed limit is 25 mph. Go one mile, take a left at the T intersection and stop.”

9.

The Corvette idled, its engine an urgent whisper. Dusty wind-blown macadam stretched out ahead in the chilly air. “Where to, Adrian?”

A grin as he checked her seat belt harness. “You’re leading the last lap of the Daytona 500 with Jeff Gordon trying to take downforce off your spoiler and pass you on the inside. Now hit it.”

G-forces pinned them to their seat backs as the Corvette pounced. “Bye-bye Jeff!” Dr. Grant screamed as she pounded the steering wheel with a gloved fist.

“Perimeter fence coming up in a mile, Sue,” Adrian said. “Ease off your revs and stop there.”

The Corvette eased to a halt with a contented purr. “Do I get a look at your power plant?” Susan asked as she stepped out.

Dr. Maas nodded. He popped the hood latch to reveal a dull gray spherical containment structure with complex circulation duct components. “It powers a little steam turbine connected to the drive shaft. It releases clean steam vapor as exhaust.” He rested a hand on its smooth surface. “Cool as an Eskimo Pie. The fuel source and primary heat exchanger are insulated and shielded.”

Grant removed her sunglasses, stared. “A nuclear reactor? It’s so small.”

“Complex process, Susan. This is the prototype. It depends on muon interaction with . . .”

Grant stopped him with a hand on his arm. “Keep it simple, Prof.”

Maas grinned. “Muons are subatomic particles with a very short half-life. If they don’t decay they can expedite fusion of tritium atoms at room temperature. I made them not decay. It’s cold fusion, Susan. The radioactive components still must be shielded.”

A perceptive nod. “I’ll bet this is what your hackers are after.”

10.

1235 hours: Probe Z2R *Alpha Epsilon* to Space Command:

Mind probe of security alien not useful. Female medical type equivocal. Will intensify attempts on scientist.

Z2R Space Command response:

Success is imperative. No alternatives.

When they returned to Adrian’s lab the message waiting light was blinking. Dr. Maas listened, blinking with concern. “Thank God.”

“Adrian? What is it?”

“It was Security Chief Blake. He was admitted to the infirmary with severe headaches. They did tests, all normal. The headaches quit and he signed himself out.”

“I’d better look at his test results . . .” Susan winced, rubbed her forehead. “Ow. Now I have one.” She took three Tylenols, chewed, gagged and swallowed without water.

Maas stumbled to his desk chair. “Mine is back too. How odd. I sense numbers again.” He reached in a desk drawer, removed a pint bottle of Jack Daniels. “Now don’t get antsy, Susan. This is an experiment. It worked yesterday.” He took a swallow as Grant favored him with a skeptical eye. “Hmm. Headache’s easing up now. Numbers still there, very clear.”

“Write them down,” Dr. Grant gasped as she massaged her temples.

He scrawled 7146 3214 8804 9601 in pencil on a memo pad.

“How do you do that?” she asked as the computer screen confirmed the figures from the intercepted transmission.

“They mean something,” Adrian said. “I’m certain.”

Dr. Grant exhaled a sigh of relief. “My headache just quit. Gone in an instant, like a switch was turned somewhere.”

Maas took another swallow. “You’re lucky. Got any more esoteric tests that could help me figure this out?”

Susan picked up the phone and began to punch digits. “I’ll try. Give me an hour or so to do some research, then go to the Neurology lab. It’s room 304 in the Imaging Complex. When they finish, come back to my office.”

11.

Dr. Grant’s office. 1500 hours.

Susan was studying a computer image when Dr. Maas arrived. “How did it go, Adrian?”

He plopped in a chair. “They were waiting for me. What’s a PET scan?”

“Positron Emission Tomography. It lights up areas of increased brain activity.” She turned the screen. “Here’s yours.”

“Wow. Looks like a fireworks display.”

“That’s your frontal lobe cortex. It’s involved with intuitive and cognitive functions. Definitely hyperactive.” She clicked another key. “Your MRI right after the accident. Suggestive but not conclusive.” Dr. Grant pulled up another image. “This is Mr. Blake’s PET scan, taken when he was admitted with his headache attack.” She clicked another key. “And this one is mine, taken an hour before yours. No fireworks in either.”

