



# CONDUCTIVE VOICES

A Tale of the Near Future

Some of the scientists have referred to this as the elephant graveyard problem. From the old myth about African elephants going off to die in some secretive location, unseen by human eyes.

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**T**here is life in the universe. It took us decades to find ... and what we found wasn't very impressive. Not impressive at all. We found their world almost 600 light-years from Earth on a barren mercury-like planet only 2AUs from their yellow dwarf star. I and a few of my colleagues were sent out at once to investigate. I must tell you I've never seen anything like it. The boys in the botany department took to calling them Naamans because they are not men. Clever, huh? They're not even mammals, you couldn't even class them as insects. Naamans look like oversize amoebas, about four feet tall and roughly eight feet wide. Only they are not a single cell. But they look like they should be.

Human beings are mostly bags of water, but we seem almost dry in comparison to the Naamans. They don't even have a discernible structure. Oh, they have organs alright. You can see them clearly through their transparent outer coverings. Most of them seem to be digestive organs, you know like the liver and spleen. Only they are not contained in anything. Take the Purple Organ for example. All the cells of the Purple Organ roam around the Naaman's body. They are not contained in anything, they simply seem to have a natural affinity of each other. It's as if each of the purple cells has a special magnetic attraction to other Purple Organ cells. This loose association of tissue seems to be in charge of digesting hard matter, like bones.

Funny thing is we can't even classify it as an animal. Because it only eats like an animal in the dark, engulfing and then devouring its prey. But during the day, or when there is enough light available, it performs photosynthesis. Not surprisingly, this is the job of the Green Organ. In the end, it's another collection of unbagged cells that roam the creature's body at will. There is no circulatory system. The entire interior flows around the creature like a slow eddy in a pond.

As I said, most of the organs are digestive. The Pink Organ seems to be specialized in waste removal. Every so often the Pink Organ approaches the surface and a small hole appears. It then expels a tiny, hard, relatively small black pellet. This seems to be organic material the creature can't ... or won't digest. Still, there are no lungs ... unless you count the entire surface of the Naaman. As for eyes, well the best we can tell is that every cell in the entire organism is also an eye. Sort of an insect's compound eye gone way overboard.

Everyone argues over the organ we believe to be the brain. It's either the Gray or the Blue Organ. Mostly because we can't figure out what else they might do. If you ask me, it's a crappy reason to identify either of them as a central nervous system control ... especially for a creature that doesn't appear to have *any* specialized nerves.

Of course, with the whole engulfing thing going on it doesn't have any mouth and therefore, no power of speech. Maybe because I grew up reading too many Science Fiction novels, I half expected it to communicate telepathically, but no luck. No one was sure it was even intelligent. Basically, as far as I can tell, we've discovered a space cow. The Naamans simply wander about eating. So far, we've estimated the population at 500 billion. They seemed to have no predators. In fact, we discovered no other life forms on the planet. The Naamans simply seem to enjoy ingesting pre-organic matter, mostly amino acids and raw proteins. They are the only creature I've ever seen become wildly enthused over emergency field rations. They go nuts for the stuff. Even my dog turns up his nose at it.

What I can't figure out is whether they are immortal or cannibalistic. As far as we can determine there are no remains on the planet. Some of the scientists have referred to this as the elephant graveyard

problem. From the old myth about African elephants going off to die in some secretive location, unseen by human eyes. Of course, on Earth, this just turned out to be the ravenous appetites of the local ants. It's not a comforting thought, as there are no other life forms on the planet ... let alone an ant.

We'd done everything we could think of to study their biology ... well, short of dissecting one of them. But with modern medical scanning technology, it would have been redundant. In fact, there was a whole series of data points available to the scanners of a live subject ... information unavailable during a dissection. Although I have to say, dissection did have a certain appeal.

Personally, I was beginning to give up. I tried to remain hopeful. Maybe, in the end, I'd have a nice little journal article. Or so I thought. I received a curt note from the *Mid-Atlantic Journal of Anthropology* explaining my article was not the kind of work they published. After all, the Naamans had no social structure, no society, no infrastructure. There was no art, music, or literature. Studying Naaman culture was, at best, coma-inducing. For an anthropologist, it was like being stuck in the john with nothing to read but old comic books.

That is until the Naamans decided to share. We've long known about chemicals and their use to transfer information. DNA for example. Strands of DNA could be used to replicate the entire body of an individual. As a result, we know chemicals can be used to store vast amounts of complex data. But the Naamans had taken this process to an entirely new level. A single secretion through their skin contains all they know ... everything. While, at the same time, transferring everything you know. As a teaching method, it's unbelievably effective.

I say this because right now I'm helplessly strapped to the launch seat of our vehicle. The Naaman's still haven't gotten the knack of sound communication yet, not having a mouth, so I am able to use the voice recorder to get this all down. I'm sure they'll be able to catch on soon. I watched as one of them set the navigational controls to Earth. From my seat, I can see another one warming up the engines.

Apparently, I'm being taken along in case they find themselves in need of a snack.