

Z2R-4

By E.S. Strout MD

Zeta-2 Reticuli: A sunlike star in the Reticulum constellation. It forms a binary star system with Zeta-1 Reticuli. Z2R is about 39.4 light years from Earth and has planets. It is not visible from the Northern Hemisphere. Some science fiction writers believe Z2R is the home of aliens that have visited Earth.

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1.

Astronomy Department, JPL/Space Corps laboratories, Pasadena, California. Tuesday, 2 February 2021. 1055 hours:

Air conditioning kept the gray-tiled laboratory space at a constant seventy degrees. Mozart's Coronation Concerto played softly through hidden speakers. The room's two occupants eyed a computer screen image.

Thirty-six year old Marcia Westover, Department Head, gulped black coffee from a china JPL cup and chewed two antacid tablets. She brushed loose tawny curls from her face, then tapped a fingernail on the screen.

"Look here, Tom. This is from our intergalactic probe NEPTUNE IV."

Twenty-eight year old astrophysicist Thomas Kastner rolled his chair closer. He pulled a Marlboro from a crumpled pack and tucked it behind an ear. He responded to Westover's raised eyebrow with a wink.

"For outside, Marcie. After lunch break."

She nodded. "Okay, but don't you worry about your lungs, Tommy?"

He grinned.

"About as much as you worry about your stomach lining."

Then he squinted at the screen. "From NEPTUNE IV, you say? I don't recognize this constellation."

Marcia nodded.

“Reticulum Rhomboidalis, Tom. It translates loosely from the Latin as The Net.”

“Been spending too much time on the Upsilon Andromedae system, I guess. What’s our interest in this one?”

She swallowed more coffee, then another antacid tablet.

“I’ll show you. Pull it up on our galaxy’s database.”

2.

Dr. Kastner tapped computer keys. Scrolling pages of text replaced the tachyon image.

“Here we are, boss. Reticulum Rhomboidalis, a minor Southern Hemisphere constellation.”

Dr. Westover pressed another key. An expanded star field appeared. “Three days ago an Earth-sized planet appeared in the Zeta-2 Reticuli system. Fourth from the star, designated Z2R-4.”

She tapped a pencil point on the screen.

“Right here. Spectroscopy confirms it has an oxygen atmosphere.”

Kastner’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Earth sized? I’m impressed. My system has only Jupiter-type gas giants with methane and cyanide atmospheres. Not very hospitable.”

He scrolled more data.

“Hmm. Bioscans show diffuse life signs. Has anyone from xenobiology seen this?”

“Bill Farris. Ph.D in botany. Department Head and major nerd. Thinks it’s plant growth. Insists we send a team to go EVA and collect samples.”

Kastner squinted a single eyelid.

“Insists? Typical nerd-biologist response. I’m skeptical, boss.”

“We can’t risk a team now, Marcie. We don’t have enough information. Sudden appearance of a new planet? Suspicious, I’d say.”

Marcia yawned, rubbed her eyes.

“I agree, Tom. It doesn’t appear in old Hubble-II photos. The NEPTUNE IV probe is the first one with high definition lenses and tachyon imagery boost. Brings us photos in real time.”

“So where was it before?”

Westover gaped a cavernous yawn.

“Wish I knew. Perhaps it was eclipsed by the system’s other binary star. Just a guess.”

3.

“When did you sleep last, boss?” Kastner asked.

She refilled her coffee cup, took a large jolt, chewed more antacid. “Thirty, maybe forty hours ago. Too much going on with this. Collecting data, reviewing plans for exploration. Council meetings, critiques . . .”

“Caffeine and antacid will cancel each other out, Marcie.”

She gave him a tired smile, touched his arm.

“I appreciate your concern, Tom. Stick to astrophysics for me, okay?”

He nodded.

“Has the Council decided anything on Z2R-4?”

“I gave them the standard caveats, but they ignored me. Farris has them all psyched up about the new finding.”

“That xenobiology bunch has their heads up their collective butts.”

“I voiced my concerns in the strongest terms. Farris reminded me that he knows people on the Senate Appropriations Committee.”

“Damn ass-kissing bureaucrat.”

Marcia nodded. “I agree. But I must give them something.”

“Okay, fine. There’s an unmanned probe available. It’s done with refit at Delta Echo space station.”

A dejected headshake.

“I hate this, Tom. I’m the junior Department Head. I’m cut out of the decision making loop. Outranked. I’ve tried every approach. No go. Council gets a manned ship for a possible first-

contact scenario.”

“Damn.” He tapped computer keys.

“Okay. We’ve got Galaxy-I at Delta Echo. First deep space probe with the Lynch gravity drive. She’s just back from her shakedown flight and can be on line in forty-eight hours.”

Kastner handed her a hardcopy.

“Astropilot Commander Marc LeClerc’s next up. His team is Caitlin Carter and Jeremy Sloan. Both have Ph.Ds in xenobiology and paleontology. But dammit, we need remote surface samples before we commit the team. We can’t put them at risk with unknowns.”

Dr. Westover exhaled a forlorn sigh.

