

Zawad Chowdhury

4200 words

500 Memorial Drive

Cambridge, MA 02139

zawadx@mit.edu

Like Them

Dear Diary,

Every. Single. Time. Lightspeed deceleration just makes me too groggy. If only the Institute would take my suggestion about a proper color scheme for the deceleration pills, then I wouldn't mix them up every trip and lose 46 reference-hours of my life for every damn planet. I'm sorry I couldn't write to you sooner. And now everything I log is being shuttled off to the Institutes archives. I told them you were a special case, but they kept shouting about "No Exceptions in First Contact"! The bozos won't recognize that me going alone is an exception in the first place! From the miles of red tape they kept dragging out, you'd think I was contacting actual extraterrestrials.

And now you and I are stuck in S14124's orbit. It took a good ref-hour to set up radio contact with them. Might've been impossible if I'd just stuck to the

Institute's protocols, but thankfully I have a library of pre-Scattering standards. After a bit of hacking I could transmit voice, and nearly fell off my seat when Flight Control cooed like a 4 year old kid! I've read the astrobiological assessment, but you can't expect me to trust my ship to what sounds like a brat playing with toy orbiters.

Well honestly all I could get was the toddler like tone of the voice. Didn't know the lingo. So, I muted it. Got the ship to hand me a transcript after translating the... Italiani, I think it used to be called? Maybe they'll tell me off for not leaving it on in case there was "intel to gain". Well, if it's important I'm sure I'll become precedent and they'll add it to the protocol later. I've finally managed to get a trip without pesky tag-alongs, and I'm going to enjoy it.

The ship relayed which Lagrange Point I was at and got their orbital station to adjust for a rendezvous. It is a thing of beauty, that station, from what I've seen through the dome. Some pieces were off, like a block model which some kid had rearranged to make the colors match. But every single module had the all the hallmarks of good orbital engineering. The humans who had come to S14124 during the Great Scattering had no intention to leave, so it's impressive that their descendants could construct a station rivaling those I've built on Enceladus or Primera Tierra. And they did it in record time once we sent them the requirements for joining the Federation! Boy am I glad to see this, Diary. I still have to go through a lot of paperwork, and there's the secret mission, but we might be able to get out of here in half an orbit!

Dear Diary,

To make up for the long break, here's a faster update! I just came back from the station, from meeting... well, let's give the S14124 people a name. Their documents had the name *gente di piccino*, but that sounds too fancy. I'll call them axomen for now.

The axomen's station is well-engineered, but not very well-designed. The auxiliary docker just exits into a hallway, with nothing to orient or welcome you. It's not even white like all other station interiors, but a gentle pale blue (Light Steel Blue, to be exact). The blue had been disturbed at many points with markings, some of which looked like letters while others were surely random doodles. A lot of the doodles had stick figure people, always with curly hair that seemed to defy gravity. One particularly artistic part of the wall had many of these people with heads melding into the roots of a bizarre tree, which reached up into the stars.

And then, as if the auxiliary docker were just a path on the way to their sleeping module, some axomen walked into the hallway. They reminded me of Bobby, the brat my grand-niece had been nursing when I last saw her. Of course, by now Bobby will have seen 32 orbits, but all I'll get to see of him is a downsized version of the creatures in front of me. Short stubby bodies, but with ginormous heads which made some of them almost as tall as my space-stretched body. Their small, rounded chins looked comical under their big fatty cheeks. For a second, I was scared they were all going to cry at the sight of me.

But instead, they turned to each other and started chattering with the high-pitched voice I'd heard on the radio. I tried turning on my personal translator, but instead of properly designing it to link to your ship the damn Institute only preloads it with schemas for common lingos. It sputtered and tried, but all it could get were snippets like “too tall”, “mouth open” and “papa”.

I was about to head back to the ship to hack up the translator when I caught a glint. The axomen had short metallic tubes and inlets poking out amongst tufts of hair. The rounded chins and head at a quarter of the size of the body matched up with the astrobiological self-assessment form, but there hadn't been a mention of tubes. Had the axomen skipped it as a non-biological enhancement, or was there something they were trying to hide?

While I was examining the tubes, a new girl showed up. She was a bit smaller than the others (so a dwarf besides me). Short hair with sharp bangs, and I didn't notice any metal tubes among them. She gave me a device not unlike the translator, and after hooking it in I could hear her chattering in perfect Current. Apparently, this was Suzanne, and she would be handling the first contact procedures on the axomen's side. She seemed more competent than the rest of them combined, but it still did take her a while to find the guy she was minding!

