

Learning The World

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Learning The World

Robert Ziefel

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Learning The World

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For My Grandmother

*Who always told me I could do anything
I put my mind to*

Learning The World

1

The Mystery Begins

Land sakes child, you gave me a fright.

The blue green world hung beneath me, like so many before and soon more to come, I was sure. My armor, a gift or so I had come to regard it, protected me from the vacuum and other hazards of space without a thought. My visor, the only break in the liquid, organic like silver that covered my physical form, glowed red as I gazed down to see if this world was worthy of my attentions or not. All along the land, colors shifted and changed as the beings living there went about their daily lives. I studied each one without emotion, seeing what colors dominated what areas. As far away as they were, the colors of their sins stood out with clarity before my eyes. I did not know how I had been given my powers, or by whom, but my mission was clear: Find worlds with intelligent beings and watch them. If they were worthy of my help, assist them with as little disruption to their way of life as possible. When they were already on the right track, leave them to their fate. But were they a danger to other species outside their own planet? Eliminate them.

I had the power to do either of the three.

This world was curious. Many evils in this world flashed before my eyes and were cataloged: red for murder, blue for sadness, yellow for... the list was not important. However, the colors did not predominate, and watching for many revolutions of the planet from my vantage point I saw that many of those colors were dealt with in what this planet called justice. I saw these beings seem to help each other, and harm each other, in equal measure, but it seemed they were trying. Their methods were not perfect, but neither were they the worst I had seen. Some areas seemed more restrained than others, while some were less so... an oddness, to be sure, most places I visited had equal distributions of color.

But something even more puzzling caught my attention, a large region of orange- too large to be even a few beings, it was more like hundreds. *Can some natural disaster be taking place in that area?* I thought to myself. I willed myself there and looked around, phased out of their

reality slightly so as not to interfere in what was happening even inadvertently. As I swept my gaze left and right, I saw the beings running this way and that, obviously terrified, but of what I could not say. I did not register any seismic activity in the area, nor any concentrations of the primitive weapons they seemed to utilize. I concluded they were not under attack, at least not by any means I could see. So what was causing this panic?

I unconsciously shifted my form to more resemble theirs, my armor flowing smoothly around my body as I did so. It wasn't necessary, of course, as I had yet to make the decision to assist them or not, so none would ever see me. I did like to experience the form of the beings I was studying, hence the change. I had found that form mattered a great deal, sometimes giving insights as to why a culture or species did what it-

"What was that?" I asked, startled, as some part of the structure I was currently in suddenly smashed apart and began falling upon the beings below.

"Unknown," my armor answered me. That gave me a seconds pause, which I felt foolish about. Of course my armor could answer me verbally. I was just so used to accessing it mentally, thinking about it as a part of myself, that I hadn't used that functionality in some time. Apparently speaking aloud had given it the idea I wished to converse with it in that fashion, and so it did. I didn't mind, either way.

"Begin a deep scan," I commanded it, looking up at the area and stepping to the "left," out of time synchronization with these beings. Reading flashed across my visor but none to explain what was happening.

"No explosive devices detected. No standard energy signatures detected. Anomalous readings in area," my armor droned.

"What readings?" I demanded. I should say they were anomalous if no energy caused that explosion. But something did- there it was! Anyway, "standard" energy readings? I didn't like the sound of that.

"Inconsistent energy signatures."

"Direct me."

The armor directed me to a certain spot and informed me the reading emanated from directly in front of me, but nothing was there.

"Are-" No, of course my armor was sure. If it said something was there, then something was. It didn't seem like this planet had developed

any sort of stealth or phase technology, but that didn't mean two hidden aliens weren't going at it right here. *If that is so*, I thought, *I will remove them to a more suitable battleground without them even knowing*. It was in my power to exactly duplicate these surroundings elsewhere, minus the beings who were in danger here, and relay the fighters there. When the battle was over, bring the victor back here none the wiser and make sure they left the planet. If they didn't leave, or the wrong sort of being was the victor, I could take action against them to make sure they didn't harm the native population. I could do that. I had done it before.

