

A ship blared through the vacuum, as near as possible to a perfect black body such as to capture the faint star light of interstellar space. It couldn't go near the star system or else its perfect black surface would cook it, its perfectly spherical shape preventing it from avoiding the star light from any direction. The ship sent a few small probes further towards the system at an angle preventing it from transiting any stars from the perspective of the 3rd planet in the system, or any artificial satellites. 8 billion people went about their daily lives, 1/3rd of them were asleep, and wouldn't know until a few hours later.

I drove up to my brother's house this weekend for Easter and we were going through the standard family catching up. I normally attempted small talk with uncles and cousins before retreating to the room I was staying in and looking busy on my laptop while scrolling through increasingly obscure wikipedia articles. There was no good reason for the entire family to get together for Easter but Austin had a big house and was one of those slightly awkward people who love to host parties and tend to everyone's needs. "So Emma, what's it like in the big apple with your fancy new job at JPL" said a cousin i was desperately trying to remember the name of. I was not succeeding at the; hide behind my laptop plan. "It's been great, it's nothing like back in Dover" I said silently glad that at least she wasn't talking about football; when I simply closed my eyes and the world seemed to fall away.

I woke up seeing nothing but black. Okay that happened, I didn't have any medical history that could cause me to suddenly pass out; so maybe it was something sudden from in the room. Oh I probably don't remember the last few seconds, but that still gives me nothing as to what happened and where i am now. Maybe this is some sort of after life; no, no, if my brain still works in this after life it would have been able to record the last few seconds. Actually the fact that I am conscious now; for whatever reason raises the question of why I can't remember. Okay im just wildly hypothesising now, i need data. So what do i see; blackness, okay what do i feel; nothing, like a sensory deprivation tank, actually it's worse than that. I don't feel my breathing, I can still feel my body, but I think it would be impossible not to; people who lose a limb still feel where it should be. Maybe complete paralysis, no that doesn't affect the eyes. I've always had visual snow, that's just gone, I don't know what's happening but I'm completely disconnected from my body. Then i see something, a spinning icon and text that says loading, how do i not see visual snow but do see what I assume is some kind of VR head set. Then I see... my laptop's login page, the whole screen is perfectly visible, i can't move my eyes but my entire field of view is just as high res as the center of my vision. I can't see black around the edge, it's like my field of vision is suddenly a perfect rectangle, and it's perfectly framing this display. When I try to look around the screen, it's difficult to focus on something that's not in the center of my vision, but I can see my wallpaper of my dog and the login box says Emma Reve. I don't even think about it, I just instinctively move the cursor into the box. The movement is completely different from using a mouse or a track pad but somehow the muscle memory still applies. Now I just have to type my password. I cant, i can move the mouse but now that im thinking about how to do it, i cant use the key bored. I imagine I'm texting a friend, "hey Noha, just reminding you to WATCH MONTY PYTHON, i promise the quest for the holy grail is funnier than the joke of you refusing to watch it". it worked, i held the F key down; i cant feel the keyboard at all but somehow i can tell that it is

a qwerty layout. I delete the sentence and type in my password. I see half a dozen notifications from various messaging apps, whatever this is, it makes sense that people at least noticed that I was missing.

The first one was from Noha "im in my computer, i everyone ive messaged is the same. I know this might sound insane but I need to know if it happened to you too"

I messaged "Yes it happened to me too"

he responded, "how do i know if im not just having some kind of hallucination, and you're not real", it was a good question, and one that somehow hadn't occurred to me. The fact that he had thought about that and I hadn't told me I'm not the one hallucinating, and I had an idea to prove it to him.

"Do you know how a gravitational slingshot works"

"no"

"I'm going to explain to you, you don't understand it, so I couldn't tell you if it was a figment of your imagination because you didn't know. Imagine you're orbiting the earth and the moon is also orbiting the earth. If you get close enough to the moon that its gravity is pulling you more than the earth's, then you fly around the moon and fly away at the same speed but at a different angle, like grabbing onto a bar while running to change your direction. So if you are moving toward the earth and the moon but very slowly, and then the moon turns you to be going in the same direction the moon is going around the earth, then when you go back to orbiting the earth you are going at the speed you were at the stars + the speed the moon's going. Space craftes use this all the time to save fuel".

"That sounds like it generally makes sense, I believe you, thank you for clearing that up" he said.

"Mear mortal minds cannot comprehend my nerdiness" I said in response.

I answered a few similar questions from people, including some at the easter get together before braising myself, and checking social media.

There was one post at the top simply labeled what we know so far. It had a bullet-pointed list confirming most of what i had already guessed, as well as the fact that people from 83 nations and counting across every continent and some who were on air planes have reported this happening, clocks show a 2 day 3 hour and 6 minute gap before everyone awoke at once, People preparing to fly drones who have managed to connect to them have found a seemingly unaltered earth, except without people, people who don't have computers are given their phone or tablet interface, or if they have no electronic devices wake up to an already set up windows 10 account with their name and information and no password, and all computers come pre installed with an app labeled "VR" containing an extremely realistic simulation of real life, including a pre set character matching you exactly, people with kids are given the option to "wake" their children who then appear in the simulation. Other people mentally