We then went through all the protocols which was full of boring details and checkups which you don't need to get into (if you're the Institute Auditor reading this, I sent you the logs already and you might want to take a look at

that instead of my personal diary, you nosy perv.). She told me I would have to go planetside for some more formalities before the orbital inspection began. Once she left, one of the other axomen walked up to me and asked, “why are you so tall and thin, *Babba?*” And the others joined in with more weird questions. Can you imagine their nerve! I’m sure the axomen with tubes are some lowly working class who were never taught respect. I think I’ll start calling them Tubeheads, to their face if they get any more annoying. And recommend them for Cultural Course Correction too, while I’m at it.

Do you see why I’m telling you all this? Oh, I forgot to mention, I’d taken off the translator before the Tubehead said that to me! They’d heard half a conversation between our lingos, and started speaking in fluent Current! It mentioned "accelerated learning capabilities" on the astrobio assessment, but surely humans can't learn that fast. And humans also can't halt development before puberty. This is the secret mission I've taken on, Diary. I'm going to find out why the axomen are neotenic (just like axolotls, get it?), and then the Institute will never question if I have the expertise to go on trips alone!

I'm back on the ship now, getting the lander module ready for attachment before we hit the surface. I haven't been planetside for a few trips, so I'm a bit nervous about the landing! Don't worry, I'll let you know how it went soon after I land!

Dear Diary,

Compared to that disaster of a docking, the landing went alright. S14124 has a small radius, and the journey from landing point to the central hub took less than a ref-hour. They had a shoot right as I got out of the landing craft. The camera crew kept nitpicking the smallest details, complaining about how I should've picked better lighting conditions to land in!

Suzanne did not seem pleased with the crew. She kept pacing about and rolling her eyes at their every complaint. She even seemed happy when the shoot got cancelled ten ref-minutes in for a storm warning!

There've been a lot fewer press conferences and meetings than I'd expected. There was one shoot right as I got out of the landing craft, but for only ten master-minutes or so. Even the camera crew had seemed impatient to finish recording and move on. I caught a glimpse of it, as our craft sped away, and boy am I glad we did not stick around. The dust cloud was much thicker than I'd seen on graphics from the red planet, and the gale force would've flattened us where we stood.

The building I'm housed in looks like it was built a hundred orbits ago, which I suppose is classy in an unintegrated planet. Lots of shiny resin, a bit like the amber I'd seen in forests back on Mother Earth. I sure hope this material is valuable, for the axomen's sake. Unless those tubes of theirs somehow produce free energy, they'll have trouble making it in the Federation.

My quarters are too spacious, too many places to lose things and never find them. And the bed is way too small, especially with the space being taken up by ginormous pillows! I'm not sure if I'll be getting much sleep planetside, with this bed and with the light.

I suppose the food is pretty good. I'd forgotten how juicy tomatoes can be, and I just had the best pizza of my life. I'm served by two real human (well, axomen) girls! Although, given how much they're stooping and how blank their chubby faces look, it seems a bit wrong to call them girls. How do axomen age? On that note, how are they born?? I'm going to have to start experiments soon. I would've gotten a sample at the landing site, but that dust storm was too distracting. Let's hope I can find some time soon.

It's not just blank faces, mind you, with those girls. One of them asked me to call her Shelly, but the other couldn't even remember her own name! Perhaps their species has a huge variance in intellect, that could be due to non-biological factors. The serving girls did have metal tubes on their head, so that doesn't seem to mark intelligence. Come think of it, every axomen besides Suzanne has had those tubes.

I'm going to try get some sleep before the lightlag seeps in. Not sure if I will be able to though, there's been a lot of noise over the past few ref-minutes. And it's not the axomen's usual cooing or giggling, thought the shouts are still pretty high pitched. I'll go and see if I can soundproof the rooms. Talk to you soon!

Dear Diary,

They seem to be giving me some well-deserved rest before the meetings start! I wish more planets would give trippers more of a break. Remember when we went to Enceladus? The damn governors wanted a meeting before every screw could be put in their station. And over here, the only important person I've met so far has been that Suzanne girl, and that only once!

I read through the contact protocol, and it said that the planet's governing body would have to manage the tour of the facilities for my inspection. Which means I don't have to do anything unless the axomen do something first!

I decided to take advantage of the free time to get started on my little experiments. It was hard to get samples in the hub. The streets are all walls and cobblestone with no green in sight! The axomen's ancestors might've been trying to replace trees with buildings, given how intricate their designs for pillars and domes are. Though if you look closely at the engravings, it's always a lot of crosses and children and lambs popping up.

