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The Fermi Paradox
Is Our Business Model

Illustration by
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The thing about seeking out new civilizations is, every discovery brings a day of vomiting. There’s no way to wake from a thousand years of Interdream without all of your stomachs clenching and rejecting, like marrow fists. The worst of it was, Jon always woke up hungry as well as nauseous.

This particular time, Jon started puking before the autosystems had even lifted him out of the Interdream envelope. He fell on his haunches and vomited some more, even as he fought the starving urge to suck in flavors through his feed-holes. He missed Toku, even though he’d seen her minutes ago, subjective time.

Instigator didn’t have the decency to let Jon finish puking before it started reporting on the latest discovery.

“We have picked up—”

“Just—” Jon heaved again. He looked like a child’s flatdoll on the smooth green floor, his body too oval from long recumbence, so that his face grimaced out of his sternum. “Just give me a moment.”

Instigator waited exactly one standard moment, then went on. “As I was saying,” the computer droned, “we’ve picked up both radiation traces and Cultural Emissions from the planet.”

“So, same as always. A technological civilization, followed by Closure.” Jon’s out-of-practice speaking tentacles stammered as they slapped together around his feed-holes. His vomit had almost completely disappeared from the floor, thanks to the ship’s autoscrubs.

“There’s one thing,” Instigator’s voice warbled, simulating the sound of speaking tentacles knotted in puzzlement. “The Cultural Emissions appear to have continued for some time following the Closure.”

“Oh.” Jon shivered, in spite of the temperature-regulated, womblike Wake Chamber. “That’s not supposed to happen.” The entire point of Closure was that nothing happened afterwards. Ever again. At least he was no longer sick to his stomachs (for now anyway) and Instigator responded by pumping more flavors into the chamber’s methane/nitrogen mix.

Jon spent two millimoments studying the emissions from this planet, third in line from a single star. Instigator kept reminding him he’d have to wake Toku, his boss/partner, with a full report. “Yeah, yeah,” Jon said. “I know. But it would be nice to know what to tell Toku first. This makes no sense.” Plus he wanted to clean up, maybe aim some spritzer at the cilia on his back, before Toku saw him.

At the thought of Toku coming back to life and greeting him, Jon felt a flutter in his deepest stomach. Whenever Jon was apart from Toku, he felt crazy in love with her—and when he was in her presence, she drove him nuts and he just wanted to get away from her. Since they had been sharing a three-room spaceship for a million years, this dynamic tended to play out in real-time.

Jon tried to organize the facts: He and Toku had slept for about two thousand years, longer than usual. Instigator had established that the little planet had experienced a massive radioactive flare, consistent with the people nuking the hell out of themselves. And afterwards, they’d carried on broadcasting electromagnetic representations of mating or choosing a leader.

“This is shit!” Jon smacked his playback globe with one marrow. “The whole point of Closure is, it’s already over before we even know they existed.”

“What are you going to tell Toku?” Instigator asked.

Toku hated when Jon gave her incomplete data. They’d taken turns being in charge of the ship, according to custom, for the first half million years of their mission, until they both agreed that Toku was the better decision-maker.

Jon was already fastening the hundreds of strips of fabric that constituted his dress uniform around his arm- and leg-joints. He hated this get-up, but Toku always woke even crankier than he did. His chair melted into the floor and a bed yawned out of the wall so he could stretch himself out.

“I guess I’ll tell her what we know, and let her make the call. Most likely, they had a small Closure, kept making Culture, then had a final Closure afterwards. The second one may not have been radioactive. It could have
been biological, or climate-based. It doesn’t matter. They all end the same way.”

At least Jon had the decency to let Toku finish voiding her stomachs and snarling at Instigator’s attempts at aromatherapy before he started bombarding her with data. “Hey love,” Jon said. “Boy, those two thousand years flew by, huh? The time between new civilizations is getting longer and longer. Makes you wonder if the Great Expedient is almost over.”

“Just tell me the score,” Toku grumbled.

“Well,” Jon said. “We know they were bipedal, like us. They had separate holes for breathing and food consumption, in a big appendage over their bodies. And they had a bunch of languages, which we’re still trying to decipher. We’ve identified manufactured debris orbiting their world, which is always a nice sign. And, uh… we think they might have survived.”

