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2000 words

Star Child

Warmth.

That was my first thought on awakening.

Wet.

Was the second. The solid state matter encompassing me was undergoing a phase transform, some liquid seeping into my amorphous folds while the rest evaporated into the scant atmosphere.

I tried reaching out, accessing more information than the feelings from my surface receptacles.

No vibrations. No chemical signatures. Only warmth and wet.

That's all I processed for some time. Well, back then I didn't know about time. I hadn't yet experienced the cycle you have. Precious stellar radiation, everywhere, then all gone to the west, then back again, then gone again. Quite unlike the incubating glow on my mothership.

But of course, I didn't know about my mothership back then either.

A signature! Triple oxygen. Volatile.

What you would call Ozone. Looking back, it makes a lot of sense that the first chemical I would perceive on this world would be the triplet of oxygen. All of you rely too much on the element of combustion. Whenever I would consume one of your brains, the first complaint would always be the lack of oxygen. Makes for an unpleasant feeding experience.

As the ozone passed, my thoughts were overwhelmed by many, many signatures. Complex chains, many carbons and electronegative elements. I must have reverted to partial stasis, my limited ion stores conserving itself until it might get replenished. Cause my next thought was

Touch. Hard. Reaction forces, can displace self.

I'd reached the surface of your world. I tried rising, pushing a third of myself forward while contracting another third. I rotated as I did so, thinning myself to reach farther and farther.

Concavity. Familiar.

But back then, I didn't know what familiar meant.

Short vibration. Not many waves per second. Not harmonic. Repeated. Shifting faster, approaching.

I had just reached the cusp of the concavity, a level where I could once again feel the atmospheric flows. The short vibrations kept repeating. I wanted to shift towards it when I sensed you for the first time.

Vibration. Harmonic, base tone at 100 waves per second. Shifting faster—ion signatures! Sodium-Potassium flows!

I wouldn't be able to tell you what I did next. My body flowed. Not the methodical push and pull that had gotten me out of the concavity, but a smooth displacement that let me ignore everything around me. Except for you.

Arghh, no, get the black blob off! Help, Skipper, get it off, be a good boy, bite it off! Oh God no. I can't breathe. Can't breathe. God, help. God, save me. God, no, let, go!

Those were the thoughts I had, the first time I fed on you.

So much, so good.

My ion stores were ready to burst. I processed all the things I had ignored. More repeated short vibrations like the first, but farther away, more synchronized. Organic chemical signatures, little messages of reproductive will, carried by miniscule granules in the atmospheric flow. And many, many thoughts, electromagnetic waves simmering all around. I couldn't perceive the meaning in the thoughts, but I knew they were ripe for feeding.

And then, for the slightest moment (but I still didn't know time, so it might've been forever), I perceived a thought far far away, many orders of magnitude beyond even the farthest of the ones I would feed on. In the direction of the stars I'd come from. A single thought, the patterns and codes much like those in my perceptions.

Replicate.

With another smooth displacement, my body and its ion stores split. We flowed. One of us feeding on your four legged companion for its scant ion reserves. All of us spreading out, a network to exponentially grow, more ions and thoughts to consume.

~*~

We met them soon after. Even before that period of stellar radiation had ended.

We'd spread out across in all directions, consuming about a hundred of you.

Some of our bodies found a vast expanse of liquid dihydrogen oxide. I still hadn't realized that was the solvent permeating through all of your bodies.

Some of us found long thin tubes, which carried our body away from the surface. Their chemical signatures suggested they were like you, but I couldn't perceive their thoughts.

One of us found a harder surface. It was made from dead organic matter and mineral fragments, just like the surfaces before. But this organic matter had to have been dead for much of the life of your star, to have arrived at this chemical signature. As we'd amassed more and more ions, we'd realized how much we understood of the lifetimes of stars and what they would do to chemicals.

But more importantly in that moment, the harder surface seemed to proceed in a certain vector. We followed that vector, with most of our bodies. The nearby

thoughts had died down, but this direction seemed to lead towards more thoughts in the distance. We continued our deliberate, methodical shuffle along this vector until the stellar radiation had started to diminish.

We sensed them first through you. One of you had come up the harder surface, carried by that metal exoskeleton you enter when you wish to be displaced smoothly and quickly like us. We had hoped to think about that exoskeleton, but the only thing on your mind was terror.

Oh no, it's here in the north too. Black blobs for as far as I can see. Oh no, I'm going to end up like Susie, oh please no. This is what I get for watching my girl die.

They were all you could think about, in that moment before we fed on all your thoughts. We were intrigued and shuffled even faster down the vector. It wasn't long before our thoughts sensed their thoughts. Similar patterns to our own, but much closer than the vast distance to the stars.

Come closer, young ones.

