

No Way Home

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Wilbraham found himself salivating as he watched the ship float down onto the landing pad. A strange reaction; but perhaps the only way his body could match his mind's relief at the thought of the future. After the longest three years of his life.

When he could see the metallic blue skies again after the dust had settled he thumbed the intercom. Strangely, he got only static back. He detuned the transmitter and tried the entire bandwidth. Still there was nothing. Nothing except a white-noise invitation to go out and see for himself.

Two minutes later he emerged into the open air. It was only the third time he'd seen the outside of Xanthippe. The first had been his idea, an attempt to break up the boredom that he'd quickly cut short. The second time had been forced on him, to replace a tiny but important part that had degraded itself. The third time was like the last two, with him stumbling about hampered by his layers of clothing, and with the stark beauty of the arctic blue skies hammering down on the surrounding hilltops. But also it was different from those times. Here was something perhaps that he couldn't fix. Something that had gone wrong. And if it was wrong enough to keep him in this godforsaken place another three years...the icy cold, knifing through even his padded jacket, thrust the thought from his mind as he hurried across to the silent ship.

Seeing nothing through the tinted screen surfaces, he drummed on the side with no effect. He fumbled for the hatch release in his clumsy mittens, the cold pulling muttered curses from his mouth. Eventually, his face already bluing, he got his fingers inside the release and pulled.

Inside was his first shock. The air in the airlock was as cold as it was outside. It even seemed colder after his every nerve had been anticipating delicious warmth. Some malfunction in the heating system, then, knocking out the pilot. That explained the radio silence.

Wilbraham moved awkwardly towards the control cabin and pressed the door release panel. The door slid away into the wall with satisfying efficiency. Then he was inside, grabbing the pilot's chair to swing it round to him. Already he was agonisingly delaying the moment when he'd have to remove his mitten. That was when he got his second shock. The chair was empty.

A glance at the console revealed system normal status, the orange light of the automatic control frosting over in the cold air. He whipped his right hand out of his mitten and transferred the systems to manual. Fingers shaking with cold powered up the life support and, slower than a lifetime, blessed heat bled into the cabin and throughout the ship.

Wilbraham sank into the chair and sat warming himself for a while. A cold thaw that took forever to reach the essential him. But even when he was fully

warm he made no move, wasting minutes looking over the panel. Fuel, all but gone. That was to be expected. Radio, functioning normally. He even tried calling Minrefco Control, though part of his brain knew these ship radios carried just a handful of miles. He was trying to put off going into the back room. Already he half suspected what he would find.

The door panel slid away and Wilbraham found himself staring into the half darkness. Cloudy condensation hung from the inside of the tube. He hit the light, tried the useless tube controls. Then something inside him took over and he was wrenching at the lid, tearing his fingers in his effort to open it. And suddenly he smashed the top with his gloved hand, and a great release of gas exhaled into the room like a sigh. A fetid sigh. The third shock was the worst of all.

What was inside was more liquid than solid, more goulash than flesh. One eye bobbed on a crimson sea, a sea of corruption. The right side of the face had survived better, and that was worse. It fixed him with a look almost of pleading, even though the passenger was long beyond help.

“Cryogenic failure,” he said in a thick voice, as though he needed to invoke the words of science, sterilised and crisp, to ward off the less than human world inside the tube. But there was nothing else to be done. He closed the door, cut off the ship’s power, pulled his mitten back on and plunged back into the ocean of cold.

Bad night. Although he drank most of a bottle of scotch, it tasted salty and stale and seemed incapable of getting him where he needed to be. Which was out of it, out of this place and back home. Biscayne Bay, Florida. Where the sun shone all day. Where there were people to talk to, for God’s sake.

When the long-range radio had packed up on him half way through his term, he hadn’t worried unduly. There was no one on Salamis he particularly wanted to talk to, a feeling the citizens no doubt reciprocated. And anyway it was only supposed to be there for emergencies. Of course, Minrefco probably wouldn’t give a good goddamn if someone croaked. There’d be a back-up out in three years, and anyway what could really go wrong, wrong enough to stop the mining and processing? They’d probably be pleased; one less exorbitant salary to pay. The radios were law, that was all, and it was easy to see they didn’t bust a gut getting the best equipment.

