

## The Path Forward

“What about this?” Fysu asks with a stressed and rushed tone.

Doci looks over, then says “Too heavy and not important enough. We have a weight limit”

Fysu places it on the desk, but doesn't let go, hesitates, begins to breathe heavily and starts huffing out words “I can't... I can't... I just...” then sits down and begins to hyperventilate.

Doci looks over, beloved Fysu drenched in fear and anguish.

“Honey! Honey!” Doci clamors over and grabs hold of Fysu “Look at me, just look at me. It's going to be O.K. We are going to be O.K.”

They gazed into each other's eyes, it took all of Doci's strength to not mirror back the dread in Fysu's face.

“This is our home!!!” Fysu blurts out falling into Doci's arms.

“I know honey” answered Doci “but we have no choice, all we can do is put one foot in front of the other”

“Our house... our community... our friends and family! All the people and places... just gone?!?” Fysu pushed out the words between sobs.

Silent for a moment, torn and conflicted, it took Doci a moment to pull together and resume, as always, to play the role that others required “We can rebuild the community somewhere new, your friends and family are what matter most right?”

Fysu Pushed Doci away, lashing out as anger surfaced “Stop lying to me! Don't treat me like someone across the table! don't handle me!”

“I'm not, we have lots of friends and family leaving with us, and the relocation package gives us plenty of options, we can go rebuild our community” Doci responded with firm confidence.

Fysu shot back, saying “I've spoken to Rado, and Pepi, and Tasi, and tons more... They are all going to different places. It's a menu of options and everyone is choosing what they like best, no one is even trying to stick together.”

“Well then we will make new friends and build a new community” responded Doci resolutely.

Fysu pauses, the fury cracking open, sorrow once more leaking through, then the anger snaps right back defiantly “Tell them NO! Tell them we aren’t leaving! Tell them we will fight for our home!”

Doci looks at Fysu with the same expression one gives a child making ridiculous demands “Start a war we can’t win?... Bend or break... there are only two options here honey, bend or break”

“Tell them... not here!” Fysu’s tone swung to one of grieving and pleading “Why here? Why not somewhere else? We don’t even need it or want it.”

“That’s why here...” explained Doci with a sigh “We are small, less developed, we are fewer and weaker, and that is exactly why it gets built here... We have no clout or bargaining power. Nobody wants to lose their home, but when it is an inevitable fate, that fate falls onto the smallest and weakest. The highway plows through our home precisely because we don’t build or use highways ourselves”

“Then go around!!!” Fysu continued pleading.

“It’s not like a paved highway” Doci says “It’s a flight corridor, they can’t just go around, they need to travel in straight lines. The only way to turn like that is to stop”

“Then stop! Stop here!” Fysu bellows out and starts begging “They can stop here and we will be the most friendly and gracious hosts of all time. We will treat them like royalty and share our beautiful home with travelers from all over”

Doci looks at Fysu, no desire to speak the next words that must be spoken, but it is the harsh reality. After a pause Doci calmly says “They don’t care, they aren’t interested, and we don’t have anything they want... We just aren’t worth the fuel and time.”

“Not worth the fuel and time?!?! Not worth the fuel and time?!?!” Fysu was overcome with a fury like never before “The flora. The fauna. The culture and historic structures. All the lives and homes built here!... Not worth the fuel and time?... just like that, all gone.”

This was not a version of Fysu that Doci knew how to deal with, there were no words within reach, no response at the ready.

Fysu was still lost in a ferocious hatred now “So what? They just come in and blast it all to dust?” filled with so much rage that it demanded a target. Perhaps the one who pushes the button to destroy everything Fysu held dear... yes... whoever pushes that button, a perfect target, someone to focus on and hate.

“No, it’s not like that” explained Doci “You know those videos of airplanes creating a sonic boom and the visible shockwaves around them. Like that but infinitely more intense. Everything will

just be blasted by powerful shockwaves, over and over, until all that is left is desert. First no animals left, then no plants, then decades later it's basically all desert"

Fysu began to imagine everything reduced to dust, slowly, a mental timelapse of a vibrant world reduced to apocalyptic dust."

"No!" Fysu burst forth defiantly "I may not be a physicist, but I studied engineering, and space is empty, this isn't true... it can't be true... It's a trick! ... and if it is true, well then they can just coast by. Shut off their engine and coast until they are clear past us"

"This is FTL... kind of... it doesn't work that way." Doci slipped back into a calm descriptive tone "I may not have a science degree like you, but I understood well enough. The explanation was surprisingly clear even for a simple layman like me"

"I refuse to believe that. I can't just accept that there is no way out of this. Explain to me how this is our only option, why this is our fate" Fysu demanded

"Look... I can only explain it as I understand, but I'll try. You know what the concept of a warp drive is?" Began Doci

"Everyone does, it's a staple of sci-fi and an arguably feasible theoretical technology" Fysu derided.