The streets were deserted. The axomen's reported population numbers are abnormally low, but it was a bit weird to not see anyone on a street in daylight. The lack of people didn't stop the ads, of course. They seem to still be using the old holographs for advertisements, which makes sense if you're not connected to the net. There were trailers for several shows, of which *Purple Power* seemed the most popular. Toys and playsets. And one about me.

They'd gotten my face right but made it very large and tacked it on to a chubby torso as different as possible from my stretched out body. You would think it's a caricature from one of those satires on the net, if not for the care put into the details. There was the word *Babba* at bottom. I'm not sure why they had to buy coverage for first contact instead of putting it on the news, but I guess I should be glad that they think I'm a big deal?

Right around the corner from that holograph I found a pond. Well, more like a puddle, but it had some green slime floating on top which would make a great sample. I'd only managed to get one tube of the stuff when I was stopped by an axoman. Bulkier than the rest, he was broader than two of me. His tubes poked out from buzzcut black hair. He stopped me in my tracks, muttering about my behavior being highly irregular. And I told him how irregular it was to be so slow with the contact protocol!

He almost looked like he was going to punch me, but then his arms fell slack and I could swear for a moment his eyes rolled into whites! He then asked me to follow him, and I did not want to argue. He led me back to my room, nodding at some other axomen along the way (who also seemed pretty bulky). Well, I'm not sure what happened that, but I'm glad I got away with getting one sample. We'll see how that goes.

Dear Diary,

I knew the experiments would work out! There's a very rich indigenous microbiome in the sample. I ran the standard evolutionary test on it, checking resistance to a pruning toxin. It took only six generations before the microbe film was growing again, and by thirteen they'd completely developed resistance.

Of course, it's been a while since I've done this sort of work so my calculations might be a bit off, cause I'm a bit worried I didn't use the proper feed calibration techniques to get a sharp cutoff between exponential growth and plateauing. So, I'll have to rerun the experiment on some other pruning toxins. But it does seem like this planet's ecology has some form of hyperevolution happening!

Do you think that might explain why humans neoteny became so extreme in this population? But it doesn't make any sense! No matter how much environmental pressure there is, humans don't breed like bacteria. There have only been 400 orbits since the Scattering, which cannot be enough for humans to become babies who talk! How are new axomen getting produced? I might have to get some axomen DNA samples to check what's actually happening. But if I can prove myself with these experiments, the Institute will finally stop trying to put other dumbasses on our trips.

I haven't been outside since the day I got the samples. Besides you I've only talked to Shelly and the other girl (she still can't remember her name, and I'm sure Shelly would forget too if I didn't remind her every day). I still have to use

a translator with those two, and even then they're annoyingly slow, but they have a lot to say. They told me that they and the bulky men and the whole district is under Suzanne's control. Well I do hope Suzanne can take a break from running the show and finish the contact protocol soon! Staying planetside for too long does funny things to my bones.

Deary Diary,

Sorry for not writing to you for the last few days! I was busy in talks with Suzy. Oh, I guess I introduced her to you as Suzanne. Well she told me to use her friendly name, rather than her "adult" name. Can you believe it, diary? She actually wanted to be my friend!

She showed up the day after we last spoke, saying that the preparations were complete and "the time of month" would come in a "week". And then when I asked her about the protocol and meetings, she'd scrunched her eyebrows. As if she'd forgotten about the huge undertaking to make her backwater planet part of the Federation! Some childish fancy or other must have kept her distracted. Now that we've been back to work, the past few days have involved a lot of meetings and paperwork. (Happy, Institute auditor man?)

Suzy and all other axomen I've met since then have been fluent in Current. And it's not the formal Current of someone being trained to deal with a delegate (Like my Española when I picked it up for the Primera Tierra job, do you remember?), but the casual Current of a native speaker.

This fluency has been really helpful in talking with and getting to know Suzy! Did you know that we're both into the engineering from pre-Scattering Earth and Mars? She's currently working on fixing an old relic that her ancestors had brought on their seedship, some sort of automatic milking machine from when we needed live animals to get food!

She talked for a while, last time when we were playing after a meeting, about how she would have loved to be an engineer. But to help out her people she has to do politics instead. She hates it, all the backstabbing and fearmongering.

I told her how she could still switch, once her current job was done. How I'd studied astrobiology, but then become the best orbital engineer known to humankind. I even told her how astrobiology was helping me now with the experiments! She was very intrigued by my theories about hyperevolution, and after talking to her I'm quite convinced that is what happened. Maybe next time I'll ask her for some axomen DNA to get conclusive proof.

She was not as happy when I asked her about the orbital inspections. Apparently, my lander module was taken for maintenance, and I would have to stay planetside for longer before the spacefarer inspections could proceed. I told her how annoying it was, and that she should improve their routine maintenance systems so that stupid things like this did not happen again. She left after that, even though we were in the middle of a boardgame! I was even about to win.