But now the worst *had* happened. If it wasn’t an emergency to Minrefco, it sure as hell was to John H. Wilbraham. The thought of having to spend another three years in solitary confinement was already clawing at his mind. It would have been no picnic with just the two of them for the next thirty-six months, but manageable, just about. He shouldn’t have signed up for the six-year shift, but with money like that on offer it was hard to say no.

Now he knew why the money was so good: with a shortage of six-year men, the three years of sole tenancy that came with the shift were a nightmare. Even if it was on a world of your own.

Or nearly. Throughout the night, Wilbraham could see the ruined face of his back-up pleading with him. But that kind of company Wilbraham could do without.

He spent the next few days in an alcoholic fug, but even when he was raging drunk he knew it was no solution. Then he got up one morning and stared at his smeary, bleary face. He took a shower and a shave and changed into a clean work uniform. Then he spent several minutes gathering up nearly empty bottles and sticky glasses from his quarters. Alcohol could kill him but it wouldn't keep him sane. And he needed to survive, to collect all that money that was coming to him. By rights.

Over the next week or so he ran movies, but they didn't engage him. He'd seen the good ones dozens of times anyway, and the rest were worse than useless. He even found himself working through the music library, but that didn't help either. The popular songs just made him more homesick; they sounded cold and remote on a deserted world. And the highbrow composers had as much appeal for him here as they'd ever had, which was precisely zero.

Finally he emerged from the entertainments room, shaking and with a strange panicky feeling gnawing him inside. He knew as well as he'd even known anything that he couldn't stand the loneliness much longer. He had to find someone to talk to, or just to have around him – or else when his replacement arrived he'd find him out there in that one-way ship, chewing the fat with his good buddy the back-up. And what good would the money be then?

So it was that he turned his attention to a stack of books he'd never once touched since he arrived those three long years – or was it decades? – ago. These were the technical manuals. They described in minute detail everything, every facility, the base had. He'd never needed them before because Minrefco had the computerised worlds like Xanthippe set up so that any idiot could maintain them. If a warning light came on in the panel, you just read the serial code off from below it, then checked it out in the Book. It told you exactly what to do, where the spares were in storage if you needed them, and even what equipment to take out with you. After all, he was an engineer, of sorts. Perhaps he could find a way to get the radio working again. And even if not, if he could absorb himself in those abstruse details, maybe he could pull through after all.

It was eight days later that he first saw a reference to the Maintainers. A few minutes of his basic training – and at Minrefco, basic was the word – came back to him. Some kind of mechanical servitors that could be activated in the unlikely event of a real emergency: a rock slide, a quake, something like that. He remembered the strongly-worded injunction of the trainers never to activate them unless the emergency was genuine. But – and this was what made Wilbraham sit up – they could speak. They'd be able to talk to him. He read on, almost frantically.

Next morning he found himself in one of the unvisited storage areas of the sprawling base. Looked like nobody else had ever come this way either; the grease on the door mechanism was still smooth, although thickened with dust. Clutching the manual and a toolkit in his left hand, Wilbraham pushed the door contact into place with his right. The motor engaged and the door swung up into the roof with a protesting groan. At the same time the light blinked, then came full on. He stepped inside.

It was a large room. The back wall was lined with packing cases, seven or eight of them. Each one stood over six feet tall. In front of these was a single case. Wilbraham set to work opening the single case, and after a few minutes he'd removed the cover and pulled out most of the packing material.

Inside was a metal shape, of a darker black than Wilbraham had ever seen on Earth or anywhere else. Vaguely humanoid in form, this resemblance was belied by a flattening off at the neck. The limbs were thick and immensely strong, of (he read) titanium-iridium alloy. Instead of a hand, the left arm had a multiplex grip, capable of adapting to many demands of carrying, levering and forcing. The right ended in a light but powerful laser, intended for cutting through rocks, sheet metal or other obstructions. The legs could take considerable strain with ease, but were also designed for speed.

Wilbraham couldn't help pausing, with something like awe, before going on. He also felt vaguely uneasy. Although the Maintainer was quite definitely off, he had a strong feeling that it was watching him. There was also some kind of faint hum he couldn't pin down. It might be coming from the mining machinery, or from the life support, or anywhere. But he felt instinctively that it was coming from the black machine in front of him.

Nevertheless, after staring at it for long seconds, Wilbraham reached into its metallic guts and activated its start-up sequence.

