

Yuri Gagarin Saves the Galaxy

Vostok-1 soared into the sky, leaving Baikonur Cosmodrome far behind. Inside the spacecraft, Yuri Gagarin gasped for breath as immense forces pressed him into his seat. 119 seconds into the flight, the detachable boosters expended the last of their fuel and fell away from the rocket. The core stage continued thrusting for a further three minutes. Then the second stage ignited, launching the craft ever higher. Finally, after the most harrowing ten minutes in Yuri's life, the engines fell silent. He had become the first human being to journey into space.

"The flight is continuing well," he reported back to Baikonur. "I can see the Earth. The visibility is good."

"Welcome, Ambassador!" said a cheerful voice.

Yuri shuddered in surprise. Normally, transmissions were riddled with static and barely audible. But this voice had been clear as day.

"Ambassador, can you understand me?" The voice asked. It spoke with a Smolensk accent, reminding Yuri of his youth in Klushino.

"Who- who's talking?" Yuri asked, glancing around the cabin.

"We are the Zorplaxian collective! We are a highly advanced civilization and we have been watching your planet for some time now. Congratulations on your first manned spaceflight!"

"Baikonur," Yuri said. "Be advised, I am experiencing auditory hallucinations."

"Oh no, that won't do," said the voice. "We're blocking your transmissions. We don't want to muddy the waters with other humans. You are the one who came to space, so you are the one who speaks for your species. You are the Ambassador."

"I see."

"And let me say, you're much better than that dog you sent up four years ago. We spent hours trying to communicate with it."

"So... aliens," Yuri said. "You're aliens, then?"

"Oh yes, definitely. We have travelled the stars for hundreds of thousands of years. Whenever we spot intelligent life we stop by to say hello. We wait until they send someone into space, though. Wouldn't want to interfere with their development."

"How am I hearing you?" Yuri asked.

"Oh that? We're beaming thoughts directly into your head."

"So what do you want of me?"

"We don't want anything from you," said the voice. "We're here to give you scientific knowledge!"

"You'll just give it to us?"

“Certainly! We’re quite benevolent. We’ve noted the radio frequencies you use for communication. We can broadcast scientific information to everyone on your world. But we don’t know what your people need. What technology would you like?”

“Uh...” Yuri said. “I don’t know... how about a cure for cancer?”

“Pfft. Easy,” said the voice. “We have technology to engineer viruses. They can be tailored to attack only cancer cells and leave others alone. Shall we broadcast the details to your planet right now?”

“Hold on,” said Yuri. “Could someone use that tech to make a deadly virus that targets people by ethnicity?”

“Huh? Well... theoretically. But how could such a thing occur? It would require a long series of errors by the scientists in question.”

“What if they did it on purpose?”

“Impossible,” said the voice. “There are thousands of sapient races and we all share one common trait: a complete inability to harm other intelligent beings. It’s an evolutionary requirement. A species that doesn’t evolve that as a hard-wired reflex can’t possibly advance to being a cooperative society.”

“I see,” said Yuri.

“So shall we broadcast?”

“No, do not broadcast that information.”

“Puzzling,” said the voice. “But you know best, Ambassador. How about some mining technology? We have a beam you can point at any land mass. It separates the matter by element into neat stacks.”

“No!” Yuri snapped. “I mean... ahem. No, thank you. We’re good on mining tech.”

“All right, how about the communication system we’re using? You can talk to anyone over any distance. No language barriers or misunderstandings.”

“Hmm... maybe...” Yuri thought for a moment. “Wait a minute. Can you melt people’s brains with it?”

“What? We never thought of that. I suppose if you accidentally set the power too high-”

“Pass.”

“How about weather control? You’re probably sick of rain and snow on your cities, right? Send it off to the mountains where it’s needed!”

“How about hurricanes?” asked Yuri. “Could we send hurricanes wherever we wanted?”

“Of course!”

“No thanks.”

The voice sighed. “This is most vexing. We’ve never had people flatly turn us down before.”

“Sorry,” said Yuri. “It’s just that there are... complications.”

“Ah, I know! Interstellar travel. You clearly have an interest in leaving your planet. How would you like to travel the stars and meet other intelligent species?”

“Are any of them prepared for a war?” Yuri asked.

“I’m sorry, our translation system doesn’t understand the word ‘war’. Apparently we have never encountered that concept before. Can you explain it?”

“Okay, I need you to listen closely,” said Yuri. “Do not, under any circumstances, give my planet any technology at all. Especially interstellar travel. Ever.”

“Never?”

“Never.”

“The heat death of the universe will occur in 10^{100} years.”

“Well,” Yuri relented. “I guess you could check back in a while. Say, ten thousand years?”

“Oh is that all? Okay, we’ll wait.”

“There’ll be other humans coming to space soon. Don’t talk to any of them. In fact, don’t talk to any humans at all. Not for ten thousand years.”

He listened for a reply. None came.

“Hello? Alien guys? You there?”

Silence.

“Well I guess that’s that, then,” Yuri said.

Seventeen minutes later, he began reentry. The process was riddled with technical faults that almost killed him. Once he was safely inside the atmosphere, he ejected from the capsule and parachuted to safety. A good decision, because despite the capsule having parachutes of its own, it left a sizeable hole in the ground.

Two years later, he was named Hero of the Soviet Union. But the rest of the galaxy would later come to know him as the savior of all civilization.

