

Tech System 611

Chapter 611 Limitation is the Midwife of Invention

"We should maintain our position and try not to provoke the being until we have an idea of how to communicate with it, Admiral," Ayaka said. As the leader on the ground, Fleet Admiral Bianchi had looked to her to open the discussion. "After all, if you look at the situation from the being's side, we're the invaders that're interrupting its life. So its reaction is... understandable, in that light, even if it is both sapient and purposefully hostile."

"Wherever we go, the law of nature still applies," Captain Marinakis interjected. "The strong eat the weak, and mercy is a privilege of the strong. We have no idea if communication will even be possible, so I'd rather eat than be eaten, Sir."

Nobody else spoke, letting Fleet Admiral Bianchi weigh the two options presented to him. They were on opposite ends of the spectrum, which was rare for the command team of Ayaka and Dimitrios, who were normally rather synchronized in their approach to problem solving.

The admiral, however, gave no sign of what he was thinking. Ayaka's suggestion came directly from The Book, and would definitely be more in line with their mission of peaceful exploration. But Captain Marinakis also had a point; the one unbreakable law in the universe-especially now that humanity's exposure to mana and its subsequent evolution had overturned their perspective on the other "laws" of the universe-was the law of the jungle. And the commanders on the ground had great freedom to overrule The Book, though they would eventually have to justify their actions when they returned to an area where real-time communication with CENTCOM was possible.

Task Force Proxima thus had a window of time to decide how to respond to the being. Everything was still unknown at the moment, thus, everything was possible and even permitted. If he so chose, Fleet Admiral Bianchi could "pull up stakes" and move on to Alpha Centauri instead of remaining in Proxima Centauri. Or even turn around and head home, though that would be disastrous to his career and perhaps even harmful to humanity as a species.

So instead of making a decision as to which end of the spectrum of possibilities his response would fall on, he changed tack. "How long until our forges are completed?" he asked his chief of staff, Lieutenant Commander Thabo Botha.

"The probes just completed the detailed mapping pass on both asteroid belts. We have preliminary sites picked out based on initial spectrographic scans, and if all goes well, the forges will be completed in six months or so, Sir. Until then, we'll have to get... creative with what we already have."

Admiral Bianchi pinched the bridge of his nose. "It's a good thing our engineers are the cream of the crop. There's going to be a lot of jury-rigging if we can't send manned missions to the surface," he sighed. Until they developed an in-system industrial base, they would be reliant on forcing square pegs into round holes in terms of mission-specific gear. Luckily, though, they had trained for just that kind of situation.

If necessity was the mother of invention, limitation was its midwife.

The briefing continued for a few hours, barring a small break for a meal, as the leaders involved hammered out a tentative doctrine for dealing with what they had found themselves up against.

Though they had all trained in simulations for subjective years, that didn't necessarily mean they'd been exposed to every single situation they could encounter in an infinite, ever-expanding universe. And "hostile root swatting at the explorers' lander" just so happened to be one of those situations they hadn't covered in their training missions.

A few days later.

Over the past few days, the rovers and drones had been collecting samples and performing rough analyses on them nonstop. Data had been flowing to and from orbit in a steady stream, and the engineers had outdone themselves by converting a lander-THE lander, as it just so happened -to an unmanned vehicle. Should anything happen to it, it wouldn't be nearly as big a loss as it would if it were filled with researchers, spacers, and soldiers.

Thanks to that, together with the first round of samples collected by the landing crew, the researchers had discovered a veritable smorgasbord of single-celled organisms that were along the same lines as those that'd once floated in the primordial soup on Earth and eventually became humankind. All of their discoveries had been scanned and replicated in the limited VR simulation, though their scanners weren't quite up to dealing with mana yet.

There was a limit to tier 1 technology, after all, especially when it was trying to deal with mana. Any scanner that wanted to detect and recreate mana in virtual form to any usable degree of granularity and fidelity would need Aron to imbue it with intent, not just use the atomic printer to carve the runes and a converter to transmute electricity to mana and flood the runes with that mana. Aron was still the only runemaster in the human species, and only runemasters of the highest level could imbue runic constructs with intent.

And there simply weren't enough hours in the day for him to personally imbue all of the hardware on entire fleets of thousands of ships, even if he were inclined to make the attempt.

Thus, the researchers had a wealth of information to study, though they would have to solve the issue of safely landing on Proxima Centauri b's surface in order to study the "withering" they had noticed in the first samples brought to the Farsight. The samples they had been taking over the past few days, unlike their very first, were being very carefully handled so as to avoid wasting them. They already knew what happened when they removed them from the mana saturating and surrounding the planet, so until they were ready to study the withering itself, they would ensure that the integrity of their samples remained intact.

Some of their initial discoveries had made the exploration of the surface even more important. One in particular, though, blew the rest completely out of the water in terms of importance. In fact, it was perhaps on the same level as the discovery of penicillin by Alexander Fleming in 80 BE. Specifically, they had discovered miracle shit. Certain single-celled organisms that resided on the planet, when provided with proper nutrients, would convert those nutrients into energy for themselves, and excrete the rest as pure mana, among other byproducts. Sure, the amount of each individual organism's miracle shit was minuscule, but that didn't matter; there were a LOT of those organisms, and quantity could make up for the lacking amount in each miracle shit.

Thus, the rovers were kept busy for an entire PCb-year (eleven E-days) collecting sample after sample and shipping it up to the Farsight via unmanned lander as the researchers polished and began implementing Operation Bear Baiting.

A single unmanned lander was sent to test the hypothesis that the being had detected the hardware itself. Should the being respond in the same fashion as it did before, by attempting to whip the shit out of the lander, it would suggest that the lander itself was what had disturbed the being. If it didn't, then it would suggest the opposite. Of course, they wouldn't be able to tell with any certainty, as they were still unable to tell if the being was sentient, sapient, or even nonsentient. After all, no one would claim that a Venus Flytrap or Pitcher Plant was sentient simply because they were capable of attracting insects and reacting to them by trapping and digesting them.

The lander slowly descended with all of its sensors tuned to their max sensitivity and range. And that was quite a range, as the vehicle itself had been refitted with spare sensors from the Farsight's spares inventory along with a dedicated microfusion plant specifically to power them. The modifications hadn't exactly been easy for the engineering crews to make, but thanks to imperial technology being essentially modular in design, they had been within the realm of possibility.