“What?” Toku jumped to her feet and lurched over, still queasy, to look over Jon’s shoulder at his globe. “That doesn’t happen.”

“That’s what I said. So what do we do? The Over-nest says not to approach if we think there’s a living culture, right? On the other hand, it might be even longer than two millennia before we find the next civilization.”

“Let me worry about that,” Toku said, sucking in some energizing flavors and slowly straightening up her beautifully round frame. Her speaking tentacles knotted around her feed-holes. “I think we assume they didn’t survive. It’s like you said: They probably held on for a little while, then finished up.”

Space travel being what it was, Jon and Toku had months to debate this conclusion before they reached this planet, which was of course called Earth. (These civilizations almost always called their homeworlds “Earth.”) For two of those months, Instigator mistakenly believed that the planet’s main language was something called Espanhua, before figuring out those were two different languages: Spanish and Mandarin.

“It all checks out,” Toku insisted. “They’re ultra-violent, sex-crazed and leader-focused. In other words, the same as all the others. There’s absolutely no way.”

Jon did not point out that Toku and he had just spent the past two days having sex in his chamber. Maybe that didn’t make them sex-crazed, just affectionate.

“I’m telling you, boss,” Jon said. “We’re seeing culture that references the Closure as a historical event.”

“That does not happen.” Toku cradled all her marrows.

There was only one way to settle it. Weeks later, they lurched into realspace and settled into orbit around Earth.

“So?” Toku leaned over Jon and breathed down his back, the way he hated. “What have we got?”

“Looking.” Jon hunched over the globe. “Tons of lovely metal, some of it even still in orbit. Definitely plenty of radioactivity. You could warm up a lovebarb in seconds.” Then he remembered Toku didn’t like that kind of language, even during sex, and quickly moved on. “I can see ruined cities down there, and… oh.”

He double- and triple-checked to make sure he wasn’t looking at historical impressions or fever-traces.

“Yeah, there are definitely still electromagnetic impulses,” said Jon. “And people. There’s one big settlement on that big island. Or small continent.” He gestured at a land mass, which was unfortunately lovebarb-shaped and might remind Toku of his dirty talk a moment earlier.

Toku stared as Jon zoomed in the visual. There was one spire, like a giant worship-spike, with millions of lights glowing on it. A single structure holding a city full of people, with a tip that glowed brighter than the rest. These people were as hierarchical as all the others, so the tip was probably where the leader (or leaders) lived.

“Options,” Toku said.

Jon almost offered some options, but realized just in time that she wasn’t asking him.

“We could leave,” Toku said, “and go looking for a different civilization. Which could take thousands of years, with the luck we’ve had lately. We could sit here and wait for them to die, which might only take a few hundred years. We could go back into Interdream and ask Instigator to wake us up when they’re all dead.”

“It’s just so… tasty-looking,” Jon sighed. “I mean, look at it. It’s perfect. Gases, radioactive materials, refined metals, all just sitting there. How dare they still be alive?”

“They’re doing it just to mess with you.” Toku laughed and Jon felt a shiver of nervous affection in his back-cilia.

She stalked back to her own chamber to think over the options, while Jon watched the realtime transmissions from the planet. He was annoyed to discover the survivors spoke neither Spanish nor Mandarin, but some other language. Instigator worked on a schema, but it could take days.

“Okay,” Toku said a few MM later. “We’re going back to Interdream, but only level two, so years become moments. And that way, the wake-up won’t be too vomit-making. Instigator will bring us out—gently—when they’re all dead.”

“Sure, boss,” Jon said, but then an unpleasant thought hit him. “What if they don’t die off? Instigator might let
us sleep forever.”

“That doesn’t hap—” Toku put one marrow over her feed-holes before she jinxed herself. “Sure. Yeah. Let’s make sure Instigator wakes us after a thousand years if the bastards haven’t snuffed it by then.”

“Sure.” Jon started refining Instigator’s parameters, just to make damned sure they didn’t sleep forever. Something blared from the panel next to his globe, and an indicator he’d never seen before glowed. “Uh, that’s a weird light. What’s that light? Is it a happy light? Please tell me it’s happy.”