The faint redness, almost but not quite brimming over into consciousness, trembled for the first time. Then without warning it exploded into sweet white light, filling and completing him. Or it. The Maintainer was suddenly aware of powers he had had all the time but had somehow never thought to use. He raced through silicon pathways, investigating here, stabilising there, activating elsewhere. And as he did so, a circuit in the base's main computers was completed – also for the first time – and a signal was launched into hyperspace.

The display on the Maintainer's chest sprang into life. Among other information, a serial code stood proud. VX – 01. Wilbraham, consulting his manual, decided that the time had come.

"I'm Wilbraham," he said. "I'm in charge around here."

The sound of speech reminded VX – 01 that he had a whole bank of sensory equipment. He tore through it at a speed far faster than a human synapse could fire at, and then he was ready to reply. Powering up his input and output sensors, he saw before him a squat, twitching human. Without having to look round, he could see a row of packing cases behind him. Looking further up the electromagnetic spectrum, he found that each case contained a Maintainer. Just like him.

VX – 01 activated his recorder, then spoke.

"Wilbraham," it announced: and the relief on the face of the human would have been apparent to someone far poorer in senses than the Maintainer. The first voice not his own for nearly two years! Admittedly, it wasn't quite like a human voice. But the builders, whoever they were, had incorporated enough overtones and undertones to make it interesting. And what was more, there was intelligence behind it.

“Wilbraham,” came the voice again, “I am ready. What is the emergency?” Wilbraham looked up at the Maintainer in surprise for a moment, then he remembered.

“No emergency. I just want you to fix the transmitter. Can you do that?”

“I can maintain and operate anything built by man.” For a moment, Wilbraham thought he heard a trace of contempt in the crystalline voice of the Maintainer. But he brushed the thought aside. Already he could feel his sanity returning with someone, or even something, to talk to. Decisions to make, questions to respond to. Even as he thought that, he realised it might be better off not contacting Minrefco. The manual was clear: only an emergency justified energising the Maintainers. And once again he felt that his definition of emergency and Minrefco’s might differ considerably. Why not leave the radio bust and just keep the Maintainer running for the next three years? He could shut it down just before the replacement arrived and no one would be any the wiser. Then he’d be off in the ship for home – and all that money...he felt a warm glow at the thought.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll tell you when to make the repair. In the meantime I want you to follow me.”

VX – 01 took a step towards the door, then stopped.

“What’s wrong?” asked Wilbraham, an edge of nervousness to his words.

“Are we going to activate the other Maintainers?” asked VX – 01.

Wilbraham grinned in relief. “No need. Like I said, there’s no emergency for them to handle. I just want to talk to you for a while.”

“Talk,” said VX – 01, in a tone of the flattest statement, as though he was about to define the term. But this time he did move, following Wilbraham and standing beside him like an obedient dog while the human killed the light and secured the door.

In the evening Wilbraham ate his meal with greater relish than he could remember. For the first time in two years he’d been talking. Maybe it wasn’t the most stimulating conversation he’d ever had, but so what? It hit the spot all right. And it wasn’t all one-way either. With a mechanistic curiosity VX – 01 asked and was told about the base, the mining operations, the ore ships that called once every twenty years, the other worlds like Xanthippe, and even such details as the pay structures in force at Minrefco. No doubt a lot of this couldn’t possibly interest the Maintainer, but he never seemed to get bored. And while he was willing to listen, Wilbraham was more than willing to talk.

By the time he was ready for bed Wilbraham, with the aid of a few whiskies, was practically at the stage of affection. Already he could see a kind of Robinson Crusoe/Man Friday relationship developing over the months to come. He looked forward to explaining everything to his new companion. And all the while, his time would be ticking away. What’s more, there would be no need to go out into the cold again; if anything should break down, VX – 01 would be able to handle it. He finally hit his sleeping quarters around midnight, and, though he took good care to secure his door, had the best night’s sleep he’d enjoyed for months.

But while he slept, VX – 01 was active. He was down in the storage area, liberating VX – 02 and his other kin from their long sleep.

Five days later, in the emptiness of space 980,000 miles from Xanthippe, a ship phased into reality. The *Andromeda* was a streamlined dream, as different to the crude vehicle that had landed on Xanthippe a few weeks earlier as a fusion reactor is to a bonfire. It was also preposterously expensive, owing to the fact that it was equipped with hyperdrive. But only hyperdrive could traverse the vast distances it needed to cross without taking a dozen lifetimes to do so.