But as any good engineer would tell people, knowing something COULD be done was 90% of actually doing it. The lander continued descending until it reached the same elevation it had been at on its previous trip, where it hovered in place as practically the entire task force watched for roots with bated breath.

They didn't have to wait for long, as the suspected root system showed an initial uptick in mana pulse intensity and frequency similar to the previous "invasion" of its space, but it soon returned to quiescence and no actual attack took place.

Chapter 612 A Wizard Did It

Over the next few weeks, the researchers of Task Force Proxima conducted hundreds of different tests and learned a few things about the "root". As it turned out, it was just one of an entire network of roots that covered the bottom of the entire ocean that they had jokingly named the New Australian Sea. After all, everything they knew lived in it had demonstrated that it was out to kill them, so the name seemed quite appropriate.

The root network was incredibly dense, with nearly a hundred percent coverage of the ocean floor, and each root itself was equally dense. The water pressure in the deepest part of the ocean—which was a full twenty kilometers deep—applied over ten million PSI of water pressure. But even at that depth, they'd learned (at the cost of a few submersible drones loaded with mana batteries) that the roots could still move with the same blinding, predatory speed as they had near the surface when one had attacked the crewed lander.

Another incidental discovery was that their tide hypothesis had been disproven. Proxima Centauri had little to no effect on the tides of the New Australian Sea. Instead, it now seemed as though the tides were driven by the roots as they twisted, turned, and writhed, seemingly inhaling and exhaling on a slow, but regular schedule.

That said, the star did play at least a minor role in the rise and fall of the tides. It just wasn't the only factor that drove the rise and fall of the ocean.

The final discovery the researchers had made was the approximate age of the root network. From the instrument readings, the roots were only a few hundred thousand years old, which made for a dilemma. In order to grow to the kind of coverage they had, even going so far as to raise the sea level by entire kilometers and drown multiple continents, the roots should by all rights be millions of years old, not just hundreds of thousands.

And that age-related dilemma was the source of many arguments and debates among the scientific staff. The only reference they had, though, was comparing the alien roots' growth with the growth of Earth's flora. So the arguments eventually died down and the initial consensus was "a wizard did it", or in other words, it was related to a function of mana that humanity simply hadn't come into contact with yet. Apparently, super-dense mana plus a star that radiated primarily ultraviolet light equaled unimaginable plant growth speeds. It was almost like Miracle-Gro, only thousands of times more effective.

However, all of the information they were working with was from instrument scans only. None of it could be proved or disproved until they had actual, physical samples to work with. But based on the roots' movement speed, density, and general irritability, actually getting those samples would likely prove to be a very difficult and arduous task. And that wasn't even considering that the roots they needed samples of might also be sapient in some form or another; they still weren't even sure they could rule that much out.

But they had all the time they could want, or at least as much time as the Powers That Be would allow them, which was subject to the whims of Fleet Admiral Bianchi and his staff. Thus, unable to make practical progress on the issue of the root network, it was unceremoniously shoved on the back burner until their protostellar forge was completed.

The same couldn't be said for samples from New Australia itself, however. The sole continent remaining above the surface of the New Australian Sea was lush with plants of all shapes and sizes, though lacking in multicellular life beyond plants that were so dark they practically glowed. Samples were taken there, and the landers they had modified to be remotely piloted flew from surface to ship in an almost unending stream to transport them.

After all, the plants on the continent were different from the roots on the ocean floor. Though they, too, had roots, they were of a much more normal sort than the beings that populated the seabed. Much smaller and weaker—and, more importantly, immobile—they served the same purpose as roots did for plant life on Earth. The trees and shrubs had taproots and whiskers, digging into the soil deeply enough to keep them stable, though they seemed to avoid the beaches and ocean.

It was almost like the ocean roots were predators that preyed on the roots of the plants on the land.

There was another curiosity that drove the scientists up a wall with frustration as well: the only multicellular life on the planet was plant life. Other than single-celled organisms, there was no fauna to match the flora.

The current leading theory on that thorny problem was that, much like on Earth, animal life had first evolved in the ocean. But given the demonstrated hostility of the New Australian Ocean's seabed root network, it was likely that the roots had simply wiped out all the other creatures in a bid to ensure that the resources of the ocean—primarily its oddly rich mana density—belonged solely to them.

Still, given that the land flora showed no signs of either sentience or sapience, much less any hostility, it was decided that the land mass would soon be open to human exploration, so long as they avoided going anywhere near the ocean. So the exploration team decided to get a jump on the mission planning for their return to the surface in preparation for when the top brass authorized the trip.

“What’re the odds of being attacked by ocean roots if we’re on land?” Ayaka asked. She had already been briefed about the assumed safety of the plants on land, but was still wary of the root network at the bottom of the New Australian Sea.

“We estimate it at less than one in fifty, Commander. We stopped getting reactions from the roots at about a kilometer from the shore when we sent down the mana batteries as bait, but we’ll be testing it with a few landers full of marines before we greenlight any researchers or explorers landing. Begging your pardon, you just aren’t as trained as we are when it comes to havoc and mayhem, Ma’am,” Major Kelly O’Shanrahan answered. He was the commanding officer of the Farsight’s marines, and it was his job to ensure the safety of the exploration teams on the ground.

“Once we’re positive that the surface is safe for extended stays, then you can come down and establish a more permanent camp,” he continued. “Before that, I can only allow brief expeditions, since we just don’t know how the locals will react to long-term residences.”

“Locals, Major?” Ayaka faintly smiled at the marine.

“Aye, Ma’am. Locals. In marine country, we’re split about sixty-forty for the root network being sapient. But you know leathernecks, we’ll gamble on anything.”

“I see....” Another thought occurred to Ayaka and her brow knit in a frown. “I’m sure we’ll have at least a few that’ll refuse to return to the surface. What’ll happen to them?”

“Well, Ma’am, while I’d like to send them to the ocean surface in a rowboat without oars, the likeliest outcome is that they’ll be reassigned to the Proxima and replaced with someone from there who IS willing to go. Not like we have any shortage of eggheads willing to risk their biscuits for a chance at immortality in textbooks.

“After all, while we technically can force them to go back down, you can’t force good work out of scientists. So we’ll just dock their pay, replace them, and when it’s convenient, the brass will load up a ship and send them home.”

“I’ll let the team know, and put together a list of people that request reassignment, Major. You’ll have it before we’re cleared to depart for the surface. Thank you,” Ayaka said.

