

THE FINAL REPORT

'It is surely unreasonable to credit that only one small star in the immensity of the universe is capable of developing and supporting intelligent life.

But we shall not get to them and they will not come to us."

- P.D. James, The Children of Men.

'There are flaws,' declared Zum4, 'fatal flaws, I'm afraid.'

'How so?' The Professor looked disappointed. Tired. Frail.

'We've investigated every aspect of the human life form; we've poked and prodded and measured these beings in every way possible. At times we even put ourselves in experiential situations with these beings. In short, Professor, we've not let a single synapse or follicle escape our scrutiny.'

Zum4, sitting at the conference console, paused to gauge the Professor's reaction, but the Old One said nothing, gave no hint to what he was thinking.

Zum4 continued, 'We took the greatest possible care with our assessment, sir. After all, we know too well that our future existence depends totally on the accuracy of our analysis...'

'The Final Report – is it ready?'

'Ready, sir. And we have a surprise for you. In order that you may see and hear for yourself some of the elements which make up the human persona, we have an Earth witness who has agreed to stand before you. Fortunately for us, in spite of their occasional aggressive tendencies, these beings are easily controlled. Our witness will be given a gold biscuit in exchange for her testimony and she is mightily pleased with this arrangement.'

Amma3, at the propulsion console and silent until now, had a question. “This witness, will she answer our questions, and will she answer honestly?”

‘She has agreed to answer all questions. Failure by her to respond will result in the forfeiture of the gold biscuit,’ Zum4 clarified. ‘As for telling the truth, these humans give off all manner of little neuro-signals, for example, blinking excessively or rubbing their noses, when they’re being untruthful. They’re not particularly sophisticated, you know.’

‘When you’re ready, please proceed,’ ordered the Professor.

‘One moment while I verify our conference connection,’ answered Zum4, as he performed a digital roll call and set up the meeting holographic at his console.

Satisfied that the guests were all present, Zum4, the lead researcher, introduced his report, ‘Citizens of Neptune, allow me to remind you all of the exact purpose of this report before we venture into the detail. As we all know, as a result of a fusion accident in our planetary warming system – an accident we believed theoretically to be impossible – our future as a race is in peril. Our unexpected exposure to high levels of radiation has rendered ninety-seven percent of us infertile and the remaining three percent just marginally fertile and the slender prospect we have for successful and sustainable reproduction is to implant compatible DNA helices into ourselves from another hominid race. For this reason, we have analysed, may I say in great detail, the Earth hominids, also known as humans. We needed to know if their DNA could save us, bearing in mind that their DNA would impact us in a number of ways. We’d pick up their instincts, their reasoning ability, even their health vulnerabilities. The stakes are very high. The wrong decision could reduce our future generations to a clan of muttering mutton-chops, or pathological killers or the heavens know what else.’

‘Let’s have the report,’ demanded Goht5, in his customary curt manner, from his position at the defence station, ‘we already know the background.’

Zum4 continued, unperturbed by the interjection. ‘The alternative to repairing our DNA with implants of human DNA is to use the Earth people as surrogate breeders but, genetically speaking, the outcome would be identical. It’s therefore unimportant to differentiate between these interventions. Let me rather focus your attention on the positives and negatives of mixing DNA with humans.’

3Ania at the docking node had a question. ‘Tell me, Citizen Zum4, can we afford to be choosy about how we survive? Shouldn’t we take this reproductive option, even if it’s suboptimal? Aren’t we talking about our very survival here?’