The problem was, a deep scan of my surroundings should have uncovered any cloaked beings right away, but it apparently hadn't. It was feasible a species had developed a technology my armor couldn't penetrate, but I hadn't encountered any thus far in my travels.

"Increase my temporal synchronization by 10%" I commanded my armor, which powered certain parts of itself to comply with my order. The action began to crawl again as I reached 10% synchronization, allowing me to closely study everything in detail as it happened.

Looking around, I saw people apparently being flung about by some unseen force, and then, of all things, an energy beam appeared out of nowhere! I mentally slowed my sync to 0% again, as that was faster than verbally commanding it, and strode over to the origin point for the blast. Now here was something obviously not native to this planet! Also, it gave me a point to focus on, something tangible I could probe; something was generating this bolt of energy, and I meant to find out what.

"Deep scan of this point right here," I said, pointing to the area just before the beam began. "Deploy additional scanning units if necessary."

Pieces of my armor flowed off and reformed into spheres, hovering over and through the area as they scanned. The armor around my body thinned to compensate, but I paid that no mind as I read the scrolling results on my visor's display.

"Permission for probe units to phase into normal space-time?"

I considered. With all the commotion going on here it was unlikely they would be noticed for the duration of time needed to complete a scan.

"Granted. Increase to 100% synchronization for the duration."

The probes positioned themselves.

“Affirmative.”

The action resumed as I stepped “right,” back into the normal flow of time, and the probes became solid with respect to the matter in this area. They took a burst reading and I stepped “left” again as they rejoined my armor and melted back into place.

“Vibrational disturbance detected at target point.”

I consulted my database for exactly what that meant, and came up blank. That set me back, there was very little technology that wasn’t in my database. Another “gift” of my creators.

“Can you... elaborate?” I asked hesitantly.

A diagram covered part of my display, and I studied it interestedly. “All matter and energy vibrate unceasingly and synchronously in this universe,” it began. That I was familiar with. There was a species that had developed a weapon based on that principal that could literally shake anything apart by creating a field of counter vibration around an object. “Postulate matter present at target point vibrates unsynchronously with surroundings.”

I stared. Obviously that was not shaking them or the surroundings apart, unless that was the cause of the- no, I looked over at where the beam terminated and decided it was a battle taking place right here. A battle none of the beings here could see, or even begin to understand, because whatever was fighting couldn’t be seen by them.

“Some sort of cloaking technology?” I asked.

“Unknown. More data must be gathered.”

I considered. *This planet may be interesting to watch after all*, I thought. “Can you shift my perceptions to allow me to see them?”

“Affirmative. Please stand by.”

As my armor worked on that request I stared at the space where the beam was coming from. I hadn’t felt this excited in a long time! What would be revealed? I could hardly-

“That’s it?” I grumbled as a figure came into view. “That must be some kind of further deception.”

“You are now viewing reality as it exists,” my armor said a bit petulantly, if such a thing was possible.

“But-” I couldn’t even finish my thought. Before me was what looked like any other inhabitant of this planet. In one hand was held some kind of primitive bladed weapon and in the other...

“That can’t be right!” I exclaimed. “Where’s the weapon it’s using to generate that energy beam?”

My armor hesitated, something I was most definitely not accustomed to. “You are now viewing-”

“Don’t give me that! Look at- scan the area again now and compensate for the vibrational anomaly.”

A moment passed.

“Further scans show a difference between perceived reality and expected reality. Only the bladed weapon is held.”

“That would mean-” The implications of this were staggering. Not only was this individual not seen by the others around it, apparently it could generate energy beams from out of nothing. *Wait a second, there must be some other, simpler, explanation.*

“Scan for cybernetic implants or synthetic tissues in the target individual.”

“No implants detected. No synthetic tissues detected.” It paused. “Target is biological?”

“That sounded like a question!”

“Affirmative. Discrepancies with surrounding biological life detected.”

“What discrepancies?”

Again the hesitation. “That is unknown at this time.”

“So you know something is different, but you can’t say exactly what?”

“Affirmative.”

“Well!” This was turning out to be much more interesting than- I turned to see what the figure was aiming at. “Huh.”

“Please restate?”

“What is that creature? Don’t answer, I know you don’t know yet.”