“Understood, Ma’am. We’ll have you dirtside in no time.”

Ayaka nodded and swiped her AR display closed. She sent a request to the research team leads for them to put together a list of their team members requesting reassignment and a second list of who

their preferred replacements would be, then discarded her perfect posture and leaned back in her chair with a sigh.

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“Keep your eyes and ears open and your trigger fingers loose, marines. No respawns anymore, so no dumbfuckery will be allowed. Looking at you, Chang,” Lieutenant Jason Morris said to the company of marines in the lander with him. A wave of chuckles followed his words, along with the soft metallic sound of soldiers in full battle rattle performing final checks on their gear.

A comms request popped up on his HUD. He blinked to answer it and the pilot appeared in his field of view.

“We’ve been cleared to fly. Your boys strapped in back there? Things might get rough,” the pilot said.

“We’re always ready. Let’s get this show on the road, there’s dumbfuckery to be had.”

“Copy that,” the pilot said and Lieutenant Morris was immediately slammed into his crash harness by the hammer of god.

“Coulda warned me, asshat. Beer’s on you when we get back,” the marine company commander grunted, but the pilot only laughed and cut the comm channel as he performed completely unnecessary evasive maneuvers. Jason spat a stream of cursing that would make any NCO proud for the full minute it took to reach their destination.

“Archangel to jarheads, you are clear to unass my ride,” the pilot announced over the speakers in the lander’s passenger cabin. “In case you didn’t understand me the first time, that means get the fuck off my lander, marines.” As he said that, the aft bulkhead fell open and slammed to the ground.

The marines’ crash harnesses released them and they sprinted down the ramp, setting up a perimeter around the landing zone in a focused silence that spoke of long hours, months, or even years of training in the time-dilated simulation. Every marine in the Bravo Company “Bulldogs” had a place, and each of them knew exactly, to the millimeter, where that place was.

The lifter rose back into the air to provide fire support, should it be needed, and the marines waited in place, eerily silent, for five full minutes as their HUDs generated a threat map.

“Time to get to work, marines. We need a functioning camp in twenty hours, clear?”

“Clear as crystal, Sir!” came the enthusiastic chorus of replies.

Jason racked his plasma caster in its place on the back of his armor. He wasn’t necessarily the type to enjoy getting up close and personal with his targets, but a plasma caster just seemed like the better weapon choice for use on a planet populated entirely by possibly sapient plant life. It wasn’t like a pulse carbine would do much to a tree, after all. Or a root, for that matter.

He looked up and watched as container after container came screaming down from orbit and slammed into the ground after a brief flare of thrusters to make the end of the trip as survivable as the beginning for anything inside the containers. Then he saw that some joker had managed to somehow find spray paint and tag each container with elaborate graffiti that spelled out the chorus of the old song by Baha Men, “Who let the dogs out?”

Chapter 614 A Mayonnaise Jar on Stilts

Two of the five squads of marines left their places on the perimeter of the landing zone and headed to the “decorated” containers. One by one, the containers cracked open, small clouds of fog drifting out of them and pooling in the low areas on the ground. The fog was the remains of the shock foam that researchers in Lab City had developed to allow for higher-speed impacts in yeet pods or cargo launched from mass drivers.

The beauty of it was that it was a completely analog system; mechanical altimeters would detect when the pod or cargo container reached a set point—usually a hundred meters before impact—and trigger a valve that would allow two binary agents to mix. The resulting chemical formed a foam that expanded, bursting the relatively fragile containment tanks it was mixed in and allowing it to expand to fill whatever space it was in. It had a ridiculously high shock tolerance and would rapidly decay and sublime into a gas composed primarily of nitrogen, helium, sulfur hexafluoride, and other trace elements.

After verifying the marines’ biometrics, Cerberus mulebots woke to life and grabbed cargo sleds in their teeth before digging in their mechanical paws and dragging the tons of materials that had taken the short journey from orbit with the bots out of the containers on heavy duty runners. Each container held five cargo sleds, and each of those weighed eight tons.

All in all, the cargo that had just come down from the Farsight would be enough to build a reasonably decent sized, semi-permanent research base. And the constructor swarm queens included in the drop set about doing just that as soon as the cargo had been unloaded and consolidated in one stockpile.

Their initial jobs completed, the Cerberus mulebots took up a complex patrol in the jungle surrounding the clearing the lander had come down in, outside the perimeter the marines were guarding.

“Okay, guys, gals, and undecided pals, time to get to work. This base ain’t gonna build itself!” the platoon sergeant announced at the top of his lungs, as platoon sergeants all through history had been wont to do. “By squad, first and third squad fall out of the perimeter and follow the assigned tasks in your HUDs. Four-hour shifts, second shift will be squads two and four. Squad five, continue overwatch on perimeter duty!”

A smattering of scattered acknowledgements followed the sergeant’s orders and the marines began moving like oversized worker bees, unloading this, carrying that, and so on.

“Man, I wish the fat kid was here. He’s got a gravity power and this would be SO much easier with that to help,” a marine grumbled as he picked up a large piece of reactor shielding for the fusion reactor that would power the research base. It was

unwieldy to carry and so heavy that it strained even the reinforced musculature of his battle armor.

“Not only is he a brat, but he’s a coward and lazy, to boot. But he’s still valuable to the PTB—do you really expect them to send him down with grunts like us?” another marine grumbled back at the first.

“I saw him practicing once, I think. Or maybe he was just doing some weeb shit with his superpower. He was putting... something... together using it and juggling like fifty pieces at once. I didn’t know whether to be impressed or shit my pants at the thought of what he could do if he really unleashed his ability. Every supe I’ve ever seen is monstrous in some way or another, and our kid is apparently pretty high up in the power pyramid,” the first marine continued.

“I’m pretty sure there’s scarier people than doughboy in the navy. A buddy of mine saw one on a reaper team attached to TF Trappist and... he went white just thinking about it. Apparently the guy can just decide things aren’t allowed to exist anymore and reality does what he says. Our pet supe is downright tame in comparison, like one of those yappy little piss machines that old ladies carry around in their purses. And the guy on the Trappist is a giant hunting mastiff with anger issues.” The marine shuddered as goosebumps popped up all over his body. He was equal parts envious and terrified; he envied the awakeners their powers, but was terrified that they had them.

Especially since they were all so young. He remembered the dumb shit he had done when he was younger, before he’d joined ARES, and couldn’t help but think how much more dangerous a rebellious teenager would be when they could just... wink things out of existence.

