

# Star Shaper

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In August 2030, astronomers picked up a massive comet traveling from the remotest confines of the Oort cloud towards the orbit of Mercury. Such an eccentric orbit had not been seen before, and astrophysicists quickly pointed out that it might be a visitor from the stars, a stray comet from another solar system who had wandered off too far from its sun, and too close to ours. The media did what it always does: aliens.

At this point in History, Humanity had been presented with so many false alarms, that almost no one took it seriously. Still, they were presented with a great opportunity for analyzing first-hand an interstellar comet. In the 20 years it took for the comet to slowly approach us, Humanity built a probe designed to rendezvous with it.

The probe was still leaving Earth's sphere of influence when the comet shifted. One trillion tons of rock, metal, and ice reduced its momentum a thousand-fold in the span of a few seconds and embarked in a collision course with Earth. Humanity panicked. The excitement of first contact with intelligence was drowned by the realization of imminent global destruction.

The global economy plummeted in response to the crisis. People stopped showing up to work when they knew there would not be anything to work for in a few months. Governments fell and rose in the span of days. Global powers made crude attempts at planetary defense systems, all of which failed. The few billionaires who managed to keep some of their wealth in the various worldwide revolts made last ditch attempts at survival by building bunkers or rockets. None made it out.

The day of the impact, the comet stopped on its tracks, fragmented into a myriad of equally sized portions, and fell towards Earth. There were no explosions, no molten rock plumes, no craters. The fragments gracefully landed all over the continents and oceans. As soon they made touchdown, kilometer-long swarms of insect-like machines deployed from the fragments of the comet like angry hornets defending their nest. They began to gather resources, ravaging entire landscapes, leaving behind empty shells of once flourishing ecosystems.

With the materials collected, they made more of themselves. Von Neumann probes. An idea devised by Humanity decades ago, and executed long before that by some faceless species that did not dare to show itself when ending our planet. They soon began their next phase. The swarms approached living things, and performed intricate dances around them. Ferromagnetic elements inside them generated carefully controlled electromagnetic fields of great intensity and precision that they used to analyze the neural structure of everything on the biosphere with a mind. The fields generated were so intense that they rendered the brain of a human being useless in the process.

After assimilating most big cities, they stopped. They could afford to wait. Their creators had launched these probes thousands, millions, or even billions of years prior. The probes pathed the way for their slow, inevitable domination of the Universe. They

could afford to wait. With the data collected they studied human languages, and announced days later in all shapes and forms that assimilated brains were uploaded to a simulation where they would be allowed to continue their lives.

That was the twisted sense of justice of a species so advanced it could mine entire planets. In some ways, it was more ethical than our own behavior. They did not breed us into a submissive species, or farmed us for our meat, or hunted us into extinction. They gave us a second chance, a blank world where our mistakes could not hurt anyone, while real intelligence was free to roam about the galaxy, spreading its seed everywhere, and putting resources to a good use. Our blind ambitions of grandeur destroyed, we were put in our place. We were nothing but the imperfect product of millions of years of unfortunate chance, a half-baked attempt at meaningful existence.

Huge gates opened in the assimilated cities, inviting the remaining humans to cooperate. A sick joke. They gave the survivors the freedom of accepting they had none, the choice to give up choice. Many accepted the gamble, while others remained in the outskirts of their fallen civilization. Religious fanaticism grew rampant. It is hard not to believe in God when you have seen him murder your entire family. Some last remnants of Humanity reluctantly lingered, stealing, murdering and raping each other in a grim last attempt at perpetuating their species.

That is the story so far. I am one of those barbarians. But not for long. I choose not to be part of this grim after-thought of Humanity. I join millions in the pilgrimage towards the gates. I envy all past generations who have not contemplated so up-close the minuteness of our species, who have not looked into the eyes of some truer intelligence, who have never truly comprehended the vastness and cruelty of this unforgiving, merciless universe. I cross the gates. I feel the nanobots probing the flesh inside my skull, first as careful fingers caressing the most precious of treasures, then as hammer and chisel violently sculpting my last thoughts. I feel my consciousness slowly vanish, my intense grief for our stolen future gives way to gentle inner-peace. I sense my intelligence leaving my body, complex ideas and thoughts turn into raw insults and curses at the universe, which turn into wordless emotions, which turn into nothing.

I'm floating in nothingness. I cannot feel anything, not even fear. I cannot fear the darkness, for I cannot see it. I cannot fear the silence, for I cannot hear it. I cannot fear the void, for I am part of it. I finally feel whole.

I'm suddenly shaken down from this brief break from existence by a blinding bright fissure in my vicinity. It pulls from me. I resist, but it's futile. My lucid state of being is swapped by pure despair. I cross the fissure, entering a white room full of people. I cannot see their faces, the light hurts my eyes. I close them shut and cry. I feel my cries reverberate in my throat. I attempt to open my eyes again, my pain seems to please them. I can now see who they are. My mother lays in a bed, my father beside her. I have seen all these before, several times.