Dear Diary,

I managed to get the axomen sample! But the circumstances were really strange. I was walking down to the dining area, to ask how long it was till food was served. And in the hallway, I found Shelly, fat legs spread apart as she sat on the ground, looking up with her eyes blank and mouth open. I tried calling out her name, but she would just keep staring blankly, so I went and got a test tube and sliced off some skin from her arm for analyzing.

That did make her come to, and I began telling why I needed the sample and how the science would help her people. But the moment I called her by her name, she started screaming “My name is Michelle! Give me the respect of my proper name, godda—”. But she stopped midsentence, and I’m sure I saw her eyes roll back.

And uhh, it gets weirder. As I backed away from the hallway, I think I saw a normal human at the end. Not an axoman, but an actual adult, standing buck naked right there. She had a normal sized head, breasts, and all that, and none of those tubes which all axomen besides Suzy had. She did have a weird slouch, and there were red stretch marks all over her abdomen. And because of those weird details I’m sure she’s real!

But I was getting away from Shelly, and so I did not get a second look. I don’t know why there would be a normal human here. I am their first contact! I’m sure Suzy will have some answers. Suzy is my friend, after all. She won’t let Shelly get angry at me again, and she won’t let me live like that naked woman.

Dear Diary,

Suzy tells me it's all real. She said she would deal with Shelly. And she asked me if I liked the naked woman. I told Suzy that the woman looked weird, and Suzy told me that she could be replaced. If I had any preferences. I wasn't sure what she was talking about, but I didn't ask any questions. I don't want it to be my job to deal with the adult woman. I don't have to think about that problem. I'll look at their orbiter, which should be mostly fine, and leave before the next orbit.

Though Suzy clearly wanted to talk more about it. She kept going on about how she had handpicked me! I told her that she was wrong, since the first contact assignments were handed by the Institute. And I could've even turned S14124 down, though I didn't because I decided it would be fun to try the secret experiment.

She'd smiled at that, and told me I was just like them. Can you imagine that! I mean with all my trips I've seen over a hundred orbits, but even without that my body has the age of a forty-orbiter. I even have a beard! But it was nice to hear how the axomen all liked me. It has been a fun planet if you ignore the small beds and the weird behavior.

I told Suzy about the sample from Shelly, and she said that it's best if I focused on that for now. That it was unsafe outside, to stay in my room. That it was unsafe to send out radio signals to orbit or beyond, because of some intense weather event. I did not tell her about you, that I would still keep

sending things through this link. I don't think she would've liked to know that I had other friends besides her.

Dear Diary,

The sample from Shelley is yielding results. Not good ones.

The axomen aren't genetically too different from humans. Negligible drift. There seems to be some specific epigenetic markers which got switched around, but I would need more samples to confirm.

One of those markers blocks meiosis. If axomen can't do that, how do they reproduce? How even did they have those markers switched?

I used our link to point a camera on the lander module. It seems to be where it should be. Not away for maintenance.

Of course, if I leave now the Institute will stop me from trips forever. And I want to finish the experiments.

I'll ask Suzy. She's my friend. She doesn't want me to leave.

Diary,

It's over.

Suzy came over just now. She brought with her three new women. Adults. Naked. They had different faces, but their defeated posture and red belly markings made them look the same. She told me, no she commanded me. To mate with them.

I have to leave. I hate being planetside, does funny things to my bones. Makes me all stubby, just like them.

I tried telling her. That I wouldn't do it. That she couldn't make me. And then she got angry. She jumped on me. Pressed me down to the ground with her bare hands.

I can escape. I can get a link to the lander module? Run for it??

She said that I had to be *Babba*. Father. They... they killed all the adults. All the normal people. When they realized what the humans had made them into. When they learned of the suffering of every culture from before to be beaten down and dragged through the mud.

I want to see Bobby again. See what he likes at 31 orbits. Make sure he no longer looks like them.

Suzy said I had to mate. How she will not be the last of the little ones to be born. I would impregnate these women, and then they would pump the wombs with epigenetic markers. And stretch them out till new axomen popped out.

She said I was like them. Just like them. Even though I have a beard and all. Even though I've seen over a hundred orbits, in all corners of the Scatter. Just like them.

I did as she asked. I did it... to those women. I think they felt it. The pain. Suzy was satisfied. Said she would come back with more.

I'm not like the axomen. Not like them. I am still human.

The damn link to the ship just went through. I looked for the lander module. It's gone. I can't escape this planet.

There was a knock on the door just now. I have to go. They are coming.