The two marines continued their discussion as they lifted, carried, and—gently—put things in various piles to make it easier for the swarms the constructor queens were building to assemble into a base like a giant 3D puzzle. It was tiring and back-breaking work, but their HUDs made it easy, as all they had to do was line their loads up with the silhouettes in their field of view, and once the shape turned from yellow (or whatever other color they had chosen when customizing their displays to fit them) to white.

The cycle of lift-carry-drop-repeat continued as the marines, who felt safe thanks to their “archangel” on overwatch from ten kilometers above them, proceeded from here to there in the clearing, handling the initial grunt work of construction with relative ease.

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Twenty-four hours later, the initial phase of construction was complete. Each of the constructor swarm queens had assembled their entire swarms and had gotten to work, building what looked very much like an opaque mayonnaise jar on stilts in the very center of the clearing. The “stilts” were deceptively small and were actually each about a meter across; they only looked small because the “mayonnaise jar” they were supporting was so big.

The order came down to evacuate the clearing and take a quick jaunt back up to low orbit, as the fusion reactor the swarms had built was about to come online. And since it was the first time that a reactor had been assembled from parts, rather than printed, nobody knew if it would peacefully generate electricity or go supercritical and turn into a second, brighter star that was much, much closer to Proxima Centauri b's surface.

But it turned out they had been worried for nothing as the reactor came up to temp, ignited, and settled into producing a steady stream of power that ran through cables strung inside the stilts that supported the reactor and held it above the ground. Those cables split, some of them going to converters that converted the output from electricity to unsuspected mana, and others passing through step-down transformers that lowered the voltage to something that regular hardware could handle.

The marines returned to the surface, where they continued hauling cargo around for the constructor swarms to assemble, and soon, the research base had taken shape. Surrounded by a spherical mana shield, the base's completion marked the moment that research could begin at full speed, instead of the fits and starts it'd been proceeding at while the researchers had been stuck in orbit.

Chapter 615 Lacking in Human Resources

A month later.

Proxima Centauri b was a hub of activity. The initial construction phase of the exploration base had been completed, but the building continued, though the base was already home to a hundred-odd researchers and two reinforced companies of marines. There was also a constant flow of technicians directing the ongoing construction.

But just because the construction was still ongoing, that didn't mean the base wasn't operational. It was, actually, though just at a minimum level; the ongoing expansion was more for creature comforts and wants, rather than needs. Everything the researchers needed was there, it was only luxuries that were missing.

Well, most of the scientists considered their labs to be rather luxurious. After all, up until a few years ago, they were relying on prying research grants out of donors and benefactors of all sorts, and those grants practically never covered all of the equipment and other assorted materials required to "properly" carry out their experiments.

Thus, things like comfortable beds, appealing housing, and so on were what they were doing without. It was an odd reversal of expectations for the teams assigned to the semi-operational research base; they were living like peasants but their workspaces were outfitted such that they could only be compared to an emperor's court.

Tens of millions, if not hundreds of millions of END had been spent on research equipment, while the researchers themselves were bleary-eyed and could only catch naps by hot bunking on cots that had been stuffed everywhere. They could only consider themselves lucky if an empty cot tucked away in a maintenance closet somewhere just happened to come open as they were stumbling off to catch a few minutes of rest while waiting for their hardware to run tests on samples that were coming in like floodwaters.

They understood their situation very well. They were on a planet where the only known advanced multi-cellular life form was demonstrably hostile to them and occupied almost 90% of the planet

itself. And until the protostellar forges were complete and they could build modular housing units for them to live in, they would just have to put up with the terrible conditions they were limited to and pray that Murphy didn't come to make a housecall, as he often did.

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Inside the main building, a group of researchers were huddled around a screen that was displaying the results of their most recent experiment.

"These bacteria are a gold mine. The xenobiologists back home will go bonkers when we get back with the samples and research results," one of them said with a low whistle as he stared at the data displayed on the screen.

It was common knowledge back on Earth that there were trillions of microbial species on the planet, with more than 99.999% of them having gone undiscovered. That had been changing with the opening of Research City, though, and new single-cellular life forms had been being added to the Akashic Record on a nearly daily basis since then. So the percentage of undiscovered species had been rapidly falling, primarily thanks to the injection of imperial technology and standards in research equipment and education, respectively.

Microbiologists had been multiplying almost as fast as the species they studied, now that they had access to all the equipment they needed—regardless of how expensive it may be—along with unlimited access to samples, materials, and so on. Virtual labs had been proving the concept of the empire's stance on the technology, and very few people were still grumbling about it.

But the problem on Proxima Centauri was a lack of resources. Specifically, human resources. There simply weren't enough xenobiologists in the entire task force to handle the sheer number of discovered microbes, accurate virtual recreations or otherwise. There were perhaps one or two thousand xenobiologists in the fleet, but they had already discovered millions of different species.

"Let's log the results and move on. We're already behind, and have to work faster if we don't want to be called up to the brass to explain why we're lagging," the team lead ordered. Leading research teams was as difficult as herding cats to begin with, but leading research teams that were focused on actual alien life forms was somehow even more impossible than that!

A susurrant of disappointed sighs and whispered complaints followed the order, but the researchers dutifully logged the results into their local copy of the Akashic Record and put the samples into tagged stasis chambers, where they would remain until the task force returned to the Sol system.

But their job on the ground was limited. They were there specifically and solely to collect samples, scan them into the Akashic Record, and note anything obvious that jumped out at them. Other researchers would be assigned the studies once the initial sorting had been done. That said, if pressed, the scientists in Research Base New New South Wales would grudgingly admit that they didn't envy the decisions that Dr. Standing Bear would have to make when doling out the most promising research to various teams in the task force.

It had to be said that, in comparison to the wealth of information about Earth, the overall number of discoveries being made on Proxima Centauri b wasn't even a drop in the bucket by comparison. However, humanity had been learning about their home planet for millennia, so the process was far more gradual than the research taking place in the Proxima Centauri system.

Add to that the advanced technologies in play in the labs of Research Base New New South Wales and the highly motivated and extremely well-educated researchers of Task Force Proxima and it was understandable that discoveries were coming in faster and in higher numbers than the relatively low number of researchers were capable of handling.

