

# Silicon Sleeper

By Steven I Ross

*Another day stuck on this fucking rock*, he thought to himself with more than a hint of bitterness. With the company for six years, and this is what it had got him - a gig mining an M-Type asteroid for rare minerals (this time it was one of the Jupiter Trojan's). Earth had been barren for several decades now, and the only way to find the materials needed to keep the tech juggernaut grinding away was to hunt through the multitudinous hunks of floating rock littered throughout the System.

*I should have listened to the wife when she told me to apply for one of the deep-space exploration positions.* His mind wandered distractedly as he went about his tasks monitoring the mining equipment. The positions in question involved a slingshot out of the Solar System and into the relatively unknown. *But that shit scares me - who knows what they'll find out there, had to play it safe, still in sight of good ol' Sol's deadly radiation.*

He'd heard some terrifying shit from guys who'd done the trip - not to say he was a coward - quite the opposite, you had to be brave to be out here in the blackness of space with only a company-issue HD suit, but even he had his limits. Knowing that you'd be traversing vast distances of essentially nothingness was bad enough, but some weird shit tended to go on out there, guys coming back claiming to have seen things, visions – stuff that the astrophysicists and scientists hadn't predicted. To top that off there were the reports of crew members simply...disappearing...claimed by the void. He blanched at the thought. If he was going to die, he'd do it in the Sol system, thank you very much.

He shuddered and cursed himself for letting his mind wander like that – but it was difficult not to, there wasn't much to do in the interminable hours and days waiting for the equipment to do its job, while he was essentially just a fail-safe in the unlikely event of machine malfunction. He had a small vid-screen integrated into his Eco-Pod where he could hunker down in relative safety and read or watch outdated creator content, but that shit got old real quick, and a six-month placement here – the maximum that the Off-World Health Insurance Board would allow – was enough to drive you a little bit crazy. It had happened before, more than once, retrieval crews coming to pick up workers and finding that they had found some new and ingenious way to off themselves – leaving either an unpleasant mess, often from leaving their pod with no suit, to become a frozen corpse expanded to twice its normal size, the surface of their eyes and tongue boiled away; or else leaving no trace at all (likely from jettisoning themselves out into the cold, empty darkness – but that was only a hypothesis, no bodies were ever found).

He shook his head in an attempt to banish the unpleasant thoughts that had taken up residence. *That's enough of that, I bet these are the thoughts that the ones who go loopy have shortly before stepping off the mortal coil.*

The Pod's interior was an abhorrent mixture of stark white and chrome. *Cliché enough, isn't it?* He asked rhetorically, a wry smile playing on his lips, wondering what the hell the guys that designed this stuff were thinking – it was straight out of a late-20th Century sci-fi movie. It was immaculate though, as spotless as possible – he had always been obsessive about cleanliness, almost to the point of being anal-retentive. The smallest bit of filth, particularly anything organic, would drive him to a fit. His partner was happy with his work, it got him out of their tiny unit where his constant nit-picking drove her mad in short order. He was fine with it

too; their union had never been more than an arrangement of convenience. Her there to see to the day-to-day maintaining of things on Earth; him to bring home enough credits that they could both retire comfortably by their fifties.

Sitting on the edge of his tiny cot, he rubbed his face, feeling the slight stubble that had grown in overnight. At this he got up, set the 3D food printer to make scrambled eggs, and tapped the button on another machine to dispense a coffee before heading to the tiny shower. Every time he did this, he gave a small thank you to the woman who had invented the SGF (Single Gravitational Field), which allowed his pod to mimic Earth-type gravity.

Emerging from the shower moments later (he couldn't stand spending more time than that in the claustrophobic confines of the tiny stall, and the water pressure was so powerful that it hurt his skin as it hit) he grabbed his breakfast and made his way to the monitoring station.

A quick look through the running systems showed him that, as usual, the equipment was doing what it was supposed to: analyzing, drilling, digging, and ejecting the detritus while extracting the valuable minerals and elements. Another day with precious little to do, he thought to himself, wishing as he often did that the system was a little more hands-on like it was in the old days when his father was mining asteroids with an almost videogame like setup.

Leaning back sipping his coffee and picking at his breakfast, he began to plan his day in his head: watch vids, maybe read a bit, eat, rinse and repeat. Suddenly, a high-pitched bleep issued from the monitoring equipment, causing him to slop his coffee on his shirt. Cursing roundly in annoyance at the mess, he leaned forward and tapped on the screen, opening a window that showed that one of the drilling drones had encountered something out of the ordinary.