Dr. Maas massaged his neck with both hands. “So my frontal lobes are working overtime. Explanation, Susan?”

She pushed a current Neurology Research journal across the desk. “Take a look.”

Adrian scanned the highlighted text and shrugged. “That’s a mouthful, Susan. Way over my head.”

“The authors believe that ethanol may increase the sensitivity of molecular receptors in the sensory neural synapses of a few individuals.”

He gave her a questioning look. “You mean like me? I’m one of the few?”

Dr. Grant nodded. “You could be hypersensitive to external stimuli. Like those weird transmissions. There’s something else, too, that goes along with it.”

She pressed a computer key and another image came on the screen. “This is the MRI of your brain taken right after the accident, I missed this before because I was just looking for trauma.” She tapped on the screen with a pencil point. These two little areas on the temporal lobes are hypertrophic cerebral tissue.”

“You lost me again, Sue. What does this mean?”

Grant grabbed a textbook of central nervous system anatomy from a shelf behind her and flipped pages as Adrian looked over her shoulder. She put a finger on an area of temporal lobe cortex. “This folded area of cerebral cortex is called Heschl’s Gyrus. That’s where the hypertrophic changes are in your brain.”

Professor Maas scratched his head. “So you’re telling me it’s not normal?”

Susan opened another book, laid it open and removed the bookmark. She turned it so Adrian could see. “Read the paragraph highlighted in yellow.”

He nodded. “Individuals with this rare anomaly are proficient at word and number puzzles. They may be quite adept at learning foreign languages. No association with heredity has been discovered as yet.”

“It fits. My first job at Langley was cryptography. I found it simple and boring. I used to submit cryptograms and Sudoku puzzles to the *Washington Post*.”

Susan’s cell phone broke into The Beatles’ *Yellow Submarine*. “Dr. Grant here. Of course, Mr. Blake. Bring it right over.”

“What?”

“I don’t know, but he’s pretty excited.”

12.

Blake handed Dr. Grant a disc with Confidential printed on its label. “Some folks in U.C. Berkeley’s Astronomy Department. picked this up. NASA believes it’s our hacker. Your Q-7 password opens it.”

She slid it into the drive slot, tapped a flurry of keystrokes as Aaron Blake and Adrian peered over her shoulder. A logo followed by *Allen Radiotelescope Array* appeared at

the top of the page. Another series of numbers followed. “What are these?” she asked.

Blake shrugged. “Beats me.”

Dr. Maas said: “I think I know. Keep going, Susan.”

She pressed another series of keys. A star chart appeared, with a red circle emphasizing a small cluster in the center. A bemused smile. “Adrian?”

“Celestial coordinates. Enlarge it and get a printout.”

They spread it out on one of Susan’s examining tables. Adrian read the text aloud. “Zeta Reticuli. A constellation with multiple star systems. 39 light years from Earth. Two-way streams of numeric code from there to us.”

Blake smiled. “A UFO, Doctors.”

Adrian nodded. “So it seems. Just a foreign language, only not of Earth. Who are they? What are they doing here?”

Susan grabbed his arm. “Think, Adrian. Get your anomalous cerebral cortex working. Get past the headache.”

“Right.” He took a swallow of Jack Daniels. “Don’t worry, Aaron. This is legitimate therapy approved by Dr. Grant.”

“Adrian,” Sue gasped. I didn’t mean . . .”

“Hush up, Susan. My Heschl’s Gyrus is speaking to me,” he said. “Move over.”

13.

Maas took two more large swallows, made a gagging sound. He pressed fingertips against his temples, squeezed his eyelids shut. “Good God,” he muttered. “These numbers. I thought so.”

Susan and Blake stared as Dr. Maas hammered keys. “I can decode their messages now. Their syntax is a bit weird, but I can approximate. Here it comes.”

Probe ZR-2 *Alpha Epsilon* transmission:

Brain probe failure. Neural function altered by unusual organic chemical imbalance in target scientist. Pathways are conjoined. It can decode our transmissions . . . we have power vehicle coordinates.