“Objection noted. The Council is being hardassed on this one. They’ve threatened to cut Space Corps appropriations and replace me if I don’t comply. Giving me an ulcer, if you hadn’t noticed.”

“Who gets blamed if something goes wrong?”

“You know damn well, Tom. It won’t be anyone with tenure.”

“Farris is a prima donna,” Kastner grumbled. “Council abandons safety protocols for first contact scenario with a bunch of weeds.”

“Here’s a better idea,” he said.

“We send Ph.D Farris to Z2R-4 in Galaxy-1 with a gallon of Roundup weed killer and a spray nozzle.”

Westover smiled. “Does Galaxy-1 have an ejection port?”

4.

Two weeks later. Zeta-2 Reticuli 4 airspace:

“1645 hours. Tuesday, February 16. Commander Marc LeClerc here. Still a little shaky coming out of hyperspace. Elapsed mission time twenty hours. Lynch gravity drive is A-OK.”

“Orbit achieved without incident. The binary star Z1R adds daylight for a full rotation. Z2R-4 has no satellites. You’re right about the atmosphere. Earth-type oxygen levels, 19.7 percent. Lotta nitrogen. Minimal CO2. High humidity. Surface temp 28 degrees Celsius. Gravity 0.89 of Earth’s.”

“Couple of weird things. No magnetic poles, but there is an axis of rotation. Also picking up some seismic rumblings, but deep scan shows no tectonic plate activity. No rock formations at all.”

“Surface features are bland. Flat terrain. Mottled grayish tan to green in color. No lakes, rivers or oceans, but uniform surface moisture. Bioscans diffuse. No discrete lifeforms. Matches your long range scans.”

“Wait one. Surface radar just pinged. Course correction entered. Approaching new coordinates. Getting visuals.”

“Wow. I see constructions. Caitlin and Jeremy will prep the lander for descent and EVA. Atmospheric analysis negative for toxins and infectious organisms. They won’t need environmental suits.”

5.

Dr. Westover inhaled more coffee and antacid tablets.

“The tachyon transmission from LeClerc is fuzzy. Some kind of hyperspace interference. Tell him to boost his gain, Tom.”

Dr. Kastner made a gagging sound.

“Your poor stomach, Marcie.”

“Objection noted,” she snapped.

“Get to LeClerc, please. Farris wants an update now.”

“Sorry, boss. I’m on it.”

6.

“0710 February 17. LeClerc here. Sorry about the delay, guys. Got a little busy here. I have to maintain geosynchronous orbit by star sightings. Usual parameters no go without magnetic fields. Only surface landmark is cluster of confirmed structures.”

“Trying to boost the gain per your request. Can’t pinpoint the interference, it’s diffuse, intermittent. Wait one, losing tachyon beam again. Stand by.”

7.

Dr. Westover gnawed a fingernail.

“What do you make of this, Phil? It came from Commander LeClerc, but we can’t decrypt it.”

Chief of Communications Philip Franklin handed her a headset.

“Weird, Prof. It’s not from Galaxy-1’s COMM system. Listen.”

She snugged it in place and tapped on one of the earpieces.

“Hmm. Sounds like static.”

He punched a key.

“I’m speeding up the playback. Now try it.”

“Damn. A regular pulse. Organized transmission?”

“Can’t be anything else. It’s an odd pattern, almost like a radar pulse. It followed Marc’s last broadcast. Then it cut off. Gotta be another source. Better let him know.”

“I don’t like it,” Dr. Kastner said as he listened on a second headset. “Something’s not right. We should abort.”

Marcia brushed more loose curls from her face and winced as she massaged her abdomen.

“I know. But the Council . . .”

Kastner gave her a slow head shake.

“Bet you wish we’d sent Ph.D nerd Farris.”

Westover held a finger to her lips.

“Hush, Tom. The walls have ears.”

8.

“0833 February 18. Commander LeClerc here. COMM line clear now. Static ended abruptly. Roger your last on organized transmission. No explanation at this end. Bioscans remain fuzzy, diffuse. No individual lifeforms. Plant life, like Professor Farris predicted. Concur with Council decision.”

“Lander A-OK for descent to Z2R-4 surface. I’ve approved sidearms and stun grenades. The structures are our priority.”

9.

“1106 Feb. 18. Mission Specialist Caitlin Clark here. Soft landing accomplished. Soft indeed. Landing struts sank three feet deep. A bit unstable, but no prob, Marc dropping power excavator. Warm here. Subtropical. Surface sandlike, but looks organic. Some variety of lichen or moss mixed in. Sticky as heck. Clings to our boots. Collecting samples. Stand by for update.”

“Have reached alien structure. Metallic foil with PlastiGlass-like windows. Circular door or hatchway. Had to scrape away a load of lichenous growth to gain access. VideoTrac running. We’re going in.”

“Place is deserted, has been for millennia by the thickness of dust and overgrowth of moss. Benches, advanced laboratory technology, perhaps an alien xenobiology team. Checking it out. They had computers. Power source dead but we’ve revived it, accessed hard drive. Requesting translator module with excavator drop.”

10.