Research in the Terran Empire was a far different beast than it had been through much of the rest of human history; it was a perfect storm of education, equipment, resources, and motivation. But that said, it was considered a good problem to have. After all, the samples and data wouldn't be going anywhere and there was no real rush to dig in and begin deep dives on any of the material that was being generated by the alien planet.

Thus, the same thing was taking place in labs devoted to all of the research specialties in Task Force Proxima, or at least those that housed teams on the surface. They were all there to collect, log, and tag samples, and every single man and woman in those brain trusts were falling behind thanks to the wealth of information being discovered.

Names would soon begin being etched into history books, but it wouldn't be any of theirs. Theirs was the effort, while others would claim the glory in the end.

Chapter 616 Supercell

TES Farsight, geosynchronous orbit over Research Base New New South Wales.

A detachment of two corvettes, a destroyer, a heavy cruiser, and a drone tender that Fleet Admiral Bianchi had ordered to take up escort duties for the Farsight had finally arrived and slotted themselves around the exploration cruiser like a protective shield. Except this particular shield had teeth, and knew how to use them; their job was to provide overwatch with constant flights of drones, and orbital strikes from the cruiser and destroyer, if necessary. The corvettes would be on constant patrol of the shoreline of New Australia, ready to report any activity on the part of the being, or beings, that inhabited the ocean floor.

Terran spaceships had excellent sensor suites in general, but as corvettes were meant for pickets and patrols by their very design, they had completely outsized sensor suites for ships of their size. In fact, the only ships with better sensors were the cityships, as they had the room to pack in literally thousands of sensors, redundant sensors, and dedicated reactors to power them all.

"Well, that's new," Ensign Bret Farnsworth reported from the bridge of the TFS *Revanche*, one of the two corvettes currently patrolling the shore of New Australia from above the Karman Line. One of his LiDAR arrays had picked up a weather system headed inland that would pass by Research Base New New South Wales at "danger close" range. It was the first weather the task force had seen that generated clouds since their arrival.

Indeed, the skies of Proxima Centauri b had been unnaturally empty since the task force had arrived outside the system and begun their scans. Thus, the *Revanche*'s AI had bumped that particular sensor array up in priority and notified the sensor officer on duty on the bridge.

"Forward the report to the Farsight, Ensign," Lieutenant Kim Willis ordered, then added, "and page the captain to the bridge." She was currently on her watch while the "captain"—Lieutenant Commander Yvgeny Kuznetsov—remained in his ready room handling the never-ending administrative tasks that any ship's commanding officer had to deal with.

If the ship's AI had bumped something innocuous like a weather report so high up the priority response queue that it ended up on a station on the bridge, it merited the captain's attention.

Not even a minute later, Captain Kuznetsov entered the bridge in his immaculate shipsuit, just in time for a holographic image of Captain Marinakis to appear on the bridge.

"Status update, Captain Kuznetsov," Captain Marinakis brusquely "requested".

"Sensors, status?" Yvgeny echoed.

"Sir, we've picked up an anomalous weather system headed inland from the eastern coast of New Australia. Tracking has it passing danger close to Research Base New South Wales and the AI bumped it up the priority response queue," Ensign Farnsworth reported.

"How close is 'danger close', Ensign?" Captain Marinakis asked.

"Five to seven kilometers away from the outer defensive perimeter, Sir.

"How severe is the system? Will we have to halt ground ops?"

"The AI says it'll be the mother of all supercells, Sir. An estimated 15 centimeters of rain will hit the research base, and the storm will last from five to twenty-four E-hours. Chance of lightning is high as well—sensors report a charge differential already building even as far out as the storm is from land.

"But as for damage to the research base, we expect that to be minimal. The shields can take lightning strikes no problem, they were built to withstand much more than the five or so gigajoules we're currently reading in the strikes over the ocean. There's no telling if that'll remain constant once the supercell makes landfall though, Sir... if it does without veering off. Storm tracking is still an inexact science no matter how advanced the tools we use to track them are.

"And adding mana to the mix, well... there's just no way of knowing what'll happen later. If the storm continues its current course and at its current intensity, it won't even tickle the rovers, Sir, much less the shielding around the base. But our

confidence level at this point is only 55% based on the information we currently have.”

Captain Marinakis fell into deep thought for a minute. A supercell storm wouldn't really impact things too heavily in and of itself; the research base and all of the hardware on Proxima Centauri b had been designed to withstand much more damaging things than a little wind, rain, and lightning. However, Ensign Farnsworth had raised a very valid point: nobody knew just how the planet's mana would affect the storm once it made landfall.

He weighed the merits of caution against the benefits of forging forward anyway and decided that caution would be the better part of valor in this instance. It was a decision that was very much in keeping with The Book, too.

“Cancel all ongoing missions,” he ordered. “Recall the unmanned rovers and aerial drones, and order all base personnel to shelter in their assigned areas. The recall will be complete and last until further notice.

“Engineering personnel are to focus on weatherproofing the base and doing proper shutdown procedures on any equipment or unfinished building projects that haven't been designed with tolerances for a storm of this magnitude.

“All personnel are to assist in battening down the hatches. The shield was never designed with weather in mind, so the wind and rain will penetrate it unless you fancy suffocating to death inside it.”

He then turned to Ensign Farnsworth and asked, “How long until the storm front makes landfall?”

“Anywhere from seven to ten hours from now, Captain,” the Ensign reported. “Our meteorologists are tracking it via doppler and will continue updating the estimate as they narrow it down.”

“Very well, Ensign,” the captain said with a nod and made a mental note to put a commendation in the young sensor officer's personnel file.

“Well, everyone, you have your orders, so move out and execute them. Marinakis clear.”

“Aye aye... cap... tain,” the bridge crew began in unison but then fell into staggered silence like an interrupted orchestra as they realized the captain's hologram had already vanished and the comms channel was closed.

Chapter 617 22 Second

Conference room, Research Base New New South Wales' main operations tower.

Commander Takahashi and Major Petrovich were seated along one side of a long conference table that ran down the center of a fairly large, though still barebones, room. At the head of the conference table were the holographic projections of Fleet Admiral Bianchi of the TFS Proxima and Captain Marinakis of the TES Farsight. Across from the commander and major were Dr. Standing

Bear, head of research for Task Force Proxima; Lieutenant Commander Kuznetsov, captain of the TFS Revanche; and a representative of the meteorologists who had been assigned to the task force.