'Good question, Citizen. A great question in fact.' Zum4 paused momentarily to draw his thoughts into a clear response. **'We have several years left, perhaps as many as five, to find a viable way to reproduce ourselves. Or we'll perish. Our investigation of the Earth hominids, humans, has taken us just four months so, if co-breeding with humans is going to be greatly detrimental to our character as a race, we still have time to investigate other hominids in this solar system and beyond, possibly even as far away as the Proxima Centauri system. Should we fail to find any other hominid co-breeders within, say, the next two years, then we'll have to take any option, no matter how regressive, to ensure our future existence. But we haven't yet reached that point...'**

'I urge everyone to remain calm,' declared the Old Man, sitting up in the command chair, **'a hasty decision when a hasty decision is not required may be a point of regret for all eternity. This is a no small matter...'**

'Blah, blah, blah!' growled Goht5, **'are we to watch as the door of opportunity swings shut on us?'**

'Silence, Citizen!' growled the Old Man, **'your ego is undermining your reason. Zum4 is right; we do have time to investigate further if we have to. Please continue, Citizen Zum4.'**

'For each criterion in my report I plan to juxtapose positive and negative findings; this may be helpful in seeing the whole picture in the least amount of time. Your questions are, of course, welcome throughout my presentation.'

Zum4 had everyone's attention, so he continued. **'Firstly, we looked at belief, based both on data and mere superstition. We found that much of what the Earth hominids believe is, in fact grounded in superstition and fear. You may find this hard to accept, but humans worship and venerate hundreds of different totems and icons which they call gods. Seemingly, where there's a lack of data or ignorance of reality, this worshipping tendency is greatest. This worshipping business is upheld with rituals like burying bodies in polished boxes...'**

7Mara interrupted, **'Your contention is that humans lack rationality?'**

'Yes, I'm afraid so. And yet these Earthlings actually have raw intelligence which is on par with our own but, curiously, their emotional make-up frequently works at cross purposes with this intelligence to such an extent that humans are beings with urges towards self-destruction.'

'How so, Citizen Zum4?' Goht5 wanted to know.

'Human beings are unique among all races we've ever studied in their display of behaviours which they know will damage their health, place them in great danger or cause their death. For example, many of them inhale the smoke of burning leaves, or consume perception-altering substances, or eat food which rots their teeth. These behaviours are unfathomable and unique.

The next aspect of the human condition which concerns us is the fixation that humans have with objects and possessions. To advance their ownership of objects they are often willing to sacrifice both their relationships with their fellow citizens and their own health. Much of their adult lives they run after possessions, many times possessions which they hardly use. Somehow the Earthlings place value on these objects and it seems to give them an aura of power and authority. This is even the case when the objects are stolen from another citizen.'

'Very curious,' commented Keria2, the Wellbeing Leader, 'but tell us, Citizen, are their strange tendencies limited to self-destruction?

'Sadly, no. These humans often enjoy hunting each other to destruction. There's a primeval pursuit of power among these creatures as you'd expect to see if you were to place too many crocodiles into a small pit. Rather than choosing to cooperate, the human species will squabble and squabble even when the squabbling is threatening their very survival. For now I've spoken enough; I'll let you speak to a living human specimen. Please welcome Mara to our conference.'

In that instant Zum4 connected the human, Mara, from her office in Jerusalem to the meeting.

'Welcome, Earth Citizen Mara. And thank you for agreeing to participate in our research. We Neptunians all strive for a zero-harm life, so please feel safe among us. Unlike in your society, there'll be no possible negative consequences for anything you may say here today.'

Maria nodded and gave the smallest of smiles. Was it possible that she was slightly amused by the Neptunians?

The Old Man spoke first. 'Citizen Mara, please tell us about yourself.'

“I’m pleased to meet you all and I thank you for the reassurance regarding my safety. As an Earth woman I do sometimes feel vulnerable and threatened. There are those in our society who are dangerous, who would choose to harm me if they were given the opportunity. It’s called human nature. I’m now twenty-nine years old; I work as a laboratory technician; I live in a small apartment with my partner, Abraham, and a small dog named Schnitzel. I’m interested in science, cooking and politics.’

Keria2 jumped into the pause. ‘Tell me please, Mara, how many children do you have?’

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‘None, miss,’ she answered, ‘I’m choosing to remain childless...’

