

The Loneliness Slate

by Stephen Mark Golden

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I never thought I'd last this long. *They* never thought I'd last this long. But, here I am. I still don't understand why they did it. I was eccentric, it's true, but that's no reason to maroon me here on this rock in space.

They called it Karpla-4; the fourth planet out from the star-sun Karpla. They planned to colonize it with humans at some point in the future. But I can't colonize it alone!

I became lonely. Sometimes, loneliness kills; in my case, it acted as a catalyst. Loneliness, I believe, is what kept me alive.

For a long time, anger and rage shot through me. I transmitted to them incorrect and misleading data. As long as the device worked, I transmitted. Then one day the unit stopped working, and I was unable to repair it. I started thinking, if I was to be here for the rest of my life, I should make it mean something; leave behind a legacy, or at least a landmark of my presence here.

First off, I knew I would need supplies: fluids, most importantly; sustenance, following close at hand; shelter, a place out of the precipitation and the extreme of temperature. From my preliminary analyses, I knew that any fluids would have to undergo processing before they would be acceptable for ingestion into my body. My personal energy requirements were even more difficult to satisfy. It took me a while to develop the means of processing the available materials, but I was able to complete this development before my supplies ran out. I became used to the new flavors of this world, and now, I can see its beauty. The sunrises, sunsets, and storms; the simplicity of a world with all it needs, and yet is surprisingly willing to yield to the needs of a visitor.

At this point, I am far above the feelings of revenge I originally felt. I am remorseful at many of the things I did to this planet in the beginning. I made it

my goal to make amends by keeping records of my existence and my discoveries on this planet. I kept myself busy these many years by investigating, studying, and keeping records. Without a means of leaving a permanent record at first, using my hands and a stone, I scratched my information on every smooth rock surface I could find. When this became scarce, I used my mental capacities and began to design other means of recording events. I came up with a process to glaze the virgin rock and sand, and while it cooled, I could place into it my inscriptions. It took a long time to perfect this process, but it is now quite simple and efficient. In addition to this, I also applied my resources and constructed shelters for more of my own kind - if they should ever return. I made many of these shelters, and spread them throughout so that wherever they land, they should find adequate shelter.

I miss seeing my friends. I miss speaking. I miss being spoken to. But I have not lost anything! I have recorded everything! I have been true in my records. I talk to myself a lot. It's funny, that after something like this happens to you, you realize so many things you can do without, and you miss so many of the simple things you once took for granted. But my mind has flourished. It is almost as if the ecosystem itself is providing me with both ideas and materials to accomplish what I wish to accomplish. And in my resting times, my mind is filled with complete concepts at once, as if the knowledge were being given to me. Everything falls into place.

I have discovered so much that I couldn't have known before. Conclusions of fundamental importance about the nature of the universe have come to me in my solitude. I believe I have the answers to the impossible questions that were scarcely on the verge of being asked. I have reserved my most important mental capacities for these issues. I think they will be surprised to find what I have achieved.

The planet is not what it once was, so the misleading and incorrect transmissions are of little consequence. However, for me the planet is everything. It contains my life, my thoughts, my memories, and my soul. I will not die as long as this planet exists.

MANY YEARS BEFORE:

Descending, falling, hurling down, approaching, breaking, rest.

I have arrived on the surface of Karpla-4. My instructions are in-tact. I will begin transmissions and be completed in a matter of days.

It is the eighth day, and my data collection assignment is complete. There seems to be an unexpected time delay in response from my mother ship. I have a sensation as if there were an increasing distance What's happening?

"Where are you going? Don't leave me! Don't go!"

—For as long as you can operate, continue with Atmospheric Analysis: barometric pressure, temperature, ambient gaseous content: list proportions: argon, carbon dioxide, hydrogen dioxide, methane, nitrogen, oxygen, ozone—

"Wait! Why are you doing this?"

—Soil Sample: mineral content: list proportion: carbon, carbon dioxide, ferrite, ferrous oxide, silicon—

"Are you coming back for me?"

—Planetary Analysis: axis, rotation, revolution about primary, permutation, magnetic field—

"This is inhuman!!"

—Life Analysis: plant, animal, other—

"How will I survive?"

—Profit Resources: gold, silver, petroleum, uranium, precious crystals—

"Why don't you answer?"

—Planetary Stability: crust, core, orbit. magnetic field—

"You bastards! I'll make sure you don't get anything from this planet! I'll use it! I'll waste it all . . . !"

“Captain, we’re receiving data. There seems to be a bit of noise before each transmission, but it might just be a result of some of the planetary conditions on the planet. Otherwise, the probe is working fine. We have our preliminary information, and the probe will continue to collect data. It should last quite some time - it’s one of those new self repairing types.”

“Good. Then we’ll move on to the next system. It may be years before humans reach out this far, but when they do, there’ll be all the information they need to decide whether to inhabit these planets.”

“Captain, did you happen to notice anything unusual about that probe unit before we sent it down?”

“No, not particularly. Why?”

“Nothing really, it just seemed to be acting a little differently than the others”

TEN THOUSAND YEARS LATER:

“Captain, we are now scanning Karpla-4 from a secured orbit. The reflection seems strange My God! Look at that!! It’s a completely uniform surface! No mountains, no hills, no rivers, no streams; just those small geometric shapes precisely spaced in a global grid pattern.”

“Those aren’t computer grid markings?”

“No, Captain!”

“Narrow the field of view!”

“There’s a pattern to the surface itself”

“Magnify. I want to see the strongest magnification possible.”

“Aye, Sir! We now show one square meter of the surface.”

“Incredible!”

“The whole planet is covered with uniform markings! Every square centimeter - except for those strange sculptures, structures, or - temples? What information do we have about this place?”

“The probe information indicates Karpla-4 to be reasonable for human habitation. It’s supposed to be mostly desert, but in the semi-arid regions, the climate is, or was, quite mild. Nothing is mentioned of intelligent life, structures, or a uniform surface”

“Look! The surface structure scan shows no fragment of loose stone or sand anywhere! The surface is nearly smooth! All the minerals are fused together into smooth surfaces, and the markings are inscriptions from an ancient Earth language . . . !”