“That’s the external contact monitor,” Instigator purred. “Someone on the planet’s surface is attempting to talk to us. In that language I’ve been working on deciphering.”

It only took Instigator a couple MM to untangle it. “Attention, vessel from [beyond homeworld]. Please identify yourselves. We are [non-aggro] but we can defend ourselves if we need to. We have a [radioactive projectile] aimed at you. We would welcome your [peaceful alliance]. Please respond.”

“We can talk back in their language?” Toku asked.

Instigator churned for a while, then said yes. “Tell them we come from another star, and we are on a survey mission. We are peaceful but have no desire to interact. Make it clear we are leaving soon.”

“Leaving?” Jon asked, after Instigator beamed their message down, translated into “English.”

“I’ve had enough of this.” Toku breathed. “Not only did they survive their Closure, but they’re threatening us with a Closure of our own. Someone else can check on them in a few millennia. Worst comes to worst, we can just overdraw our credit at the Tradestation some more.”

“They are launching something,” Instigator reported. “Not a projectile. A vessel. It will converge on our position in a few MM.”

Watching the blip lift off from the planet’s surface, Jon felt a weird sensation, not unlike the mix of hunger and nausea he’d felt when he’d woken from Interdream: curiosity.

“You have to admit, boss, it would be interesting. The first living civilization we’ve actually met, in a million years of visiting other worlds. Don’t you want to know what they’re like?”

“I just wish they had the decency to be dead,” Toku sighed. “That’s by far the best thing about other civilizations: their 100 percent fatality rate.”

The little blip got closer, and Toku didn’t make any move to take them out of realspace. She must be experiencing the same pangs of curiosity Jon was. It wasn’t as if they’d contacted these people on purpose, so nobody could blame Jon or Toku if they made contact briefly.

Jon reached out with his lower right marrow and grazed Toku’s, and she gave him a gentle squeeze.

“What do you want to bet the leader of their civilization is on that ship, engaging in atavistic power displays?”

Toku almost giggled. “It would be amusing to see. I mean, we’ve seen the end result often enough, but…”

“Yeah,” Jon said. They were each daring the other to be the coward who took the ship out of realspace before that vessel arrived.

The “Earth” ship grazed theirs, trying to do some kind of connective maneuver. Instigator tried a few different things before finally coating the visiting ship’s “airlock” with a polymer cocoon. Instigator couldn’t make air that the “Earths” could breathe, but could at least provide a temperature-controlled chamber for them in the storage hold.

Three of the “Earths” came into the chamber and figured out a way to sit in the chairs that Instigator provided. In person they looked silly: They had elongated bodies, with “heads” elevated over everything else, as if each person was a miniature hierarchy. “I am Renolz. We are here in [state of non-violence],” the leader of the “Earths” said.

Jon tapped on his communications grid, some sort of all-purpose “nice to meet you” that Instigator could relay to the “Earths.”

Slowly, haltingly, the “Earths” conveyed that they were from a city-state called Sidni. And everyone left alive on “Earth” was the servant of someone named “Jondorf” who controlled a profit-making enterprise called “Dorfco.” The rest of the “Earths” had died hundreds of years ago, but a few million people had survived inside the “Dorfco” megastructure.

“We always had [optimism/faith] that we weren’t alone in the universe,” the leader said after a few MM of conversation. “We have waited so long.”

“You were never alone,” Jon tapped back on his comm-grid. “We made lots of others, just like you, more or less, but you’re the first ones we’ve found alive.” He hit “send” before Toku could scream at him to stop.

“What in the slow-rotting third stomach of the Death Lord do you think you’re doing?” Toku pushed Jon away from the comm-grid. “You’re not supposed to tell them that.”

“Oh! Sorry. It just slipped out!” Jon pulled a chair from the floor on the other side of the room from the comm-grid, and settled in to watch from a safe distance.

In reality, Jon had decided to tell the “Earths” the truth, because he had that hunger/nausea pang again. He wanted to see how they would react.
“What did you say?” Renolz replied after a moment. “Did you say you made us?”

“No,” Toku tapped hastily on the comm-grid. “That was a translation error. We meant to say we found you, not that we made you. Please ignore that last bit. In any case, we will now be leaving your star system forever. Please get off our ship, and we’ll be gone before you know it.”