"Well this is like that, but apparently actually bending space like that isn't very feasible" Doci continued.

With a snarky tone Fysu jumped in again saying "That's precisely what most people expect, and if it's beyond these aliens ability, then they aren't so advanced after all" Fysu got a sense of satisfaction from the feeling of knocking these aliens off of a pedestal, they were not gods, and maybe that means they can be handled and dealt with by her own people.

"They didn't say they can't do it, they can. They said it's not feasible." Doci said "Anyways... you know about matter-energy equivalence, well apparently there is also space-energy equivalence."

Fysu was a bit knocked back, taking a moment to digest. Knowing it was the kind of thing that gets discussed abstractly but not having ever read about any workable theories of it.

"...So apparently it's much easier to just destroy space in front of you and create space behind you." Doci's words kept rolling out as Fysu slipped deeper into mental visualizations and puzzles.

Doci continued explaining things just as it had been explained by the aliens "... Turning off the engines is not so easy. The ship needs to maintain a very delicate balance inside an

unimaginably turbulent shockwave that builds up around the vessel. Shutting down is a complex process of shedding the shockwave. The ship was never really moving so it comes out of the shockwave with virtually no momentum. Coasting past us was suggested by our scientists too.”

Mechanically explaining things felt better than thinking about them emotionally, Doci just kept going “They told us to imagine moving through water. Treading through water is cumbersome, but you can boil and evaporate the water in front of you, and condense it behind you, and if you do this efficiently and fast enough then you will just slip through the emptiness in front of you riding on a wave of your own creation.”

Fysu was still whirling in all the puzzles and visualizations, like a deer caught in headlights.

Seeing Fysu’s expression shifting from fear and anguish into deep contemplation, Doci felt great relief. It was a painkiller, for them both.

“You know how they say the universe is inflating, and that’s why light from far away is red-shifted...” Doci guessed what might be the most interesting tidbit for Fysu to chew on “Well it turns out the causality isn’t so unilateral. It is also true to say that universe is expanding because photons are red-shifting... and that’s kind of how their engine works”

Fysu snapped out of the trance, ripped back into reality, recognizing the feeling of Doci’s tone, it was the tone taken when trying to distract and manipulate, like a magician’s sleight of hand. A lifetime of dealing with that behavior had honed Fysu’s reflex, immediately leaping right back at the issue, ignoring the distractions and searching for what is important.

“What gets saved?.. No... What gets left behind? How many are getting left behind?”  
Demanded Fysu.

After a long silence, with Fysu’s burning eyes unwavering, Doci responded “The compensation will be enough to comfortably settle and transport 2 million”

“Less than one percent ?!?” Screamed Fysu “Less than one percent?!?!?” another scream, this one cracking into a curdling shriek.

Doci knew there was nothing to say, no words to lessen or soften this, and grabbing Fysu tightly whispered “I know“

Doci finally broke down with Fysu, they formed an emotional feedback loop, the grief of one triggering more in the other, each feeding the other’s flood of tears with their own.

When they were finally drowned in all the horrible thoughts and terrifying visions, after they had nothing left but a sorrowful numbness, they just stared at each other in silence.

Fysu had already numbed into clarity, but noticed Doci was struggling, still slipping into tears, like a baby animal trying to stand, falling into tears over and over, unable to get up and out of a pit of grief.

"It's okay... I'm sorry... you know I don't mean to direct those feelings at you. I know it's not your fault" Fysu was now consoling Doci.

"It IS my fault" Bawled Doci.

"What?? What are you talking about?" Fysu pushed Doci back to make sharp eye contact, this moment demanded full attention and confrontation.

"... well... not this time... this time it's not my fault" Doci squeezed out the words while crying.

"This time?" Fysu asked, feeling deeply confused.

"Do you have any idea how often I was on the other side of this exact type of situation? Sitting there explaining to a town or community why they were being demolished or torn apart for the sake of greater economic progress." Unable to continue Doci sobbed a while, then settled and went back to what felt like confession. "I sat there arguing with these aliens... saying things I have heard a thousand times from other people just before I bulldozed them and everything they loved. I even realized it, I started using it, channeling all those voices that fought back against me, I became the embodiment of the people I steamrolled over."

Doci broke down again, and then whimpered "...and just like their words were futile... so were mine."

Doci sniffled for a moment, then tried hard to say in a calm voice "As bad as you feel... Imagine feeling like you deserve it... like somehow this tragedy is happening because I deserve to feel the other sides pain... and fate is dragging the whole planet into my punishment"

"Oh no dear, it's not at all the same... don't you dare blame yourself." Fysu understood and knew it was cruelly similar, but could not bear to see Doci burdened with such guilt, inventing a horrific new meaning to the expression 'feeling the weight of the world'. "No one deserves this!" were the most honest words Fysu could find.

They felt trapped in that moment... stuck... with no one to vilify, no one to beg, and no one to fight. It felt like it lasted forever.