‘But didn’t you say you’re with a man?’ interrupted Keria2, looking extremely puzzled, “I’m with a Neptunian man but our fertility has been destroyed.’

‘Abraham and I have careers. And, frankly, I’m also very much afraid of the prospect of childbirth.’

A moment of silence followed Mara’s declaration, then Zum4 was bold enough to ask,

‘Mara, how do hold yourself away from Abraham?’

Mara laughed, a big honest laugh. Then she answered, ‘I don’t hold myself away. We practise prophylaxis which we call birth control. It’s quite normal for humans to do this. No babies for me!’

The Professor spoke now. ‘We sent one of our men, one of the three percent of marginally fertile Neptunians, among the human race. We dressed him like an Earth person and even instructed him on some of the basic human customs, like drinking beer and talking about weather. We asked him specifically to find out if it would be possible to make the right connection with people to allow breeding to take place.’

Mara looked profoundly amused but listened intently as the Professor continued, ‘Our Neptunian man seemed to fit in well enough but some really bizarre things happened to him. Firstly, he was offered sexual intercourse but in exchange for the tokens which Earthlings call money. When he said that he’d try to find the money but would the human woman do everything possible to ensure a pregnancy, the Earthling laughed at him and called him a ‘weirdo’. Can you believe this?’

Now Mara couldn't contain herself; with tears rolling down her cheeks she laughed so hard that she involuntarily spotted her underwear.

Zum4 picked up where the Professor had left off. 'After deducing that maybe he had made an unfortunate choice with his first attempt, our bold volunteer sought out another connection. He made his way to a bar and installed himself there with a glass of beer. The beer made him feel a little dizzy, but he didn't back away from the challenge. He had a mission to accomplish.'

Keria2 simply had to know and she interrupted, 'Tell us please, Mara, is this the best way for Earthlings to find a mate?'

Mara smiled and replied, 'I'm unsure if it's the best way but it's certainly a common way among humans to seek out sexual intercourse. The consumption of alcohol lowers inhibitions, allows people to talk more freely and puts a warm glow in the groin.'

'There are many pregnancies...?'

'No, I wouldn't say that. Most people know how to avoid conception. We've become pretty good at this; we call it birth control.'

'Ah, no doubt to avoid overpopulation and starvation.' At last Keria2 got the point. So she thought.

Somehow Mara managed to keep a straight face. She thought it best not to disillusion Keria2 with further explanation.

Zum4, detecting a lull in the question-and-answer session, continued with his presentation, 'As I was saying, our volunteer found himself in a bar, drinking beer, waiting, watching for an opportunity to connect. After a while a human male sat himself down next to our Comrade and bought more beer, beer for both of them. They talked about a few things, possibly the weather. The Comrade's head was spinning from the effects of the beer so he's unsure what exactly was said. In time, the human fellow suggests that they go to his apartment. The Comrade was a little puzzled by the proposition and informed the Earthing that he had a place to sleep, but thanks anyway.'

'Get to the point,' says Goht5, 'what does all this have to do with why we're here?'

'Patience, Citizen! This is all relevant to what happened next.' Unruffled by yet another interjection, Zum4 continued, 'The male human looked directly into the face of our Citizen, directly into his eyes, and said, "I want to fuck you, buddy."

Our Citizen, from the whirlpool of debris swirling around in his head, searched for the word he needed. And found it.

'Weirdo!' he shouted as he rose unsteadily from the barstool and made for the exit.

'So, dear friends, that concluded our experiment and, for his continuing safety, we withdrew our citizen volunteer from any further interactions.'

Zum4 swivelled at his console, looked in turn directly at each attendee. Then he drew back his shoulders slightly, took a deep breath and declared, 'We have to move on, my fellow Neptunians. We have to look elsewhere for a breeding option. There are simply too many flaws here on Earth. Fatal flaws, I'm afraid.'