“Good afternoon, Commander Takahashi,” Captain Marinakis said. “I wish I had better news for you, but you’ve got a potential disaster coming up on you in a few hours. It seems that a supercell formed off the coast of New Australia and is headed your way. Estimates currently have the center of the storm passing a few kilometers off of your...”

He continued briefing Ayaka until she had been caught up to speed on the current situation on the ground, then finished by asking, “Any questions?”

“No, Sir,” she replied with a faint smile. “I’ll recall everyone that’s out there and sit tight here in the base.”

“Good. Thanks Ayaka—we can’t predict anything about this...” he sighed and raised a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. “This mage storm. Sounds like something an eighth grader would come up with, but,” he gestured to the meteorology representative at the table, “it’s what meteorology decided to call it. And they’re the ones with naming rights.”

The meteorologist froze, as if he didn’t know whether to be offended or laugh along with the joke.

“I understand, Sir. Not everything can be New Whatever,” Ayaka said with a grin. Captain Marinakis could refer to everyone in his crew by their given names, if he chose, but as one of his subordinates, she certainly couldn’t call him by his... publicly, at least. Grinning was about all the informality she could get away with under the eyes of the strict head of the entire task force.

“You have your orders, Commander,” the fleet admiral interjected. “Best go carry them out before it’s too late.”

“Aye aye, Admiral. I’ll ensure we remain in contact with the fleet as best we can, Sir.”

“See that you do, Commander. Bianchi clear.” His hologram disappeared from the room; as the task force commander, it was a surprise he had even attended the briefing to begin with. He was a busy person and had to handle the tasks that kept the full million people in his fleet operating at their peak efficiency.

The rest of the holograms also flickered out one by one, leaving only the commander and the marine captain in the room.

“I’ll send my people out with orders to sit on the nerd herd if need be, Ma’am,” Captain Petrovich said. “Wrestling bears would probably be easier, I think. My nana used to do that, and if she could do it, I certainly could.”

“I’ve seen pictures of your grandmother, captain. I think you’ll likely find that you’d rather wrestle bears,” Ayaka joked.

“You’re probably right. My nana was a strong woman.” Captain Petrovich stood and offered her a salute. “I’d best be about it Ma’am. By your leave?”

“Granted, Viktor. Good luck,” she said, returning the salute.

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Ayaka was in the command center, tracking the progress of the general recall, when OC Parker of the disastrous first landing fame burst into the door. He stumbled over an errant cable on the ground and nearly fell, but was caught by one of the marines guarding the door and saved from another rather inelegant landing.

“Ma’am! Commander Takahashi! W-w-we have a problem, Ma’am!” he stuttered. Trying to speak, stand steadily, and salute all at the same time was obviously an issue for him.

“What’s the problem?”

“There’s a manned crew out there with a downchecked rover. They won’t be able to make it back to base before the storm hits them, ma’am,” Parker said.

“Oh?” Ayaka stood and sent a comms request to the Terrible Teenager. It was time for him to finally pull his quite substantial weight on their shared mission.

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“Is... is this the end? Am I really going to die here?”

Lee Joon-ho was lying on the ground, broken, bloody, and battered. The visor on his helmet was cracked and an alarm was stridently sounding inside his helmet, warning him of the loss of suit integrity. Twenty-two seconds before, he had been rushing to the site of a busted rover full of scientists to save them. Then... there was no then. He was swatted to the ground by something that he imagined the fist of god would feel like, or what windshields felt like to bugs at freeway speeds. The only reason he knew it had been 22 seconds ago was because his environmental suit’s internal clock was still peacefully ticking away in his HUD.

“Shut up shut up shut up shutup shutup shutup shutupshutupshutup shut the FUCK UP!!” he shrilled at the alarm, completely forgetting that it would be simple for him to disable it. It didn’t matter anyway; there was nothing he could do about his ruined suit. In addition to the cracked visor, the rest of the suit was ripped and torn with gigantic rents in it going every which way.

The empire’s environmental suits were durable and rugged, with hard armor plating embedded anywhere that wasn’t expected to have to move. They also included a certain amount of self-repair capability and, no matter how damaged, they could restore themselves in a matter of half an hour to

an hour... assuming, that is, that the wearer could get away from whatever was damaging the suit in the first place.

But that was something that Joon-ho most definitely couldn't do at that precise moment in time.

The lower half of his body had been "eaten" by a tree, which had sprung up between his legs after he'd been forcefully slammed to the ground. As for the rest of him, well, the rest of him wasn't doing any better. Small, questing roots had covered his upper body like a pulsing network of blood vessels, immobilizing him and leaving him unable to do anything but take shallow breaths. And the cocoonment continued apace; it wouldn't be much longer before the roots reached his helmet and interred him on this alien planet.

At least he had proven that the atmosphere was technically breathable.

The twisting and writhing roots finally found his helmet and drilled through it, then into his ears, nose, and eyes. His tongue fought them for a second or two before his mouth, too, was filled with roots. He whimpered as loud as he could in agony, hoping beyond hope that someone—anyone—would swoop to his rescue, but it was all for naught.

Then the pain began.

Joon-ho's life flashed before his eyes and, amidst his muffled screaming, he recalled all of his most cherished experiences. His mother, whom he believed to be a saintess, sacrificing her meals to ensure he was fed.... His first time eating a proper meal, and the pride in his father's eyes when he was selected to join one of the exploration fleets. He remembered all of his waifus, the long nights spent binge-watching anime, and the "love" he felt for his leader and partner on this exploration fleet mission, Commander Takahashi Ayaka.

All of it flashed through his mind and he wondered, 'Is this it? Is this what they mean when they say your life flashes before your eyes when you're about to die?'

His eyes, or what was left of them, began glowing a silvery-gray as he came to a decision. If he was going to die, he absolutely refused to die alone.

Chapter 618 Red Rover, Red Rover...

An hour ago.

A team of seismologists had taken a rover filled with measuring equipment to install on what they believed was a fault line just off the coast of New Australia. It was considered research-worthy, as they had never seen a fault line run perpendicular from ocean to land before. Parallel, sure; there were plenty of fault lines on Earth that came within proverbial spitting distance of coastlines. The San Andreas fault in California, the Cascadia Subduction Zone in the American Pacific Northwest and Canada, and the Alpide Belt in the Mediterranean region, among others, sometimes reached within a kilometer of various coastlines.

But this new discovery had them as excited as, well... as seismologists ever got, really. They were a dour, stone-faced lot in general and tended to be on the serious end of the scale. It wasn't surprising, considering the gravity of their area of study and how oh so very deadly earthquakes could be, and generally were.