“That was no translation error.” Renolz looked agitated, from the way he was twitching. “Please. Tell us what you meant.”

“Nothing. We meant nothing. Would you please leave our ship now? We’re out of here.”

“We will not leave until you explain.”

“Options,” Toku said, and this time Jon knew better than to offer any. She bared her flavor/gas separators at him in anger. “We could expel the ‘Earths’ into space, but we’re not murderers. We could wait them out, but they might launch their projectile and destroy us. We could leave and take them with us, but then they would suffocate. And we’re not murderers.”

“Why not just explain it to them?” Jon couldn’t help asking.

“This is going on your permanent file.” Toku’s eyes clustered in pure menace. Jon shrank back into the corner.

“Okay then,” Toku tapped on the comm-pad. “This may be hard for you to understand, so please listen carefully and don’t do that twitching thing again. Yes. We made you, but it’s not personal.”

“What do you mean, it is not personal?” Renolz seemed to be assuming the most aggressive power stance an “Earth” could take.

“I mean, we didn’t intend to create your species in particular. Our employers seeded this galaxy with billions of life-seeding devices. It was just a wealth-creation schema.” The worst Interdream nightmare couldn’t be worse than this: having to explain yourself to one of your investment organisms. Toku stiffened and flinched, and Instigator pumped soothing flavors into the air in response.

“You mean you created us as a [capital-accretion enterprise]?” The clear bubble on the front of Renolz’s helmet turned cloudy, as if he were secreting excess poisonous gases. The other two members of his group kept clutching each other.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Toku tapped. “We…” She wrote, erased, wrote, erased, wrote again. “We created you, along with countless other sentient creatures. The idea is, you evolve. You develop technology. You fight. You dig up all the metals and radioactive elements out of the ground. As you become more advanced, your population gets bigger, and you fight more. When your civilization gets advanced enough, you fight even harder, until you kill each other off. We don’t even find out you existed until after you’re all dead. That’s how it’s supposed to work, anyway.”

“Why?”

However they had survived their Closure, it obviously wasn’t by being super-intelligent. Toku mashed her marrows together, trying to think of another way to explain it so Renolz would understand, and then leave them alone. “You dig up the metals, to make things. Right? You find the rare elements. You invent technology. Yes? And then you die, and leave it all behind. For us. We come and take it after you are gone. For profit. Now do you understand?”

“So you created us to die.”

“Yes.”

“For [industrial exploitation]? ”

“That’s right. It’s cheaper than sending machines to do it. Often, the denser metals and rare elements are hard to reach. It would be a major pain.”

Toku hit “send” and then waited. Was there any chance that, having heard the truth, the “Earths” would get back into their little ship and go back home, so Toku and Jon could leave before their careers were any more ruined? With luck, the “Earths” would finish dying off before anyone found out what had happened.

“What kind of [night predators] are you?” Renolz asked.

Toku decided to treat the question as informational. “We are the Falshi. We are from a world 120,000 light years from here. We’re bipeds, like you. You are the first living civilization we’ve encountered in a million years of doing this job. We’ve never killed or hurt anyone. Now will you leave our ship? Please?”

“This is a lot for us to absorb,” Renolz said from the other chamber. “We… Does your species have [God/creator beliefs]? Who do you think created your kind?”

“We used to believe in gods,” Toku responded. “Not any more. We’re an old enough race that we were able to study the explosion that created the universe. We saw no creator, no sign of any intelligence at the beginning. Just chaos. But we’re not your creators in any meaningful way.”

Renolz took a long time to reply. “Will you establish trade with us?”

“Trade?” Toku almost laughed as she read it. She turned to Jon. “Do you see what you’ve done now?”

Anger made her face smooth out, opened her eyes to the fullest, and for a moment she looked the way she did
the day Jon had met her for the first time, in the Tradestation’s flavor marsh, when she’d asked him if he liked long journeys.

“We trade with each other,” Toku tapped out. “We don’t trade with you.”

