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Intelligent life

"I still can't believe these things are intelligent"

Darren was walking along a trackway following a metre- high slug-like creature.

"At the speed they move they make tortoises look lively."

Phil circled the animal, which was munched at the mossy track surface as it surged slowly forward.

"I know what you mean, but they're definitely what's managing this environment... All these roadways, those burrows, and those buildings – if that's the right word."

During the brief hours since they landed the two men had seen scores of similar creatures moving in ordered lines, shaping and moulding the landscape – some using tools and machinery. They farmed ground-cover crops, constructed roadways, created order.

"It's a kind of civilisation", said Phil, screwing his face in self-disbelief.

They dubbed the creatures "slug-cows" as soon as they saw them, and they had been the magnet that drew Earth's attention to the planet. Their physiology could not be judged from space, but distant observations identified signs of creative activity. Years of astronomical surveying had failed to identify extra-terrestrial life more advanced than the simplest single-cell bacteria - until this planet was discovered, with its geometrical pathways and its evidence of designed construction. The planet was unremarkable, geologically speaking, but observations had been strongly suggestive of advanced development. Phil and Darren were the first to witness it directly.

Slug-cows had no hands, nor any definite limbs, but they 'handled' tools; extending folds from their flexible bodies and twisting them round the object to be grasped. Neither man had the courage yet to test the strength of this grip, but it was strong enough to use tools without dropping them. To call their bodies 'flexible' is not descriptive enough; they were like jelly held together within grey, elastic elephant skins. Their method of locomotion was a compromise between the many-limbed walk of the millipede and the relentless drift of a glacier. Some kind of ripple flowed along their bodies, but it was more of an oscillation than a walk. Slug-cows were slow, but purposeful; they were shapeless, but adaptable to all their needs. Best of all, they seemed tireless in this oppressive environment, which kept Phil and Darren down to 30-minute bursts of muscle-aching activity. The force of gravity on this planet was 50% greater than on Earth.

Their inter-stellar craft circled eighteen hundred kilometres above them, passing over their heads every second day. A closer orbit was considered unwise in this gravity field and there were serious questions about the two-man pod's ability to rejoin their mother ship at the end of the mission. Their objective had been predetermined since space travel first became a reality to Earth people almost two centuries earlier. Some day we knew we must find intelligent life elsewhere in the universe and we would have to find ways to communicate with it.

"How can we talk to a cow?"

Phil knew the script well enough, but he had expected the task to be more straightforward. He knew it was illogical, but he always imagined he would be meeting a being somewhat like himself - Something with eyes, legs, hands and some kind of external organ for making sound.

"I can't see how they can talk with one another, let alone with us. But they must be communicating. It's got to be telepathy."

Phil crouched to examine the creature.

"The distance between this animal and the one over there must be 200 metres and I can't hear a sound from either – but their movements are perfectly synchronised. It's got no arms to wave; I can't see any electronic equipment. The only thing near it is these wretched fire-flies."

He swiped at the lights dancing round his head.

"The scanners picked up ultrasounds as we approached orbit, remember?"

"But you don't think one of these jelly-barrels could produce those sounds, do you?"

"Perhaps it's the flies?"

They had paid little attention to the fireflies until now but, glancing around, they could see thousands of the microscopic lights. The biggest swarms hovered just above the slug-cows. The word 'flies' was a compromise description for a being that had no recognisable form. If they had shape it would need powerful magnification to observe it. They had light and they had movement; and they responded to the movements of the men, especially when one of them swatted at a swarm.

"They are alive, but they must burn up a lot of energy to glow that brightly", Darren mused, "Have you noticed they're the only thing flying on this planet?"

"What do you expect in this gravity? Anything bigger than them would need impossible resources to stay in flight."

"And, if they didn't glow, they'd be invisible."

"Look at that."

Phil pointed at seven slug-cows that had come together and were moving in their direction.

"They look a bit too purposeful for my liking."

The swarm hovering above each cow was growing in size and brightness as fireflies grouped together in the same purposeful progression. The nearest slug-cow was turning itself towards Phil and Darren, apparently goaded on by its attendant swarm.

"It's time to start communicating with these creatures!"

"What d'you expect me to do? Hold up my hand and shout 'we come in peace, take me to your leader' like some cheap twentieth century comic book character?"

"You may not need to. Look!"

Phil pointed at a glowing shape on the back of the nearest slug-cow. It was an exact copy of the badges both men wore on their space suits.

Darren moved forward to take a closer look, "Have these creatures got screens on their back? Wait on... No! It's the fireflies."

The points of light were reforming to create words; messages; they were communicating in written English.

“We were looking for intelligent life but that’s more than I expected. How could they know our language when we’ve never been in communication before?”

“More to the point, how can we talk back?”

The fireflies answered Phil’s question...

The new message on the slug-cow’s back read, “We come in peace. Find a container to put some of us in and take us back to your leader.”

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