Z2R Space Command response:

Acquire and return at once.

Dr. Grant gave the screen a worried stare. “Acquire? What does that mean?”

“I know.” Maas stumbled to his feet. “Give me a hand here Blake, Susie. The garage. Hurry.” he shouted in a drunken slur. “We’ve only got minutes.”

14.

1620 hours:

“Susan, Aaron, wait in my office. You’ll be safe there.”

It seemed an eternity to fumble into the HAZMAT suit in Adrian’s inebriated state. Longer to make a small change under the Corvette’s hood. He slammed it shut, just missing a fingertip. “This better be right,” he whispered in a barely decipherable mutter.

Seconds later there was a blinding flash.

“Whew. Just in time,” he said as he shed the HASMAT gear in the office,

“Oh no,” Sue wailed. “The Corvette?”

Maas nodded. “Gone They have teleportation capability, but they can’t transmit organic structures. They’d have grabbed me if they did.”

“How can you know that?” a skeptical Security Chief asked.

“Heschel’s Gyrus and Jack Daniels, Aaron. Susan will explain,” he slurred. “I can hear, sense, feel all input from them and their craft’s data banks now. Their ship is fueled by plutonium,” Dr. Maas said. “Their mind probe caused the headaches.”

“What did you do in the garage?” Susan asked.

I took a chance,” he said. “Muons are very reactive if their half-life is prolonged, especially with other radioactive elements. Like in the aliens’ plutonium reactor.”

“You removed the shielding.” Blake said.

“I did.”

“Good God, Adrian,” Susan shrieked. “They are more technically advanced than us. Stealth and FTL technology, tachyon transmission capability and teleportation. They’re

aiming some kind of weird weapon at us right now.”

Maas hiccuped, excused himself, giggled. “They don’t have one, Susie. They only want to steal my cold fusion discovery. We assume alien races will be more advanced,” he slurred. “These guys are inept klutzes. They couldn’t crack my files and their mind probe only gave us headaches.”

“Hell of a first contact scenario,” Adrian muttered. “All they had to do was ask. We could have shared technology. Damn.”

Security Chief Blake raised a skeptical eyebrow. “What happens now, amigo?”

“Help me to Susie’s office before I fall on my face,” he mumbled. “Then surf the all-news channels on her TV. You’ll see.”

15.

1730 hours:

Susan poured a fourth cup of strong black coffee for Dr. Maas as he held an ice bag to his throbbing skull. “You’re going to be hung over for a week, Adrian. You put away a lot of Jack Daniels.”

“Here it is, Doctors,” Blake said as he hit the volume.

BREAKING NEWS. Science Editor Randall Roberts reporting:

A sudden bright flash was seen at 5:02 P.M, EST by an orbiting telescope. Not a known asteroid or comet, about half way between Mars orbit and Jupiter. Satellites with radiation detection capability report a burst of gamma rays and subatomic particles, consistent with a major nuclear incident. Updates to follow. Stay tuned to Fox News . . .

Blake’s cell phone tweeted. He listened for a full minute, shook his head. “I’ll tell them,” he said with a dubious frown.

“What?” Susan asked.

“We’re wanted,” Blake said with a sour grimace. “Homeland Security, FBI, CIA, NASA, and the Air Force are all lining up debrief us.”

“I think I’m getting another headache,” Dr. Maas groaned.

“I can get more Jack Daniels,” Blake said with a wry grin. He barely dodged Maas’s flung icebag.

“Professor Maas needs a more sensitive type of therapy, Mr. Blake,” Susan said. She took Adrian’s hand and gave his sutured face a delicate but tender kiss.

Susan entered a saved number on her cell phone as Adrian napped beside her, snoring softly. She spoke for a couple of minutes. “Thanks, Dad. I know Adrian will be very pleased.”

Blake gave her a questioning look.

Susan smiled. “My father knows somebody with a first generation 1955 Ford Thunderbird. An antique T-Bird. It’s in need of some serious restoration.”

The End