incapable of operating a computer were put in digital parks organized by geographic locations and it is encouraged for you to go to your local park and generate fliers (instructions in pinned comment) as well as helping verbally explaining to people who were sent due to reading disability. I found myself pleasantly surprised by the quick response, the comment had over 1 billion likes, clearly it had reached most of the english speaking world by now. The comments were filled with less useful but still interesting insight. The primary post was clearly being edited on the fly but still had to maintain a very general summary. In the comments I found that all computers are listed as having 64 petabytes of storage, 16 petabytes of ram, and all components are marked as unlisted. People driving cars seem to have all pushed the brake pedal in unison with no known fatalities, drivers report their leg muscles simply flexing on their own, people's pets seem to exist in the sim but wild versions of the same animals have also been found. I decided to do as the post suggested and help at the park, but first I wanted to contribute something; even though it would probably turn up nothing. My job with JPL was with the group telling the opportunity rover what path to follow, it had been amazing at first, but I should have realized the novelty would wear off eventually. By now my job is just listening to geologists about where to go and looking at the area to find any terrain that might be dangerous to walk over. I wasn't even authorized to move the rover, but since dust could influence some terrain features I have the ability to request an image. I put in a request for all 6 HAZCAMS to take a photo. I was pretty sure the rover was fine, it's not like nasa landed it in a bad part of town, but i would know in 31 minutes; the time it takes for a signal to get to and from mars. So I found the new application on my computer and opened it. Immediately I felt my body again and saw a park, it seemed to be the default waiting room for everyone. I had my body back but also a few buttons. I can't explain where but i felt them, and i could push them like muscles. There was text on a screen somehow on top of my vision but not blocking, it said "buttons: leave, menu, settings, hotkey1, more hotkey's can be created in settings. I pressed (menu), and found a grid of actions on screen. I clicked the button opening my device and then selected my laptop. It gave a message "do you want to set (Emma's thinkpad t16 4) as your default device", I hit yes. I opened the same post I saw earlier, and found the pinned comment on how to set up fliers. I then saw that there was an organised system people had set up in the park. People who dont know whats going on in one area had people who could explain it come up, and then they would both walk to the section for people who understand, where they would both help. The people considered mentally incapable were mostly the elderly, people who aren't proficient enough with computers presumably. It was a good system and it was sure to get everyone up to speed. I opened the menu and pressed the teleport button, then found new york in the map, it had multiple park icons i could click. I pressed the one closest to where my home is and found an identical park but with a less organized system. Someone was marked as having "moderator privileges", i clicked the info button and it said that in times of emergency volunteers can take control temporarily. I walked up to her, and explained the system I saw in my brother's town, she thanked me and started yelling orders. She had apparently been trying and failing to get some kind of system going for the last few minutes, but when the crowd eventually settled down she sorted us in the same way. I explained what's going on to a few people and then got a notification saying the HAZCAM photos were here. I clicked the close button and saw my desktop. I navigated to the photos and looked. I saw something I never could have expected.

There was a rectangle in the dirt looking a lot like the monolith from 2001. It had text written in a language I couldn't recognise, it had letters from the latin alphabet though. My computer let me select the text straight out of the image and I put it in google translate, it registered as esperanto. That makes sense, Esperanto was at least attempting to be a universal language the translation said "we are not from your planet, we connected you to computers and made you much easier to keep alive because doing so was impossible for us to do for all of our worlds. You are still on one world so we would like to give you this gift. Do not try to find us, the stars around you for huntress of light years are yours and the ones farther than that are too many for you to check. If you ever find us even we will not know if it was us. We wish you luck, and hope if you ever meet a civilization across the stars, you be considerate and treat them as friends regardless of technological advancement". I was speech-less, not that I had vocal cords outside of the simulation, but my thoughts seemed to have a new layer to them that felt like speaking. I posted the image and the translation in the comments to see it sky rocket in likes. I was going to post other social media sites but people have clearly been watching new posts to like anything of substance, they were almost certainly reposting on other sites. I was still in shock, we had just found alien life, i had just found alien life. It seemed to imply the rare earth hypothesis is true. I checked what else had been posted in the comments and found a video. It was a drone flying, it flew but then yawed to the right, the operator stopped and turned the drone around to see a power bank still attached, they moved closer to the power bank and then flew right as fast as possible, the drone just barely stayed in the air. The wire pulled down as well as left, but the drone stayed in the air. It was in the football field of what looked to be a school. There was a large rectangular section with big windows, probably the gymnasium. The drone flew up to the window to find a bunch of hexagonal organic looking objects stacked on top of one and other they looked to be about a meter across and half a meter tall. At this distance they would be impossible to see if not for it being some kind of cinematography drone with a high res camera. They had what looked like skin, but weren't disgusting, they looked like some kind of hairless animal cuddling up for warmth. The drone went down to find an open door, the drone flew in and it showed the hexagons closer up; they had what looked like organic connection pins, and holes that looked organic and fleshy, but were very clearly North American, European, and Chinese electrical outlets. I paused the video to see what looked like a fiber optic cable sticking out of what I assume is a person. That made me chuckle, I guess it has some kind of eye to look at the fiber optic. I then saw name tags on each hexagon, which pretty much confirms that these are people. I unpaused and the drone started flying through the halls, but as soon as it flew past the wall it cut off. I saw a phone and controller next to the power bank, the operator was probably using some kind of remote desk top service to connect to the phone via cellular, as soon as the drone lost connection it simply turned off and probably automatically landed. I thought about how many things had to go right for that video to exist. They had to be changing their drone at that time, the phone needed an app that let you connect to it via cellular, there had to be a window making them investigate further, and the door had to happen to be open to get high res video proving that they are people and not just some art project. I guess 8 billion people are enough to brute force probability. Then I marveled at the fact that I was now the discoverer of intelligent alien life, and I was thinking about probability. This whole day just didn't seem real any more. I reopened the VR and found a

menu for preset environments. I selected one that looked like a fancy hotel room and took a nap. Hopefully humanity would know more in an hour.