I walked closer. It was very different in appearance to the beings around it, but not overly so. It walked upright, and was about the same size as the others, but it didn’t wear coverings like they did. Also, wings protruded from the creature’s back, and horns sprouted from its head. The legs were also odd. “Is that a tail?”

“Affirmative.”

The creature was obviously wounded, but the blood, if that’s what it was, seemed to be burning up in the air rather than dripping down like a normal fluid. It was in the process of dodging the energy blast, which

I found rather impressive, until I realized it was still there, hanging in midair.

“Estimate speed of energy blast.”

My armor rattled off a number that was much slower than it should have been, further confusing me.

“Possible explanation.”

“Go ahead.”

“Being is actually throwing this energy rather than discharging it.”

I considered. It was as good a theory as any. I looked back and forth between the two figures, trying to figure out exactly what they were. Obviously no technology was keeping this creature vibrationally separate from the rest of the universe, unless it was implanted somehow. My armor said it detected no such technology but did declare some sort of energy was present around it. I asked where the energy was coming from, but my armor said no supply beam was detected, so the creature must be generating it, itself.

As I studied it, I didn't take long to see the attacked creature was obviously a predator of some kind. The claws protruding from the thing's fingers were proof enough of that.

“Is it possible,” I asked my armor, “that creatures on this world evolved the ability to alter their vibrational makeup? And to combat them, others evolved the ability to-” No, it was too farfetched. A biological organism could create a shock of electricity or the like, but this beam rivaled a directed energy weapon! Could a living being really create such a thing on a whim?

“I'd like to see what else this being can do,” I said, walking back over to the being generating the beam. “Bring my temporal synchronization back to 10%.”

The world slowly began moving again, and the creature finished dodging the attack and jumped backwards, moving its hands in a weird pattern. Looking back at the attacker I noticed it doing the same thing as the creature bounced backwards down the space that was opening around this area. Looking down, I noticed an odd ring of light surrounding the creature, and mentally ordered a scan of it.

“Energy matches that of field present around the creature,” it answered.

Let's see what further surprise you have for me, I thought. An instant later, the creature seemed to vanish!

“Track it!” I shouted, looking around. “It could be employing another layer of deception!”

“Tracking impossible. Only one vibrational anomaly in the area detected.”

“It’s just gone?” I asked, shocked again. “Did it Teleport, or get Teleported away?”

“No known Teleportation energy recorded during specified event.”

I looked back at the other figure, perhaps it would give me a clue of what happened, as presumably it would have dealt with this sort of thing before.

Its facial expression changed, though if it was happy or not I couldn’t say, and it stopped waving a hand around and slowly looked about. Perhaps the creature *had* escaped somehow. Then the being started waving a hand again, and I was sure it was vocalizing as well. I took the biggest shock of all: a hole appeared in the air in front of the being, as big as it was! Easily big enough to step through, though the being didn’t do that. It looked through, and I came up behind it to look through myself.

“0% temporal synchronization,” I ordered, and the action stopped again. I looked through to another world, a very bizarre world indeed, and I had seen some odd ones in my time. I didn’t want to poke my head through without learning more, but from the opening I could see a red sky and a horizon that seemed to curve upwards, rather than down. It seemed some kind of forest, as plant life was everywhere, and there, impossibly, was the creature again! If that expression was one of triumph I would be shocked, it seemed even more wary now than before. It was caught in a crouch, and it seemed like the plant life, if that’s what it was, had started reaching branches out to capture it. I had seen carnivorous plants before, but as I went back to 10% time synchronization I realized I had never seen any like this.

The plants tore the poor creature apart, while the being still here stood and watched through the portal as it was devoured. It didn’t take long.

The portal closed, and the being calmly got out a long, narrow something and made a mark with it on their hand. Wait, the weapon it was holding looked different now! That was the least of my concerns as I watched as the being calmly strode away, leaving the area in chaos and terror.

I stepped “left” and considered following the individual, but decided I could home in on that vibrational anomaly again anytime, so I stayed to watch what happened here. There was some bustle for a while, and people were kept from the larger pieces of wreckage, and those that were injured were tended to. There seemed to be a lot of shouting and staking about by people all wearing a similar covering, those carried what I recognized as weapons. Perhaps some kind of peace keeping force, but a little too late from what I saw. If they could even have done anything, which I doubted.