“I think I know why we survived,” Renolz said. “We developed a form of [wealth-accretion ideology] that was as strong as nationalism or religion. Dorfco was strong enough to protect itself. Jondorf is a [far-seeing leader]. We understand trade. We could trade with you, as equals.”

“We don’t recognize your authority to trade,” Toku tapped. As soon as she hit the “send” area of the comm-pad, she realized that might have been a mistake. Although communicating with these creatures in the first place was already a huge error.

“So you won’t trade with us, but you’ll sell our artifacts after we die?” Renolz was twitching again.

“Yes,” Toku said. “But we won’t hurt you. You hurt each other. It’s not our fault. It’s just the way you are. Sentient races destroy themselves, it’s the way of things. Our race was lucky.”

“So was ours,” Renolz said. “And we will stay lucky.”

Oh dear. Jon could tell Toku was starting to freak out at the way this was going. “Yes, good,” she tapped back. “Maybe you’ll survive after all. We would be thrilled if that happened. Really. We’ll come back in a few thousand years, and see if you’re still here.”

“Or maybe,” Renolz said, “we will come and find you.”

Toku stepped away from the comm-grid. “We are in so much trouble,” she told Jon. “We might as well not ever go back to Tradestation 237 if anyone finds out what we’ve done here.” Was it childish of Jon to be glad she was saying “we” instead of “you”?

Toku seemed to realize that every exchange was making this conversation more disastrous. She shut off the comm-grid and made a chair near Jon, so she wouldn’t feel tempted to try and talk to the “Earths” any more. Renolz kept sending messages, but she didn’t answer. Jon kept trying to catch Toku’s eyes, but she wouldn’t look at him.

“Enough of the silent tactics,” Renolz said an hour later. “You made us. You have a responsibility.” Toku gave Jon a poisonous look, and Jon covered his eyes.

The “Earths” started running out of air, and decided to go back to their ship. But before they left, Renolz approached the glowing spot that was Instigator’s main communications port in that chamber, so his faceplate was huge in their screen. Renolz said, “We are leaving. But you can [have certainty/resolve] that you will be hearing from us again.” Instigator dissolved the membrane so the Earth ship could disengage.

“You idiot!” Toku shouted as she watched the ship glide down into the planet’s atmosphere. (It was back to “you” instead of “we”.) “See what you did? You’ve given them a reason to keep on surviving!”

“Oh,” Jon said. “But no. I mean, even knowing we’re out there waiting for them to finish dying… it probably won’t change their self-destructive tendencies. They’re still totally hierarchical; you heard how he talked about that Jondorf character.”

Toku had turned her back to Jon, her cilia stiff as twigs.

“Look, I’m sorry,” Jon said. “I just, you know, I just acted on impulse.” Jon started to babble something else, about exploration and being excited to wake up to a surprise for once, and maybe there was more to life than just tearing through the ruins.

Toku turned back to face Jon, and her eyes were moist. Her speaking tentacles wound around each other. “It’s my fault,” she said. “I’ve been in charge too long. We’re supposed to take turns, and I… I felt like you weren’t a leader. Maybe if you’d been in charge occasionally, you’d be better at deciding stuff. It’s like what you said before, about hierarchy. It taints everything.” She turned and walked back towards her bedchamber.

“So wait,” Jon said. “What are we going to do? Where are we going to go next?”

“Back to the Tradestation.” Toku didn’t look back at him. “We’re dissolving our partnership. And hoping to hell the Tradestation isn’t sporting a Dorfco logo when we show up there a few thousand years from now. I’m sorry, Jon.”

After that, Toku didn’t speak to Jon at all until they were both falling naked into their Interdream envelopes. Jon thought he heard her say that they could maybe try to salvage one or two more dead cultures together before they went back to the Tradestation, just so they didn’t have to go home empty.

The envelope swallowed Jon like a predatory flower, and the sickly-sweet vapors made him so cold his bones sang. He knew he’d be dreaming about misshapen creatures, dead but still moving, and for a moment he squirmed against the tubes burrowing inside his body. Jon felt lonesome, as if Toku were light-years away instead of in the next room. He was so close to thinking of the perfect thing to say, to make her forgive him. But then he realized that even if he came up with something in his last moment of consciousness, he’d never remember it when he woke. Last-minute amnesia was part of the deal.
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