

# **Starshot**

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For countless centuries our people have gazed into the starry sky. We wondered if we were alone. At least, we did until the stars called out to us. Tiny machines guided by solar sails. So fragile, so delicate, and yet here they are. It is only aboard space stations, away from the harsh unyielding tug of gravity, that we can truly unlock their secrets.

The council chose me to be one of the scientists who are to study these interstellar emissaries. I am eternally grateful for this. Yet how much will we ever truly know?

Microscope analysis has revealed languages, several in fact, inscribed on the bodies of these probes. The linguists have identified at least nine languages, possibly more, but they haven't the faintest idea what any of them say.

I adjust the focus of the microscope to examine probe number thirty-seven. This one appears to have flag symbols on it. Most of the probes do, but the designs differ on

each probe. There appear to be three flags. One has a central white stripe flanked by two red stripes. I can not say with certainty what the symbol in the middle is, but I'm tempted to call it a leaf of some sort. The second flag has thirteen alternating red and white stripes. In the upper left corner is a blue canton with fifty-eight white pentagrams. The final flag is a simple white rectangle with a red circle in the center.

What do they mean? Are they flags of nations, or do they represent something more? I swivel my eye-turrets and gaze out the window. Far-Sun is barely visible against the light of Near-Sun. The engineers have determined that, based on their design, the probes couldn't have come from anywhere but our nearest stellar neighbor. The Raxar System is quite unlike our own. It has but a single yellow star, as opposed to two binary yellow stars and a red dwarf. It must be quite the strange world; I can scarcely imagine the sorts of beings who inhabit it. Would they gaze at us with four eyes as we do? Would they walk on six leg, or do they find four to be sufficient? At only 4.37 lightyears away they are practically next door.

Well, that is, until one considers the vastness of space. Even our best spacecraft still use chemical propulsion. It was an eight month round trip, not counting time on the surface, just to get to our nearest planetary neighbor. We might be able to get to the Raxar System using nuclear propulsion; it would only take 100 years. Of course, that would require the science council to reach an agreement on the use of nuclear

propulsion. We could use antimatter, but we have no way to store it. Besides, the most we've ever made is about as powerful as a firecracker.

I decide to take a break and have a snack. All foods aboard the space station have already had digestive enzymes added to them. There's no need to vomit-up my stomach and secrete acids. Bodily fluids would float about and interfere with electronics in the space station's zero gravity environment. Still, swallowing my food directly into my internal stomach is a sensation that takes some getting used to.

I gaze longingly at a photo that is pinned to the wall. It is a photo of me and my bondmates during a happy time. I gently stroke the photo with my tongue. The five of us met during our time at the science academy. We have decided to have a brood of twelve children, a reasonable size for a family. All five of us will contribute genetic material for the children. I was to incubate the eggs, but then I was selected for this assignment. I feel so fortunate being able to study objects from another world, and yet I also feel incredibly guilty to be away from my bondmates for so long.

I flap my wings with frustration. We know that an extraterrestrial civilization has reached out to us, but...yes, that's something. We now have someone to share the stars with. The nature of their society is...well, who can say, really? Still, I like to think that it isn't

terribly different. They surely laugh at jokes, enjoy the company of good friends, mourn the loss of their loved one, and seek meaning in life. It is a great thing to send probes to another star system; not something done on a whim. There must have been hundred, perhaps even thousands during the initial launch. These few we have found are the ones that have survived the long and arduous journey across the ebon sea. They are, I should think, not reconnaissance scouts, as the tabloids like to claim.

No, they are explorers of the unknown. For so long we have wondered if we were alone in the universe. Now we have verifiable proof that intelligent life has evolved in multiple star systems. Even if we know nothing else we will at least know this. We now have someone to share the cosmos with. It is a glorious feeling. For if intelligent life has twice evolved, then where else might it be found?

I glance at the screen again and notice something new. Of course, how could I have missed it? The tiny lens of a camera unfurls itself. I put the microscope aside and position myself above the camera. The probe is transmitting pictures, perhaps even video, across the void to its makers, or perhaps their descendants. Am I to be the first image of our world that these extraterrestrials gaze upon? My training has not prepared me for this. I always secretly hoped that something like this would happen, but now that it is here, I freeze with fear and excitement.

My words will doubtless be incomprehensible to them, but I must say something. My hearts feel as though they are churning at the speed of light. I flick my tongue about nervously, silently cursing myself for acting such a fool. Then a thought occurs to me. It is child like in its simplicity, and yet it is the perfect response. For what else is there to say when someone in the blackness reaches out to you and your people?

"Hello, my friends. The stars say hello."