This planet had intrigued me, but those were just the first surprises I encountered on the planet I came to know as “Earth.”

2

Information Gathering

A database cannot draw conclusions.

I was once again high above the planet, watching the tapestry of sins shift and change beneath me as I considered this world. What was my next move? I wanted to learn more about the ability of that being to create directed energy weapon fire from nothing, and about the strange place the creature had fled to. Obviously it had fled there to try and get away from the other, but had found itself in a bad position. Had it chosen to be killed in that manner rather than be captured? Had it been a mistake? At this point I couldn't be sure. A thought came to me- was that one being unique? I brightened, there was a way I could find out, and perhaps answer some other questions about this world at the same time. I stepped "right," the world beneath me coming to an instant halt, and activated certain circuitry in my armor.

It was time for a planetary scan!

A ball of light formed between my two upper appendages, which I then released. It flew towards the planet at a speed even I could hardly track, and impacted the surface. I watched as it "slowly" formed a great ring, rolling across the entire surface of the world gathering data for me. When it was halfway through I willed myself to the opposite side of the world and watched as it now shrank, coming again into a ball and flying towards me. I allowed it to impact my armor and information flooded into my databases, much faster than I could perceive. My armor systems began immediately cataloging and tagging the information so whatever I asked about could be answered. I stepped "left," not needing to maintain the energy cost of holding myself steady in respect to their time. There was no rush, and my armor would soon have the answers I needed.

What question to ask first? Ah, of course! "Approximate number of vibrational disturbances upon the surface?" The "approximate" being necessary because my armor would otherwise relate the exact number, to the individual being. Even I didn't have time for that.

“Six Hundred,” came the reply.

“Approximate total planetary population?”

“Seven billion.”

“So hardly even worth mentioning?”

“Affirmative.”

“So those beings that can hide themselves from the others are almost so rare as to be nonexistent? That’s a pity, a larger sample size would increase the amount of data I could gather about them. Are they distinct?”

“Affirmative. All share the same base vibrational frequency but enough variation exists to allow tracking of individuals.”

“Excellent! We have one “specimen” tagged already, let’s go see what it did after leaving the area we were in.” I willed myself to appear in that location, knowing my armor would make the necessary inquiries into the database to bring me to the proper place.

I stayed where I was.

I hadn’t felt fear- real, honest to goodness fear since I awoke and found this armored shell around me. Since then, nothing had been able to even interact with me unless I willed it. I, sometimes in my anger over a species’ deplorable behavior, had destroyed entire civilizations that were too far gone to be allowed to continue. Never- never had my armor failed to obey a command until now. What was wrong? After all this time, was my armor... broken?

“Explanation for delay?” I hesitantly asked, dreading the silence that would inevitably follow my question.

“Target individual cannot be tracked.”

I relaxed- slightly. If my armor could still respond to me it wasn’t broken somehow, improbable as that would be. I had never considered it running down or failing, but perhaps it was prudent to think about that possibility? After my study of this planet was done, I told myself, I would look into creating certain backup plans should my armor show signs of malfunction. After all, who was there to repair it? Or was this a sign of malfunction itself?

“Explain how that is possible.”

“Unknown. Even a non-living organism would still be vibrationally separate from this universe. The only conclusion is that target being has left the planet.”

But these beings only had the most primitive of spacecraft, and there were none of more advanced creation in orbit, I had checked that when I first arrived. Unless...

“It may have made another of those holes to that odd world and stepped through. That would account for the anomaly.”

“80% probability this is correct.”

Well! Even I could only study one world at a time. The mystery of the odd place I had glimpsed earlier would have to wait.

“Continue regular scans. I want to know when that being comes back into this world.”

“Affirmative.”

Now what, I asked myself. I could see what other hidden individuals were doing, but I felt a connection to that first one I had seen. It was probably silly, but I wanted to wait for that one to reappear in the world. Still, if a world held one surprise, perhaps it held others. My planetary scan was quite thorough.

“Were other anomalous phenomena recorded that were not vibrational in nature?”

