

Edward Gao
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Starry Night

Entry 001, September 3, 2112

So today's the big day! I have been waiting for this all year long. I don't even want to go into how many professors I had to *beg* to earn a seat on the U.S.S. *Pioneer*. I mean to be fair interstellar spaceships are new fancy things that a college graduate doesn't usually sit in, but come on I rank number 2 in my class, so I'm pretty sure I'm more than qualified. Well, sometimes I get laughed at for being *too* smart and nerdy—funny thing that anybody can be *too* smart in such a technology-driven world.

So right now I'm sitting in one of the crew cabin pods near the rear of the *Pioneer*. Oh, by the way, I'm carrying a book with me. A *paper* book. They are kind of rare these days, with electronics being cheaper and more environmentally friendly. My obsession with paper books is one of the main reasons why people think I'm nerdy. But I don't really care. Again, it's romantic. Just think about it. Paper books are the start of human knowledge. They are the whole reason why now we can build all the touch screens and fusion power plants and this spaceship I'm sitting in. But the book I'm carrying today is also special. It's called *Animal Farm*, written more than 150 years ago. The world back then seems so much more interesting! They had adventures, conflicts, wars, all those fun stuff. Not that I want to see people bleed and die, but a world without fighting is a world without romance, and that's *boring*.

But today, finally something fun is about to happen. This trip won't be boring for sure. It's been fifteen years since we have found firm evidence of extraterrestrial life. It wasn't much—no flying saucers in the sky or big-headed Martians running around Washington D.C. shooting birds and congressmen. It was just a beacon, sitting a mere four lightyears away from Earth, quietly but steadily sending out a gravitational wave pattern that could only be generated by intelligent life. And today, humankind is finally ready to pay a visit to our neighbor.

Some theorist in the early 21st century proposed that any contact—even unilateral—with an extraterrestrial civilization will be devastating for the human society on Earth. They were wrong. Very wrong. Not that their reasoning wasn't sound, but it's just that the first contact came at a time when humans couldn't be more confident about our power. Earth has become a utopia in almost every sense. New energy technology eliminated pollution and now provides power to everyone for free. Atmospheric CO₂ levels fell back to pre-industrial levels. Food production is completely automatized, and efficient transportation systems deliver food to even the remotest corners on this planet. Country borders have become imaginary lines—no more patrolled walls or fences. Global translators make language barriers obsolete, and it's almost impossible now to find someone that's not mix-raced, if you can still define race at all. Warp-drive spaceships travel at 90% speed of light. We cannot possibly be better off. All humans are equal and no one is more equal than others.

Of course, there is a downside to that, which is *no one reads serious literature anymore!* Everyone is about making spaceships faster. Now, half the population is unemployed and live comfortable lives, taken care of by robots—these people only read cheap comics that make them laugh; the other half, on the other hand, are hardcore scientists, who only read science journals. It's a shame that in an era when pretty much every book ever published in history is free for

anybody to access, no one reads them, which is, again, why I get laughed at. Well, I know better. I will enjoy my *Animal Farm*.

Okay I have to go now. Captain just said we will launch very soon. It's going to be a long flight, but I will be sleeping most of the time anyway. So excited to see what aliens have to say to us! Well, see you on the other side.

Entry 002, December 2, 2120

Oh my god can you believe it. It's already been eight years! Now we are near the end of our year-long deceleration process, and most of the crew members have been awakened from our hibernation. Flight deck just announced that it has been determined that the beacon we are looking for is located near the North Pole of one of the planets. Guess we will be landing soon.

I can already see the purple planet out of my cabin window. I see no water though. We are still quite far away from the planet, so I can easily see the entire hemisphere that is facing us. But everything is purple. Not a single other color. I suppose maybe their water is purple. Or all the water is on the other side of the planet. Or they have no water at all. Either way, I doubt this place is going to be the paradise of life that some people imagined.

Entry 003, December 9, 2120

We have been orbiting the purple planet for an entire week. Eighty drones were sent out five days earlier to look for intelligent life. I guess those robots had some fun. As for me, I'm stuck in this little cabin of mine. I read *Animal Farm* from front to back three times already. I guess I should have brought a thicker book. Captain announced that she didn't want to make a reckless landing until we are sure that we would not disturb the life on this planet, if there is any. Well, apparently there isn't. Five days of search revealed not a single sign of life. Oh, at least I now know that this isn't a weird planet where water is purple or concentrated on only one side of the sphere. There is *no* water, at all. There are definitely basins miles deep that would be spectacular oceans if filled with water. But no. No water. No romance. Only rocks.