Just as they were about to reach their destination, the order calling them back to home base had come in. So they dutifully packed up the crates they had just been about to unload, got back in their rover, and started the engine. Or tried to, at least, as it simply refused to start.

Dr. Paul Hodgins, the lead researcher, fancied himself something of a mechanic, so he and one of the two marines attached to the mission as escorts got out of the rover, despite the pouring rain and constant lightning strikes, and opened the engine compartment.

“Jim, you’re never gonna believe this,” he radioed to his friend and coworker in the rover.

“Never gonna believe what, Paul?”

“There’s some kind of... it looks like roots, maybe? Anyway, it’s all tangled up in the engine. Gonna take a while to get it sorted out and I don’t think we have enough time before the storm hits.”

“Have you called it in?” Jim asked.

“I might just have to. Why don’t you take a look and let me know what you think?” Dr. Hodgins threw a short video file to him.

Jim watched all fifteen seconds of the clip and noticed something that didn’t bode well for their research team. “Paul, I... I can see it growing. I don’t think that’s just something we accidentally picked up on the way out here. I think it grew up into the engine compartment while we were unloading the rover. You’d better get back in here and call it in.”

“Agreed, I’m on my waaaaAAAAAYYYYAAAARRGH!”

“Paul? PAUL!?” Jim shouted over the open communicator, but was only met with silence. “Corporal Klinger? Anyone?” The ominous silence continued for what felt like an eternity before the marine that had gone out with Dr. Hodgins broke into the channel amidst the crackling, hissing, and popping of a damaged communicator or bad connection.

“IT’S GOT MY LE—AAAAAARRRGH! OH GOD!! HELP! GET IT—” The marine’s screaming broke down into incoherency and continued for a few seconds, then he, too, went ominously silent.

The four scientists in the rover looked at each other, then Paul ventured, “I’m calling it in to base. Any of you volunteer to go check on Jim?”

The other three scientists shook their heads and cast wary gazes at the cab of the rover, as if they expected whatever had “gotten” the head of their team to leap into the vehicle and come after them.

Paul turned to the remaining marine that had been assigned to escort them. “How about you?”

“Let’s see what the external pickups have for us first. I can’t leave you completely unescorted, it’s against SOP,” the corporal replied.

The five remaining members of the mission turned to the monitor on the divider that separated the drivers' compartment from the cargo compartment and it flickered to life. The flickering was a bad sign; imperial technology did NOT flicker. At least, not under normal circumstances anyway.

A grainy image appeared on the screen as the camera mounted to the roof of the driver's compartment panned back and forth. Everything appeared normal, though the image was distorted and blurry.

"Is there something wrong with the camera pickup?" one of the scientists asked. "It almost seems like the ground is... moving. Computer, run diagnostics on camera three."

{Acknowledged. Diagnostic program in progress...} the VI installed in the rover replied.

{Diagnostic scan complete. No errors reported.}

"So is the ground actually moving? Perhaps it's an artifact caused by the ionization in the atmosphere because of the thunderstorm."

{Unknown.}

"Let's try another camera and see," the second scientist suggested.

The view switched to a camera pickup located over the side of the cargo compartment, but it was the same grainy, blurry image and the ground still appeared to be moving.

"Maybe the thunderstorm caused some symbiotic organism to come up to the surface? That patch of ground almost looks like the top of the tubs of earthworms I buy when I go fishing," the third scientist said. "Let's see what's on the other side."

The view changed to the camera on the opposite side of the rover, and off in the distance, it looked like a solid wall of black had risen up from the ocean that was just a couple hundred meters away from where they were.

"Uh... I don't think that's the sky," someone murmured, almost whimpering.

"It isn't a tidal wave, either," the marine interjected.

"So what is it?"

Lightning struck the ground only a few hundred meters from the rover and the echoing boom of thunder was loud enough to rattle the three-ton vehicle like a paint can in a mixer as what appeared to be a solid wall of giant roots crashed down on the doomed rover and buried it beneath them.

Chapter 619 ...Send Rescue Teams Over

Research Base New New South Wales.

The storm front had already reached the base and, as they had been worried about, the mana-infused raindrops sheeting down were having a rather negative effect on the shield. It was draining the shield capacitors nearly as fast as the reactor could charge them. But that much, they could handle.

Then the lightning began striking and the fusion reactor could no longer keep up with the draining capacitor banks. And to make things worse, there was no way of increasing the output of the reactor

any more than what it already was; in fact, it had already been increased to 110% of its max-rated output, and after the storm passed, they would need to tear it down and completely rebuild it.

But even that much wouldn't be an issue. The reactor could be run at the red line for thirty-six hours before they began running the risk of a containment breach. The biggest problem they were facing was one they hadn't anticipated at all: mana.

As the water built up on the ground, forming a complex network of rivulets and puddles, the lightning strikes "overcharged" it with mana, each bolt that struck the ground sending out shockwaves like ripples in space. And those shockwaves had effectively blinded the Henry's Eyes sensors in the base, as well as those in the satellite network and ships overhead.

The Proxima herself could potentially push enough power through theirs that they would be able to function through the masking effect of the storm front's mana surges, but by the time she could arrive at Proxima Centauri b, the storm would long have passed by the research base.

Thus, Admiral Bianchi, acting with an overabundance of caution, had ordered the Farsight and her escort ships to begin a full-scale evacuation of Research Base New New South Wales and a steady stream of landers was flowing to and fro, ferrying passengers from the surface to the ships in orbit above the base.

Here and there on the ground, marines could be seen with lab-coated researchers thrown over their shoulders and being carried like wailing sacks of potatoes. In the marines' minds, any researcher who wasn't willing to abandon their work to save their lives wasn't worth being handled with kid gloves, so some of them were even going so far as to bodily throw them into the landers, both with and without someone in the loading hatch prepared to catch them.

Injuries, after all, could be cured in a matter of minutes or hours in a medical pod. Lightning stricken bits of vaguely human-shaped charcoal, on the other hand, could not.

The only place that was still a reasonably calm island of efficiency was the main monitoring room in the central tower of the base. Ayaka was inside with Captain Petrovich and a few other technicians that would be in the last evacuation group. They were coordinating and directing the hundreds of landers coming down, acting as air traffic control to prevent collisions and keep things moving.