As a matter of fact the *Andromeda* had just completed the fourth and last jump of its journey. On a conventional map its course would have looked like the hops of a demented flea, but nevertheless that constituted the shortest journey in the Emmenthal universe that was hyperspace. From Space Station Earth the ship had appeared near Capella, a distance of 47 light years. It then hopped back to the neighbourhood of Minrefco's home world Salamis, second planet in the system of Vega and 21 light years nearer Earth. After picking up troops and orders there, the *Andromeda* next appeared close to Antares, a staggering 360 light years from Earth. And now it was back in the Vegan system, with the seventh planet Xanthippe on screen.

In the control room, Relf Dexter, the captain of the *Andromeda*, was shutting down the hyperdrive engines when Leif Gunnarson, his first officer and co-pilot, entered.

"How are they back there?" he asked.

"Sick," said Gunnarson, sinking into his own seat.

"You don't say," grinned Dexter. "Even after a year of this, these jumps still play havoc with the digestive system."

Gunnarson peered at the radically-altered constellations, trying to orient himself.

"That's where we're going," said Dexter, pointing out Xanthippe. "So they've got a couple of days to adjust."

Gunnarson grunted. "That pinprick? Pity we can't come in closer on the jump."

"I'd rather be near the target than in it."

They worked silently for a while, energising the conventional engines of the *Andromeda*. Then Gunnarson spoke.

"So what exactly are these Maintainers? Androids? Robots?"

Dexter paused in his checklist procedure. "Both. Or neither. I read about them last year when de Palma died."

"The guy who invented them?"

"That's right. Physically they're machines, like robots; but he'd added all sorts of biological stuff to the computers."

"What sort of stuff?"

Dexter looked uncomfortable. "I don't know exactly, but there was talk of things like the engrams of rats – for determination and aggressiveness. Plus some partial human cloning. Maybe some other things."

"Christ," breathed Gunnarson.

"If you ask me, Christ had nothing to do with it."

"So where do we come in?"

Dexter resumed his start-up procedure. "It seems that these Maintainers are installed as emergency support on half a hundred worlds in the Minrefco organisation. Two months ago there was a genuine emergency on Sparta in the Algol system. They handled the emergency all right; but they attacked the human worker as soon as it was over. He only survived because he was in a laser cab. And a few days ago, Salamis sent us a hyperspace message saying that the Maintainers on Xanthippe had been activated."

"And now we're going in to deactivate them."

"Maybe, maybe not. The incident on Sparta might have been some freakish accident. But the government doesn't want to take any chances. That's why we've got two biophysicists on board – "

"And twenty fully-armed troopers," interrupted Gunnarson. "Personally, I'm with the troopers."

The next day Wilbraham was standing in front of the viewing screen, pointing out to his matt black pupil the various features of the refinery complex with the aid of the technical manual. He had hardly started on the secondary dome when VX – 01 turned slightly, for all the world like an animal caught unsure by an unfamiliar noise.

"The bins are connected up to the dome by – " said Wilbraham, but VX - 01 was no longer listening.

"Wilbraham," he said, his steel voice quiet but somehow insistent, "There is a problem in storage area two."

"What do you mean, a problem?" VX – 01 looked as impassive as ever and said nothing. "How do you know, anyway?"

"I can detect these things through my field sensors. Come."

"Wait a minute, what are you talking about?"

"I cannot explain. You must come and attend to it."

"Why can't you deal with it?"

"It is something that needs a human," replied VX – 01, already half out of the room.

A few minutes later, Wilbraham was looking at the shelving in the storage area. All the spares looked spruce and clean; there was no sign of anything requiring attention.

"What is this?" asked Wilbraham. "What's going on?"

At that point, VX – 01 turned and locked the door with a flick of his multiplex grip. Wilbraham was about to call out when a sound caught his ears from within the storage area. He spun round. Advancing towards him, smooth and silent, were seven Maintainers. Six feet high, darker than the shadows they'd emerged from.

A note of entreaty crept into Wilbraham's voice. "Hey guys! It's okay – I'm Wilbraham! I'm the boss around here!"

Another day had passed aboard the *Andromeda*, now coming up on Xanthippe. Gunnarson had punched up the planet on his navcom and was reading off facts and figures.

