

Warez

Excitement is infectious.

Annotated audio transcript only.

“We weren’t listening on the right channels. That was the old SETI in-joke. We should be listening to the media we haven’t invented yet.”

“And now we have?”

“Well... not as such, Minister. The artefact is millennia old and spent about a century in the British Museum egyptology collection, labelled ‘ritual object — purpose unknown’. One day it got used in a round of dating calibrations, and slow neutron imaging showed an internal structure that wasn’t at all Old Kingdom. The science-fiction fans in our technical team call it an ansible.” *[gesture]*

“Which would be an anagram of... of...”

“I have not researched that aspect. What it is, though, is a galactic modem. An interstellar access point. We’ve identified thousands of stations, nodes, channels, whatever. A fire-hose blast of information.” *[gesture]*

“But surely all in a ghastly foreign lingo?”

“Up to a point, Minister. Some communications are sheer Library of Babel — or babble. Many, though, seem designed for transparency. They begin with helpful language lessons, visual teaching aids.” *[explanatory gestures]*

“Nasty tic you have there. So, Exercise One goes: ‘Take me to your leader?’”

“A little more sophisticated than that, Sir. So much more so, indeed, that there are built-in pitfalls.”

“One has heard rumours.”

“Our interface software is now blocking channels #207 and #855, which produce undesirable symptoms in most people exposed to the message content. Convulsions, death, that kind of thing. Also #1,023, whose researcher came through in good health but with her former language skills overwritten. Apparently she now thinks in fluent Vegan or Arcturan and is finding it hard to relearn English. In fact...” *[several agitated gestures]*

“Interesting, but can we be more focused? Less pantomime and more valuable scientific insights that will advance the frontiers of knowledge and turn a whacking profit”

“Well, #89 is quite intriguing. It claims to offer the secrets of cheap interstellar travel. Some kind of light-pressure drive that relies on destabilizing the local sun.”

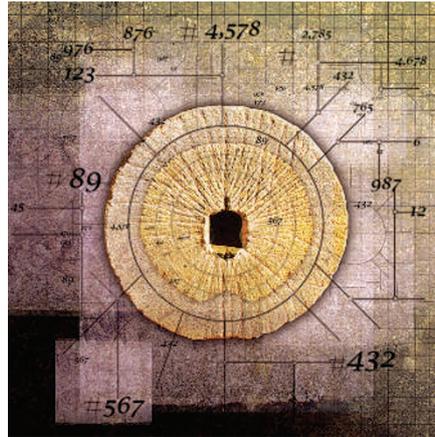
“That is, our local Sun?”

“In effect, yes.” *[gestures]*

“Good lord. Better not tell NASA about that... Something more practical, please.”

“The payload of #387 is allegedly a total-spectrum antibiotic. We didn’t care to

investigate too closely, but this would seem to be a replicating catalyst that persists in the environment and is incompatible with carbon-based life. One of those SF fans in our crew thought the target users might be silicon intelligences.” *[gestures]*



“*Caveat emptor. Onward!*” *[gesture]*

“Just for balance, #388 promises the same for semiconductors. No computer viruses, because no surviving computers: the catalysts roll us back to Ohm’s law technology... Now #1,599 has a certain fascination. All-purpose solution to any energy crisis.” *[gestures]*

“There will, I presume, be a catch.”

“The summary claims that it’s a simple technique of reprogramming the space-time attributes of matter to generate antimatter in arbitrary quantities. 100% conversion efficiency and zero CO₂ footprint.”

“The boffins already make that stuff, don’t they? At CERN and suchlike places.” *[gesture]*

“Exceedingly tiny amounts, Minister, at a rate of billions of years per gram. We are offered the opportunity to make antimatter by the kilogram, with a total energy release of circa 43 megatonnes when that mass encounters normal matter and annihilates. Just as easy to make a tonne for a yield of around 43,000 megatonnes. And it’s supposed to be simple.” *[gestures]*

“One detects a pattern. Dangerous toys.”

“Yes, Minister. We decided not to unpack full details, just in case it really is simple, but I lost no time putting a block on that channel too. The #1,599 message header, by the way, includes a slogan that seems to translate as ‘MAKE ENERGY FAST!’”

“Likewise, no doubt, ‘Information wants to be free.’ Pray continue your most interesting narrative.” *[gestures]*

“Of course we don’t know that the actual contents will match the instructions on, as it were, the tin. It may be significant that many of these communications take the general form of #214, which offers immunization against invasive memes, which are allegedly liable to reconfigure one’s entire culture as an ansible broadcasting bot that exists only to relay the original memetic message.”

“That, at least, sounds useful... Ah, maybe not. One has heard of Trojan horses. The benefits of a classical education.” *[gestures]*

“Yes, Minister. I should have mentioned that our girl who lost her English managed to infect three other people with whatever she’s now speaking, before we isolated everyone concerned... *[gestures]* There’s a wide range of suspected Trojan channels, mostly rather less ingenious than #214. To paraphrase a typical specimen: ‘Greatly enlarge your species potential!’”

“Or conversely, ‘There’s one born every minute.’”

“The final disappointment, I’m afraid, is that we don’t seem to be detecting any real-time communication out there. Just endlessly repeated broadcasts, most likely from zombie networks. *[numerous gestures]* Maybe it would have been different if we’d accessed the galactic net thousands of years ago, back when some UFO tourist presumably overflowed the Old Kingdom and dropped his mobile phone.”

“You fear the original broadcasters are all gone?” *[gestures]*

“I am trying my best to be optimistic. In fact I’m working hard to convince myself that although the ansible network may be choked with this junk, a genuine extraterrestrial contact is still possible.” *[gestures]*

“You mean... *[multiple gestures]* Go on: I’m beginning to understand.”

“Yes, Minister. We need to learn the trick of listening with another technology that we haven’t invented yet.” *[multiple complex gestures]*

NOTE: exchange continues solely in non-standard sign language. Both subjects now segregated as carriers of contagious memetic dactylology tentatively associated with channel #419. Prognosis uncertain.

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