“1530 Feb. 18. Clark again. Deep sensors revealed additional artifacts. Power excavator uncovered new ruins. Different culture than those on surface.”

“Another alien exploratory team. Their computers were destroyed by heavy bryophitic overgrowth. No written records or skeletal remains. Neither of these civilizations had tachyon COMM capability. They must have used a series of relay satellites. Primitive, considering their advanced electronics technology.”

“Damn moss is getting inside our boots, equipment. Transmitting VideoTrac record now.”

11.

“There’s that interference again,” Dr. Westover said.

“No VideoTrac signal received. Why not? Can’t raise LeClerc. What have you got, Max?”

The electronics tech looked up from the tangle of wire, transistors and fiberoptic cable.

“Beats me, Dr. Westover. It’s not on this end.”

“Is the uplink okay?”

“I have an intact tachyon link. The interference is still systematized. It’s deliberate. And I think Phil had it right.”

“A radar pulse? What do you think it means, Tom?”

“I’d guess some kind of distortion. Distance factors, tachyon feedback, equipment malfunction maybe.”

“Everything’s A-OK here, Dr. Kastner. Must be at Z2R-4.”

12.

“1920 February 18. Jeremy Sloan here. Translator module integrated with alien computer’s hard drive. Working on their databases, log entries. Will download to Galaxy-1’s command computer and Exploration Division mainframe. Caitlin’s found evidence of third, fourth and fifth alien explorations. A bunch of odd skeletal remains, getting VideoTrac record.” “Wait one. Say again, Caitlin? Reports she’s uncovered partial wreckage of alien spacecraft. Must have hard landed.”

“What’s that? The moss? Repeat, please . . . stun grenade! Planetquake! Caitlin . . . ?”

13.

“Dammit. Signal’s gone.”

Dr. Kastner turned to the COMM tech. “You gotta fix this, Max. They’re in trouble.”

He fumbled for his cigarette and let it dangle unlit from his lower lip.

“I’ll try, sir. Switching to backup channel. Boosting tachyon input. Okay, I’ve got ‘em. Signal’s real weak but I think I can get past the static.”

He punched computer keys. “There. Try it now, Doc.”

14.

“2005 Feb. 18. LeClerc here. Emergency situation. Can’t raise Clark or Sloan. Massive planetquake on Z2R-4. Good Christ. The moss Caitlin described. This is impossible. It’s in the ship, fouling the cockpit instrument panel. All systems off line. Trying to initiate Lynch drive with backups, no response.”

“Losing orbit, entering atmosphere. Getting hot . . . Going down. Less than five hundred feet altitude. Three-fifty . . . Please get hold of Laura. Tell her I love her . . .”

15.

“Dammit, Tom. I just lost the downlink. What’s happening?”

“Unknown. Trying to recapture signal. Nothing. Wait one. Single rapid burst on encrypted channel. Too quick for the interference to override. Gotcha! It’s from Jeremy. It’s an alien transmission, partially translated. He pulled it off their outgoing message log.”

They stared unbelieving at the screen.

“Oh, my God, Tom,” Dr. Westover whispered.

Warning! Repeat, warning . . . (undecipherable) . . . probe Alfa Echo 991 . . . (undecipherable) .

..

Compatible atmosphere on site Kilo 551. Followed positive bioscans. Hard landing. Surface resilient, shifting. We set up field research facility. Bryophytic plant growth, source of bioscans. Evidence of other alien exploratory attempts. Our scientists missing . . . (Undecipherable) . . . unable to lift off. Lichen incursion fouling FTL drive components, command console . . . (undecipherable) . . . Our relay satellites unresponsive. The planet is . . . (undecipherable)

16.

Dr. Kastner mopped sweat from his brow with a sleeve.

“The planet is what, Marcia?”

She rested her head across folded arms on the desk top, took deep tremulous breaths, did not respond.

Tom stared at the real-time relay from NEPTUNE IV in sudden dismay. “Good God, Marcie. Z2R-4 is gone!”

Westover raised her head, dried her eyes on a Kleenex tissue, drank some coffee. Her voice was soft, subdued.

“Multiple alien civilizations, Tom. Their exploratory teams lured by a compatible atmosphere, positive bioscans. They were rejected.”

Kastner spit the soggy cigarette into his coffee cup.

“Lured then rejected. I don’t get it.”

“Z2R-4 is a rogue, Tom. Traveling for eons across the galaxy, searching for a compatible planetary system. Now it’s discovered a ship with faster than light propulsion and a tachyon-based COMM system.”

“None of those alien explorers had those capabilities. We do,” she said. “We’re the prize, Tom. We match its needs.”

“Our COMM and propulsion technology from Galaxy-1 have been absorbed and retrofitted,” she continued.

“The radar transmission Phil picked up was pinpointing Galaxy-1’s site of origin.”

“Good God, Marcie.”

“Z2R-4 is a spaceship. Must have a crew of thousands.”

A sigh of resignation.

“Not a spaceship, Tom. Z2R-4 is a very intelligent, technically evolved hostile lifeform. A hell of a big one.”

“And it’s coming here.”

The End