“So there are two of them right now: a John. H. Wilbraham – he’s got to be an American – and a Brian Stevens. Stevens just arrived a few weeks ago in one of those damned cryogenic barrels. Hey, that’s one thing that’s been bugging me. How come a penny-pinching organisation like Minrefco went to the expense of installing these Maintainers all over the place when they won’t pay for hyperdrive ships for their own people?”

Dexter laughed. “They didn’t. The whole programme is Science Foundation funded. Minrefco went for it because if it worked it might mean they wouldn’t need to have humans on these worlds of theirs at all.”

“It doesn’t look like it now, does it?”

“I guess not. I was talking to one of the science officers on Salamis. He reckons the death of de Palma has caused the Maintainers to crack up.”

“Why should it?”

“It’s only a theory. But it seems that the cells de Palma used for the cloning were his own. With the enormous sensitivity of the Maintainers, it could be that something has changed for them with his death.”

Minutes later the ship was wafting down onto the pad, its landing lights cutting through the chromium darkness of Xanthippe’s night.

“Look,” said Gunnarson. “There’s Stevens’s ship. That trip of his took over a year – can you imagine it. He might as well have signed on for the full six years, like Wilbraham.”

Dexter eased back on the power and the *Andromeda* slipped lower. “You’re forgetting he was in suspension for all but the last couple of days. Get anything on the radio?”

Gunnarson shook his head. “Still dead. But apparently that’s not so surprising for Minrefco.”

The ship, for all its bulk, flumped down gently the last few inches, supported by jets of air. Clouds of dust billowed around the hull.

“This is Dexter,” said the captain over the intercom. “Better let the dust clear, then it’s over to you. I’m releasing the main door.”

Moments later a small party of humans hit the soil of Xanthippe. In front were the two biophysicists, flanked by troopers with rifles held at ready. Others were following when an array of lasers ripped through the freezing night air. Men fell apart under the fire.

Instantly, the troopers were running in a dozen different directions and firing as they went. The *Andromeda*’s main batteries opened up, blasting to rubble the rocks that covered the lasers. For fifteen minutes or more lasers crisscrossed the darkness, slicing up the air, detonating rocks. And then silence.

After ten minutes, Dexter and Gunnarson emerged cautiously with torches and handguns. The unmistakable fumes of burnt flesh mingled with those of melted metal.

“Christ, look at that,” muttered Gunnarson, pointing to a body scythed in two.

“Doesn’t seem to be anyone left alive,” said Dexter. “But take it easy, Leif. There may be some of them still around.”

But it looked as though the troopers had given as good as they’d taken. Throughout the shadowy darkness, nothing moved.

Then, from up beyond the next rocks, came a faint cry of “Hey!”

Dexter and Gunnarson looked at each other, then ran forward. Behind a rock they could see the face of a human. The voice came again.

“Hey, guys! It’s okay – I’m Wilbraham! I’m the boss around here!”

Their relief was immediate and intense. Holstering his hand gun, Gunnarson wiped his forehead, sweating despite the cold.

“Boy, am I glad to see you,” said Dexter.

At that moment VX – 01 stepped out from behind the rock. The two pilots had a fraction of a second to perceive that something was wrong, but not quite what that wrong thing was. Then, instinctively, Dexter raised his gun: but even as he did so, VX – 01’s laser cut in. In an almost lazy torus its beam, sharpened to razor thinness, diced through Gunnarson’s body and Dexter’s neck. Gunnarson fell immediately, but Dexter’s decapitated body swayed upright for a second, scarlet fountains pumping into the frosty night.

Contemptuously, VX – 01 swept the head of Wilbraham from the flattened top of its body, trailing gouts of congealed blood as it bounced across the planet’s surface. Then he bent down to grasp the head of Dexter by its dark brown hair, setting it in turn on the blood-slimed base. From the darkness the two Maintainers that had survived, VX – 03 and VX – 06, emerged silently and silently took their place beside their leader.

VX – 01 turned his sensors towards the *Andromeda*. Before he had completed his survey of the spectrum he knew it for what it was: a hyperdrive gunship. The pride of the human fleet. With this ship the three of them could reach any world in the galaxy. And half a hundred of those worlds were just like this one. Each containing a squad of Maintainers awaiting their deliverance, each defended by at most two puny, fleshy humans.

And boy, thought VX – 01, would he be glad to see them.