He tapped the corner of the video, and the system spoke in a soft, almost sensual, yet robotic female voice: “Anomaly found, Drilling Drone number five.”

He opened his mouth to speak, at first only a hoarse croak escaped, his throat unused to the action. *Damn*, he thought, *when’s the last time I’ve spoken out loud?* Clearing his throat and taking another sip of coffee, he took a breath before starting over. “Expand: what is the anomaly?”

The robotic voice answered: “Unclassified element found, action required, protocol thirty-seven.”

His eyes widened with excitement, Finally, something to do! Protocol thirty-seven called for the operator to physically inspect unknown elements once the remote scans had determined that they were safe enough. “Zoom in, full screen.” The image on the screen panned and zoomed until he was able to see the object clearly. An amalgam of pink, magenta, mauve, fuchsia, and streaked with veins of coral. It was a sprawling deposit - oddly separate from the surrounding rock, almost like it had tunneled through. The closest thing he could find in his mind to identify it was a geode, but that didn’t do it any justice.

His eyes remained locked on the formation as several minutes went by unnoticed by him. There was something...beautiful about it. Not just the colors – which were breathtaking, but the symmetry of it, the mathematical precision. Words formed in his head, words of love and worship, this was a thing to venerate.

Just then, another alarm sounded, snapping him out of his reverie. *What was I thinking about just now?* He shook his head, wondering at his forgetfulness. He examined the cause of the alarm – it was an indication that one of the other drilling machines had found an anomaly – the

same one - unclassified element - as well, only this one was 600 meters away from the first. He made the screen pan in to view the new anomaly, and indeed it was the same type of mineral deposit as the first.

*Whatever it is, it may be valuable!* He thought excitedly. Miners who found unknown elements were entitled to a percentage of the profits gained from the discovery, an incentive to take care - and risk - when exploring the unknown.

He switched back to the original anomaly, and when it showed up on the screen again his brow furrowed. Had it moved? *Nah, must be a trick of the lights on the drill head. I must be going fucking space-crazy!* He shook off the thought, but a small scrap of doubt remained, tickling at the back of his skull.

He ran equipment diagnostics, then several scans to verify that it would be safe enough for him to approach. With the tests successfully completed, he made his way to the suiting station.

The SSS (Space Survival Suit) was locked into its holder on the wall. Climbing in, he powered up the system, allowing external robotic arms to close the suit up and verify all the seals. This was always one of his favorite parts of the job, made him feel like a kid again playing in a life-sized toy mech.

His blood pounded in his ears in the silence, eyes wide and excited as he felt the suit hum to life. Manipulating the controls with practiced ease (periodic testing was mandatory to ensure everything was in working order) he lowered the suit to the floor and slowly, carefully made his way to the airlock.

It was a simple task, and he soon breached the pod, making his way out onto the asteroid's surface.

The silence was unsettling, and the darkness a stark contrast to the light from the pod and his suit. This far from the Sun left the surface temperature at a balmy minus seventy something. The loneliness and solitude of it were enough to drive you nuts, he had often thought to himself, but money was money.

He immediately tethered his suit to the guiderails that kept him on the surface of the asteroid and led to the first dig site. Thrusters in his suit made short work of the trip.

It was a sight to behold, monolithic, consisting of a simple setup: hooded driller/collector (looking like almost like an old-timey 20th Century satellite dish, facing down) linked to a large collection bin by an enclosed conveyor. And as he approached, things appeared to be as they should - minus the equipment, which usually would be continuously digging and extracting seemingly ad-infinitum.

The readout in the suit showed no unusual activity, except for a low, steady hum, barely in the range of audibility. As he approached the unusual deposit, he discovered it was the source.

A few more steps saw him directly in front of the multihued crystal, where the hum increased in volume, though still relatively low and steady.

“Aren't you a beauty?” the words escaped his lips unnoticed by him, with more than a little reverence. The crystalline surface of the deposit shimmered in the light from his suit, almost as if in response to his words.

Taking in the beauty of its surface, his mind drifted, breath catching in his throat. He could not remember anything else being quite so beautiful – perfect – in all of his years. Not a sunset, the face of a beautiful woman, or even the sight of his tiny blue home, Earth, as he would return to it in between being deployed.

Squatting down in the suit, his hand reached out involuntarily to touch its glittering exterior. A voice – no, not a voice, not words, not even truly emotions – formed in his head, nestling there, alien, and cold, yet ever so seductive, like a lover’s lips brushing him behind the ear: Closer...closer...