The silence lingered.

Doci finally pulled together, stood up and said "Come on! Let's finish packing! We have our whole lives to cry over this, but right now it's time to move. We can't just lay down and die."

Fysu stood up slowly saying “Even now, you keep putting one foot in front of the other, always moving forward no matter what hits you. That is the reason people look up to you, not your persuasion or charm” remembering what had always been so enchanting about Doci.

“Enough! Flattery gets you nowhere” the tiniest laugh tried to escape Doci’s mouth, but failed “Just be thankful we are within the borders of the alien’s collective government. It could be worse.”

“Worse? Worse than this!?” Fysu was struck with disbelief.

“We are the village being bulldozed to build a highway. There are others who are like a village downstream from a polluting factory. The shockwave that builds up over the journey, it just gets bigger and bigger, when it is finally shed at the terminal it gets blasted forward in a tight cone. Stretching forward from the terminal of the flight corridor for thousands of light years is a cone deadly to habitable planets. That flight corridor is the barrel of a gun” explained Doci, regaining composure.

“That’s just... I mean the energy.. it must be ridiculous” said Fysu stumbling over the words.

“It’s a fuel shipping lane and the fuel is artificial black holes. They can be used as an unimaginable power source, but moving them is difficult. From what they say it’s easier to just tear up space itself than actually moving them around.” Doci says while moving around packing things.

“And they just blast off those cones into the galaxy?” asked Fysu also becoming quite composed, almost casual, as if discussing an everyday curiosity.

“They try to aim it at the emptiest regions, as best as they can, but that’s secondary to the primary objective of getting the fuel where it is needed. I would guess they often just blast it off into dense regions of stars and planets for convenience sake.” Doci said

“They don’t even worry about life on planets out there?” asked Fysu who was not as shocked as one would expect.

“ It was never explicitly discussed but I get the feeling it’s just like the problems we often deal with, companies pollute now and worry about it later. Any damage is often discovered after the company is gone and there is no one left to hold liable. Our companies do it all the time...” Doci paused then added “...DID it all the time... Our companies did it all the time...”

Those words seemed to echo, as they realized that from now on, it was past tense, the planet, the people, everything was now past tense.

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"I asked for a story about the aurora, not the highway" erupted a voice from the circle of construction workers sitting around in a circle.

"It was!" argued another voice, "Don't you get it? We are downstream from the corridor. Right Bami?"

"Yup" said Bami, head tipped down, baseball cap lid concealing Bami's eyes.

"Everyone knows the aurora is solar flares" said another voice

"How do you know?" asked yet another "They say this is the biggest we have ever seen. How do you know it's really solar flares?"

"Too many independent astronomers and astronomy organizations. You couldn't cover this up. It's just a story, like always, right Bami?" That same argumentative voice again

"Yup. It's just a story" Replied Bami

"Ah, good old Bami, mouth like river telling stories, then not even two words at any other time" Chuckled a voice from across the circle.

"I think the story is about..." a younger gentler voice began speaking but got cut off.

"Save it for later newbie. Come on! Everyone off your butts, this highway won't build itself" trumpeted a new voice.

Everyone gets up and walks off, except for Bami who is still sitting there, not a muscle moved since the story ended.

The newbie turns around and walks back over, standing above Bami, whose head is still down, not lifting it even as the newbie casts a shadow from above.

"The story is about them isn't it?" Asks the newbie pointing at the anthill directly in Bami's gaze.

"Yup" says Bami, still not moving a muscle.

The rumbling sounds of a heavy engine starting up broke the quiet in the air, along with a voice yelling "Move it. Out of the way you two"

Bami stood up and the two of them stepped back. Bami still staring at the anthill, all the little dots scurrying around, the newbie looked at the anthill, then at the approaching bulldozer tearing up the earth in its path and cringed.

The newbie had seen such things many times, and even ripped apart anthills with a shovel in previous jobs. In the past the experience of it brought feelings of curiosity and even derived a bit of playful fun. Those memories now started to resound with a haunting feeling, almost like guilt. The newbie couldn't watch and turned to look at Bami, who was still laser focused on the anthill.

"Do you.. " The newbie was a bit scared to ask such questions to a stranger on a job site "Do you feel sad?"

"Yup." replied Bami.

"Then why watch?" asked the newbie, fully focused on this interaction as a distraction from the thoughts of the bulldozer closing in on the anthill.

"Maybe feeling sad is enough." answered Bami.

The newbie was intrigued and asked "You think feeling sad makes it better?"

"Nope" said Bami

The newbie responded with an audible "huh?" sound.

"Feeling sad doesn't make anything better. But sometimes it's better to feel sad." explained Bami.

The newbie hesitated... then turned and watched the anthill with Bami. They watched the bulldozer plow into the anthill, there was nothing to see really, one moment it was there and the next it was not.

Then they both walked off and went back to work.

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