Their invitation, if I had to describe using your memories, would've been like the chattering drone of hill of army ants. But back then, we didn't have those memories, or understand the meaning behind them. We shuffled forward, and they showed us many things.

A convexity, above the surface. Metamorphic rock: marble. Supported by thick tubes of the same rock.

Arggh, what's that black thing? It looks like a viscous fluid, but it's moving deliberately. A giant rat escaped from 68?

I sensed many feedings. Your bodies there had less ions in reserve, but many thoughts.

Oh damn, asphyxiation really is the worst way to die.

Get this damn blob off me! I did not survive this week just to die before the weekend.

Bleh, I hate this fucking place.

And after that, a spreading. They'd reached the surface in the vicinity of thousands of thoughts to feed on. And so they'd spread out much wider, sensing parts of this world in one cycle that I hadn't sensed ever since. Their numbers were three orders of magnitude over ours, if I'd have to guess.

Give memories.

They commanded us. Their frustration grew the longer we failed to reply. But eventually, it got through that we did not know what memories were.

Negative time thoughts. Access lower ion channels. Processings, sensations, thoughts that aren't now.

I suppose I must be grateful. If they hadn't taught us, I would not be relaying this story to you right now.

What next?

We were trying to end the communication, get as far away from them as possible now that memories had been exchanged. We didn't know much then, but we knew to stay away from them.

Contact mother. Memories for that too. Will transfer to different commune.

Consult mother for targets.

~*~

That was the first of many, many periods without stellar radiation, that we spent communicating to the mothership.

Of course, Mother never spoke to us. They might have the privilege to contact Mother, but the Last Queen would not respond to the thoughts of ones so low as us. Instead, we spoke mostly to the Analyst, under whose perceptions we'd formed our first memories.

How many feedings this cycle?

The ones on the mothership cared only about feedings. Single-track minds, you might say. That was true, of course. The ones on the mothership had barely enough ion reserves to run even one body.

Seventy thousand. We might transmit. One had this harmony in thoughts, beautiful—

Not enough. Was always the reply. Must accelerate feeding rate, deplete the bipeds.

But even then, we did not want to finish feeding on you. The millions of you we'd experienced had shown us such unique, interesting thoughts. Pleasant vibrations, intricately constructed from layers of harmony and counterpoint. Ecstasies derived from union, from adventure, from chemicals. Memories of eating Pop Tarts.

Must we? We would occasionally counter. Especially on the cycles when the stellar radiation would reflect off the whole surface of your world's satellite before reaching us, reminding us of your poems and platitudes.

You must. You and your sibling are our last hope.

The only ones still able to replicate. Both given to this world, in hopes it might bear seed from which new Mothers will grow.

The bipeds have hope too. I want to communicate, but the Analyst wouldn't understand you. Could anyone, without experience a million of your thoughts?

~*~

Of course, you didn't need us to negotiate for you to the mothership. Your hope, and the destruction it brings, was bound to outmatch ours.

They never accepted my suggestions to consider your thoughts, much preferring the quick rush of ions to the strategy learned by digesting your brains over time. Therefore they were easy to pick off for your doombringers.

But even if they'd understood your strategy, they might've been too afraid to survive it. Afraid of being all alone, that is. Why else would they only travel in

droves, arriving at your large island commune in a single linked mass? They must've thought you were afraid to be alone too, or else you wouldn't have destroyed 9 million of your own bodies when you unleashed the power of stars to destroy them.

We knew better. We spread ourselves thin, limiting the thought network to have few connections per body so that we might escape the worst of your weapons. It wasn't much use against the best of your hope. Our feedings became sparser and sparser, while you picked off our bodies one by one. Perhaps a few of us split away, becoming new mes. I wouldn't know.

I must have spent a hundred cycles now, of stellar radiation followed by no radiation, in this glass concavity where you see me now. It isn't a bad home, all things considered. Several little organisms to feed on every cycle, though none as nourishing as one of your brains.

The glass surfaces memories. Of being trapped in similarly small concavities, while the ones on the starship tested my signatures and vitals to assess whether I was viable for replication. Of being taught the secrets of the universe, so I might understand the world I had to dominate.

When your little hands press up against the glass, my ion channels trigger a memory of the Analyst peering into my old concavity, thoughts exploding with bursts of joy, the happiness of a second chance. Of course, those thoughts had run out of the energy needed to power them long ago. We stopped receiving

thoughts from the mothership, long before our bodies were depleted enough for the connection to break.

Often, I sense you thinking about the stars, about reaching up to the great beyond where my people must have come from. That is why I'm trying to communicate this story to you now. So that I might keep the hope of my people alive for just a little longer, for a few more cycles if not the lifetime of any star.

Will you take me back to the stars, human child?