The beacon has been determined to be a box the size of a normal Earth house. It doesn't have a little antenna sticking out of it or say "Welcome to Planet Purple Poo" on the walls. In fact, it is pitch black. Optical test results say that the material absorbs 97% of visible light to make it look like void space. Not a fancy thing for 22nd-century humans, but again a definitive sign of intelligent life. Ten additional bots investigated the area using every technique known to humans. No sign of life or danger detected.

Entry 004, December 10, 2120

The wait is finally over! Flight deck made an announcement saying that landing is tomorrow! I'm fortunate enough to be on the first team to land and investigate the beacon. I would like to think of it as a recognition of my talent as an astrophysics student, but let's be honest, they did it because I'm more expendable than the more experienced scientists on this ship. It's a daunting mission. There is no guarantee that the harmless-looking box won't eat us,

explode, display inappropriate alien videos, or, in the worst case scenario, be disappointing and do nothing. No matter what, tomorrow is going to be intense and I should probably get some rest now.

Entry 005, December 11, 2120

Okay we are going to touch it. We are standing right in front of the beacon, and the team leader has his hand less than one feet from its surface. I should probably stop talking now. Ok deep breath. Deep breath. Deep... OMG it's glowing!

Entry 006, December 11, 2120

Alright. I finally stopped screaming. So that's good. First things first. The beacon did not explode. I'm alive. Obviously. So it turns out that the glowing wall is now a touchscreen. What a surprise. We flew four lightyears to see a touchscreen. Not impressed. Do better, aliens.

Most of the wall is currently showing only pictures of cute animals. *Earth* animals, that is. We have eight dolphins, two koalas, five pairs of otters holding paws, three puppies playing games, and an astounding fifteen obnoxious cats smiling at me. Seriously aliens? This is the best way you can think of to show friendliness?

But near the center of the wall, there's actually words written on it. It seems to be a lengthy message—a document, maybe. A document written in... Korean!? An enlarged image is projected onto my visor. Yes. There is no mistake. Aliens speak Korean! It took our global translators two seconds to translate the entire thing into English. Let me copy down the translated version.

=====DOCUMENT LOG 001, DECEMBER 11, 2020=====

To our dear friends from Earth:

Hopefully one day you do see this message. We, the citizens of Trilarar, have been observing your world. We would like to take this one last chance to let you know our stories. We fear that there isn't much time left. We thus have chosen to write down the most important parts, in a randomly chosen Earth language. Know that we mean no hatred. We simply want the universe to remember.

Introduction

Journal by sociologist SI 871.72, documenting the first social scientific research of intelligent life on the planet MSS 5047.3S. Despite not receiving significant academic attention, this journal has excited popular fantasies over extraterrestrial life.

Day 1

I don't care about aliens. At all. I mean when my home planet is so beautiful and cute and comfortable, why would I ever leave? But oh well. I need a college degree, so here I am, sitting alone in my spacecraft, a million miles from the planet MSS 5047.3S, doing my research. Intelligent life was only recently discovered on this planet so there hasn't been much research on it. We have mastered their languages though. Apparently they have been obnoxiously broadcasting all sorts of messages into deep space. We caught them, analyzed them, and now we have a dictionary of most of their languages. It's funny that they have more than one language in the first place. I mean how *do* you communicate? The entire Trilarar uses a single language. We have two different species of intelligent life and we use one language!

Day 2

So the aliens—called “humans,” apparently—call their planet “Earth.” Funny name, I should say, but I like it. Anyway, I just read some geological research on this planet that said life started here around the same time life started on Trilarar. That's just weird. How come we are already travelling near light speed but humans are still burning fossil fuels? This planet makes no sense. But hey maybe this can be my research topic!

Day 3

I found some other weird words in the human dictionary. “Race,” for example, makes no sense. It seems that humans segregate themselves into different groups based on phenotypical traits, namely the color of the skin. They use less than five major “races” to group themselves. But my data shows that human skin colors form a continuous spectrum, and any grouping can only be purely arbitrary. My molecular scanner also just told me that individuals from different “races” share the majority of their inheritance materials, differing in maybe a couple genes. I don't know what the deal with humans is, but to me, every individual on this planet are pretty much identical.