“Affirmative.”

I was pleased, this world did still have secrets I could look into while I was waiting. “How many?”

“Seventeen distinct phenomena recorded, one hundred twenty three locations.”

Seventeen! This world was a jewel! There was no doubt about it, worthy or not, it had captured my attention. “Choose one at random and take me there.”

I found myself in a small room with a being bent over an object on a table. Books lay open about a being doing some strange work, and other objects, possibly of ritual significance lay precisely placed along the table as well. What caught my attention, however, were the ribbons of energy that hung in the air, glowing in multiple colors. As I stood and watched the being would consult one of his books, then turn back to the energy ribbons and add another one very precisely. Centrally, an object smaller than one of these being's heads rested on a stand, and the ribbons of energy wound around it in the air. The being would touch one of the objects to the table and pull it away, leaving a new ribbon, which it pinched off and then threaded through the others. I ran a scan, and as

energy was pulled out of the object it became more immaterial, as though the object itself was being translated into energy and being fed into those ribbons. Each object was already quite indistinct, as though the being had been at work for some time. I sensed movement behind me and jerked my vision, noting the second figure in the room I had totally missed upon my arrival. The strange ribbon energy had consumed my attention, an embarrassing lapse on my part. I hadn't even noted the presence of the second being. I knew I couldn't be harmed or even sensed by the beings, but that was no reason to become sloppy! And who knew what surprises still awaited me? Best to not take any chances with these beings until I had cataloged all they could do.

I watched for some time as the being finished using up all the objects around him, turning them into energy. It studied the air from all angles, consulting the books and nudging things this way and that. The resulting product was quite beautiful, I had to admit. Was this being a sculptor of some kind? Was it making an art piece? A very strange one, if so- it couldn't last! This fact was a minor mystery against how exactly this being was converting matter to energy with such ease in the first place. What exactly maintained those ribbons in that configuration? I had seen other artists create pieces with light, but always with special platforms that refreshed the image or special films to capture the photons and later display them. I scanned the table under the object- it was just murdered plant life, shaped into a certain configuration and held together with heavy element fasteners. Nothing special.

The two beings looked at each other, and the one working placed his hands lightly on the edges of the ribbons and closed his eyes. I watched with anticipation- what exactly was going to happen? Suddenly the man drew the ribbons together all at once, causing them to wrap tightly around the central object, where he strained to keep them. I watched in amazement as they sank into the object and disappeared, making the being relax. It straightened, then handed the object over to the other being, who put it around their neck after attaching a thin chain to the top.

The two beings then left the room and I followed, puzzled. What was the point of all that? The art object was gone, could it be called out again from that central object? Why wear it in that position? I was clearly missing something but I was unsure as to what. They stopped and I saw the artist, if that's what he was, pick up a shaped length of murdered plant life and gesture to the other. He held it like a weapon, and I was

concerned that violence was about to begin here. But the other didn't try to get away or struggle, so I must be wrong. That being seemed to answer affirmatively, and the one holding the weapon smashed it into the other's chest. I was right, violence! But why do harm after taking such pains to create that- The instant the weapon was about to hit the other figure it suddenly bounced off, and it became clear what that strange object was.

"That being just made the other a force field," I said, stunned.

"Energy Barrier detected around being wearing the object," my armor agreed.

I scanned the object again, and yes, it was still just solid metal to the core. That was unchanged from before all those ribbons of energy sank into it. The one being seemed satisfied, and took from his pocket a large wad of green rectangles, which he passed to the other being. That being set the weapon down and took them, nodding his head as he began to count the individual pieces. I hardly noticed, I was fixated on the object. It had no power supply, no circuitry. How could a force field come from it? I scanned the being carefully, there was no other explanation for the field, it must be coming from that object. My armor squawked a warning: "Space folding in progress!"

"You mean-" But the being was gone, and air rushed in to account for the vacuum it left behind. This tore the objects out of the other being's hands and forced him to scramble around to catch them. I could hardly see him, my thoughts were rolling. Personal space folding- in essence, a Teleport, but without any external means? Force shields without power supplies? Hidden predators? This planet wasn't interesting, it was a madhouse!

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