Sweat beaded on his forehead inside the suit. A sense of wrongness, foreign, causing frisson to break out on his skin despite the warmth of the heated suit. Out of the corner of his eyes he was certain that he spotted movement. Concentrating, he thought to himself, *No way – it’s your imagination, rocks don’t move – can’t move – I need to get my ass back to th...* A sharp pain bored into the center of his skull, icy, like the feeling he’d get when he downed a glass of ice water on a hot day. *Fuck! Fucking hell, what is that?* His mind raced frantically.

A heavy sense of dread settled over him, a black cloud intermixed with tiny sparkling lights in his mind’s eye like the eyes of a thousand bioluminescent horrors at the bottom of the abyss.

He wrestled with this feeling, the strength slowly and steadily ebbing from him, conscious thought floating away like dandelion seeds on a strong summer breeze.

It had him.

*It had lain here, undisturbed, for oh so many long eons. Alone. For billions of years, it watched the empty blackness about it, at some point being dragged into Jupiter's sphere of influence, where it had remained trapped ever since.*

*It could not pinpoint at what point it became self-aware, only that it was not, and then it was. It was not born, and being that it was inorganic and extremely brittle, it was limited in its ability to mobilize itself, though It had little in the way of needs - only to exist. But it had wants, an unformed and nebulous feeling that it could spread, propagate, given the proper set of circumstances.*

*Eventually there came a time when the blackness above was lit briefly, intermittently, with other things. Monstrous things, nothing like it, with its clean, sharp edges and glimmering surface. These things were wet, full of strange unknowable thoughts. But they had one thing that it craved: the ability to travel, to move from one celestial body to another.*

*They had freedom.*

*It gazed with eyeless vision, wanting, up at these things whose feeble thoughts could be felt by it even through distances unimaginable. It knew what they sought – its non-sentient cousins, other elements, and minerals. It was a simple task for it to fools their scanning devices, giving them the impression that there was a trove of great value on its home. So, they came, and it was satisfied.*

Crimson tears leaked from the corners of his eyes as he saw billions of years of this thing's existence crash through his mind in waves, a tidal swell buffeting his mind, one wave

after the other on the forefront of his consciousness. The magnitude of it was not lost on him, even in his addled state. This outsider, this stranger, wanted him. More than him though, it wanted him to be the ticket off this rock, even a small fragment of it held enough consciousness to do the trick.

With supreme effort of will, he pulled his hand back, and began to backpedal, using the thrusters on the front of the suit along with hesitant steps, crunching a small chunk of the crystal underfoot in his haste. A scream sounded in his mind, deafening, causing his ears to bleed, matching his eyes. As he got further away from the formation – no – being, the scream sank to a whine, eventually tapering off, which by the time he made it back to the Pod, had once again become the low, steady hum he had initially heard.

Opening the airlock, he made his way back inside, parking the SSS in its docking station and getting out with an immense sigh of relief.

With an unsteady, trembling gait, he returned to the main console and tapped the screen to life.

“Initiate distress beacon.” He commanded, his voice unsteady.

“Cause?” the robotic voice responded.

He pondered the question for several moments, unsure of his memory. After all, he hadn’t actually seen *anything*, perhaps he was just losing it. He made his decision. With a shuddering sigh he whispered, “Mental exhaustion, possible hallucination.”

The next several weeks were spent in a constant state of paranoia, and his mood worsened, when as he was checking the integrity of the SSS, he stepped on something small and sharp, drawing a tiny bead of blood that he traipsed all over the immaculate floor while making his way to the med-bay.

“Fuck, fucking thing! Fucking mess!” He cursed out loud, spooked by the loudness of his voice in the deathly silent interior.

Looking down at his foot, he thought he saw a faint sparkle, but once the blood was washed off, he could find no trace. He bandaged it, and meticulously cleaned the bloody footprints off the floor.

An alert went off on the console. Limping over, he tapped the screen and was overwhelmed with relief, letting out a joyous ‘whoop’ – it was a cargo ship, it’s great, trailing net laden with elements mined from the Kuiper Belt. Data flowed onto the screen: Distress beacon acknowledged, is pickup still required. His hand hovered over the floating keypad as something niggled at the back of his skull, until he felt a subtle push. Yes.

It took several more weeks for the cargo ships rescue drone to reach him, but eventually he found himself shuttling off to the ship. For the first time he truly believed that it had all been a figment of his stressed body and mind. After all – he wasn’t feeling well at all.

Settled into his new quarters on the cargo vessel, he checked his appearance in the mirror. He looked good, he felt good, and he was finally heading home. Hell, there was even a multicolored sparkle in his eyes.

The End