With that said, the word “racism” makes even less sense. “Racism” is apparently a derivative from “race” that means “the idea that one race is superior to another.” I mean... what? You are the same species, dear humans! Such superiority is biologically impossible! I mean sure maybe some individual is smarter than others, but how can that possibly be related to something as trivial as skin color? Trilarar doesn't have discrimination like that! We even have two

intelligent species—one carbon-based and one silicon-based. We are not only biologically different; our building blocks are *chemically* different! Our inheritance materials are nothing alike! And we don't have a problem! I work with carbon-based colleagues just as well as silicon-based ones!

You know what. I think I found my thesis. This whole weird racism thing must be because poor little humans don't speak the same language! I mean if you can't communicate, you will probably imagine other individuals as evil monsters and have trouble understanding their actions, right? This has got to be it! I'm a genius!

Luckily I have a super computer onboard with me. This baby can model pretty much anything. So why don't we make our own little virtual Earth! Let me just quickly scan the entire planet... Okay... now set the time to when humans first appeared... Then let me just tweak this tiny bit here... Yay now everybody on Earth speaks the same language! I bet that's going to solve the problem. I'll just let the program run while I take a nap.

Day 4

Alright the simulation is over! Welcome to Earth 2.0, racism-free version! I bet the word "racism" isn't even in human language anymore. Let me just search to be sure... What!? It's still there! And it's still all over their news! Oh dear. Seriously, humans? Do you just hate each other that much!?

You know what. I think I figured it out. I'm a genius. On Trilarar, in addition to using the same language, we communicate using EM wave resonance. That is, we "talk" at light speed, literally. Humans, however, rely on vibrations of air molecules, limiting the speed and range of information exchange. That's got to be it! Time to make Earth 3.0, where every human is a telepath!

While the simulation runs, let me keep looking for weird human words. Oh here's one. "Art." So this is apparently visual, verbal, or audial things that humans simply "make up" out of nowhere. Does this thing have a purpose? Apparently it doesn't help feed humans, cure their diseases, or improve their technology. So why does it exist? My data says that most humans don't even have access to large amounts of "art." So this whole thing is just made for... nobody?

I guess we did have something similar on Trilarar, but that was forever ago, back in the days when we hadn't figured out what an atom was yet. Our great but ignorant ancestors spent their days recording their imaginations of the universe. They had some interesting ideas, I must say, but all those ideas have become jokes in front of concrete math and science. I mean how can a visual drawing of the universe be more helpful than physics equations? It is utterly incomprehensible that humans in the information age still fancy the intangible outcomes of biological imagination.

Day 5

Earth 3.0 complete! Let's see how this turned out. Scanning for occurrences of the word "racism"... wait for it... Damn it's still there! Come on humans! Just be a bit more

understanding! Oh dear I'm never getting this thesis done. You know what. I will try one last time. If this doesn't work I will just ditch this project. Stupid humans.

Okay let's think. What other difference between Earth and Trilarar could I look into? Intelligent life started on both planets about one million years ago... Trilarar entered the atomic age ten thousand years ago... Humans learned about atoms... only three hundred years ago!? What have you been doing humans? What took you so long?

Time to consult more geological research! Let's see... according to this article... humans spent hundreds of thousands of years... fighting predators? Damn how unfortunate. Now that I think about it, it's quite a miracle that humans managed to survive all those scary things called... yes, mammoths and saber tooth tigers. Trilarar, in comparison, is a much friendlier place. We had no predators. Period. All carbon-based organisms photosynthesize and all silicon-based ones have solar cells. Everybody is happy. End of story.

So... my final hypothesis: ages of fighting for survival plants in humans the seed of hatred—or rather, the need for self-defense, the tendency to be hostile toward anything that is different, that is not “self.” I guess when saber tooth tigers died off and modern technology halted biological evolution, this hostility transferred to other humans.

Anyway, time to test this. Earth 4.0 will be a paradise of human life. No more crazy lions or tigers or bears. Only otters. Puppies. Cats. Koalas. Dolphins. Also throw in a bunch of food. Wheat grows everywhere. Vegetables don't die. Cows are roaming around waiting for you to eat. Be my guest, humans.

In the meantime, let me look at the “art” thing again. I guess just for my own amusement I can pick something that the humans find so valuable and prove it is ridiculous. Oh this is going to be fun. Let's see... okay here's a “painting” that they apparently talk about a lot. It's called... uhmm... *The Starry Night*, that's right. Made more than a hundred years ago. Oh boy. Can this be more stupid. Dear humans, even before you launched a single thing into space, you should have known that this is *not* what the universe looks like. I mean come on this painting looks like ten supernovas that should have vaporized Earth instead of a “starry night.” Exactly like what I said, art is so useless.

Day 6

Today is my last day orbiting Earth. Whether Earth 4.0 works out or not, I'm going home. So, without further ado...

Searching for occurrence of “racism”... Zero! Yes! Finally! I'm a genius! Haha humans I solved your big problem!

Now let's see how far technology can advance without stupid discrimination holding it back! Searching for human-made space objects... zero. Searching for nuclear sites... zero. Searching for human-generated EM wave signals... none...

What the heck!? Did humans all drown in the sea of koala cuteness? Let's see... Zoom in a bit... find the humans... Here they are! They are still alive! And they are all... farming...

Day 7

I am now on my way back to Trilarar. So Earth 4.0 was a fail after all. True, racism disappeared, but so did human progress. Without external survival threats, humans never bothered to develop their technology. They didn't even make it past the Iron Age. Before I left, I for no apparent reason did a search on the term "art." It also disappeared, along with racism and nuclear plants and computers. It is the greatest irony to me that art and science could be possibly linked together.

Even more ironic, I remembered *The Starry Night* again as I flew away from Earth. Watching the light of their star fade away, I suddenly saw another layer in the painting. The twisted circles... spacetime curved by gravity... thin lines that fill the sky... eleven-dimensional strings... weird, inconsistent colors that decorate the night... cosmic background radiation that whispers the secret of the universe... all hanging over the inconspicuous houses on the ground, in which lived the humans who for no apparent reason look to the universe for inspirations.

At that moment, I saw art and science merge into one. The universe suddenly became more than a collection of equations. It reverted back to the awe-inspiring entity that my ancestors looked up to, the sacred being that gave rise to thousands of years of technological development. It's funny that the most trivial human struggles led to the most stunning views of the universe.

[End of document 2758.8473.4728]

Dear humans,

We have re-written the work of SI 871.72 using more understandable human vocabulary to show you how it all started. This document started a massive social movement on Trilarar that eventually led to a global revolution, a first in Trilarar history. We admired humans for your reverence in front of the universe. We saw you as our model, a miraculous species who survived thousands of years of hardships and conflicts and whose technology developed at a stunning rate. Citizens of Trilarar dug up our "art pieces," buried in the deepest layers of our libraries. Researchers and common citizens alike formed different factions, each attempting to depict the universe in their own creative ways, outside the boundaries of orthodox science. We had our Renaissance. Different schools of thoughts bloomed. Technology progressed at an unprecedented pace.

With the liberation of thought, however, came also conflicts. Citizens of Trilarar for the first time witnessed the clash of ideas, the opportunity to challenge others, the need to defend oneself against opposing parties. Conflicts led to wars and wars led to destruction. Repeated bombing of the planet's surface has rendered our once-beautiful home a barren land of rocks. But citizens of Trilarar showed no regret. We, the authors of this message and the constructor of this monument, shows no regret. In the last few decades of Trilarar history, we as a civilization truly lived up to our intellectual potentials. We learned to appreciate the universe not just as a scientific fact but also as an entity that embraces and inspires all of us.

We built this monument to remind you of your own power. As we board our spaceships and embark on our journey to find new homes and deeper truths of the universe, we want you to

remember the power inherent in your species. Know that the struggles and conflicts you face are a gift of your mother planet. Know that your art inspired you and us alike to reach toward the sky.

=====END OF DOCUMENT LOG 001=====

Entry 007, December 4, 2129

Hey so it's been a couple weeks since I got back home. I haven't really talked to anybody. The news has been going on and on about the Trilarar documents. I have the TV turned on just so that I don't suffocate in the silence in my house.

The guest speakers are having a zealot debate on what Trilarar means to us. Research articles flood the academia. Online forums explode with different views. The guilty pacifist begging for God's forgiveness. The proud artist—they are sort of rare these days—calling for a second Renaissance. The enlightened sociologist frantically reaching out to computer scientists for help. The frightened politician crying for stability. They won't stop fighting. They won't shut up. The world is so loud.

I also lost my copy of *Animal Farm*. I have no idea where it went and I doubt I will ever find another one. Hardcopies are rare these days. But maybe it's for the best.

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