Sure, the base's AI could technically do that, but it was in power-saving mode and most of its remaining processing power was being taken up by running backups on all of the information in the local copy of the Akashic Record. Thus, nobody really trusted it to handle critical tasks like ensuring a smooth emergency evacuation.

The small rivulets of water ran into each other, forming streams. The streams gathered until they became rivers, and puddles expanded into broad, shallow lakes. Soon, the landers could no longer reach the ground and the evacuating people were directed to the rooftops of their buildings to meet their assigned landers. Over time, the water rose until each building of the research base looked like an island rising from the water, and the sealed passages were completely under it like submerged sandbars, directing the flow of water from high to low and out toward the shore, where it would eventually meet the ocean.

Not much longer after that, a lander was headed to pick up its assigned evacuation group when an alarm blared in the cockpit informing the pilot of an incoming object that had been picked up on

radar. And soon, more information came from the TFS Khopesh, the drone tender that the lander was from.

“Warrant Choudhury, we’re picking up some movement on the drones monitoring the coast. Their ground-penetrating radar pinged on many moving objects. Looks like the roots are coming for the base. We don’t know exactly how they’re doing it yet, but you’ve got about 37 seconds before they intercept your flight path. Divert on new heading, I’m throwing it to you now.”

“Copy that, Khopesh control. Heading received and correcting course in three... two... one... mark,” Chief Warrant Officer Choudhury replied.

“Warrant Choudhury, godspeed. You’ll probably be dodging roots coming back up, we estimate they’ll reach the outer shield perimeter within the next fifteen minutes. So get down, get loaded, and get gone. Khopesh control out.”

The same notification had obviously reached the control center at Research Base New New South Wales as the base AI halted the backup procedure and assumed direct control of the environment suits those waiting for evacuation were wearing. It was an odd feeling to the scientists, having their body moved like a marionette by an invisible puppeteer as they rushed to the nearest windows and leapt out.

Screams of fright resounded amidst the background noise of explosive bolts blowing out window frames all over the base as researcher after researcher defenestrated themselves, spending a stomach-lurching moment in freefall before their suits’ jump jets took over and sent them rocketing into the atmosphere at a barely survivable thirty gees of acceleration.

In a stunning display of aerial coordination, choreography, and aerobatics, cluster after cluster of suits formed in staggered formation. They only waited in place for a few seconds, though, as landers came screaming through the atmosphere toward each group, slewing sideways at the last moment to scoop them into the transport bays in catch maneuvers that would have made the pilots’ instructors proud.

One by one, groups were loaded into landers, which then immediately shot toward orbit in random, jerky corkscrews that would minimize the risk of being hit by the roots that were already rising from the floodwaters to introduce themselves to the fleeing small craft in a most violent, brutal fashion.

Ayaka was the last person to be scooped into a lander and she had the niggling sensation in the back of her mind that she was forgetting something. Something important. She thought about it for a moment, bracing herself against the crash harness of her acceleration seat, then gasped.

She frantically toggled her comms channel open and attempted to connect to Lee Joon-ho, but there was no response.

“Yui, check the last known of Warrant Officer Lee Joon-ho,” she ordered her personal AI assistant.

{Last known position of Warrant Officer Lee Joon-ho is here, Commander.}

A topographical map of the area was projected in Ayaka's vision, on which were two labels. One for the rover that had broken down earlier, and another where the Terrible Teenager had been struggling just moments before.

And neither of the labeled dots were moving.

"Check biometrics on Warrant Officer Lee, Yui," Ayaka ordered.

{Yes, Commander. Checking.... No biometric data stream found. Searching for backup.... No backup biometric data stream found. Checking for suit data recorder signal.... No suit data recorder signal found. Checking for backup....} The checks continued as Yui read them in her calm soprano voice, each failed check hitting Ayaka with an almost physical impact that she felt in her gut.

{File found, Commander. Fragmented data stream available. Recompile and display?} Yui asked.

Ayaka's heart rose into her throat and her jaw worked soundlessly for a moment before she could utter a hoarse command to play the video. It loaded shortly after and her gorge completely rose as she watched a giant root come whipping toward Joon-ho from his suit's perspective.

"Joon-ho..." she whispered as the video abruptly cut off.

{Playback complete, Commander,} Yui announced.

Chapter 620 Cogs ALWAYS Fit Somewhere

Moments before Lee Joon-ho had been attacked, he was enjoying the feeling of unfettered flight kilometers above the surface of Proxima Centauri b. He had done it before, of course—at least in the simulation and on Earth—but there was something different, something special about doing it on an honest-to-god alien planet. And having been stuck in the research base without being able to fly on his own had been like sandpaper rubbing against his desire to exercise his superpower.

Before he'd been blessed by mana, he had been lost. As restrictive as the Kim regime had been, at least he knew he had a place. He was a cog. A small cog, but a cog nonetheless, and cogs ALWAYS fit somewhere. But then China stuck its fingers in the North Korean pie and triggered an attack on South Korea, the retaliation for which had completely wiped out the dictatorship that ruled the northern half of the divided country.

And his place had been wiped out with it.

So he lost himself. He lost himself in food, in luxury, in fantasies. His new "place" was the tiny bedroom in the tiny house, because tiny was comfortable. Tiny was safe. Tiny was all that he had ever known, ever been.

But then he became oh so very much more. He discovered a new place, a new role, and he became a slightly bigger cog in a much, much larger machine. A machine that he actually liked being a part of. A machine that allowed him the freedom to fly with the wings that fate had given him.

So he hadn't been too upset when his mother had signed him up for the Imperial Hero Academy. Sure, he had made a scene and pitched a fit, but deep down, he was thrilled. Why? Because the academy would let him be a Hero, with a capital H. And that stoked a desire that he had never known was inside him.

When Ayaka had ordered him out on a high-priority rescue mission, he felt a thrill that tickled him somewhere deep inside, in his most primal nature. He had never before been "in charge" of

anything; even the rank he held in the fleet was merely a courtesy and had no actual privileges of command or responsibilities. It was just the spot in the imperial machine that a Joon-ho-shaped cog happened to fit, is all. No more and no less.

But now he had an actual responsibility, and found something deep inside that responded to that. He was responsible for five scientists and two marines, and held their very lives in his hands. If he failed in his mission, they would be lost, or so he believed anyway. It wasn't known what Ayaka thought would happen to them if he failed, but that didn't matter to the eighteen-year-old awakener. All that mattered to him was that he had just been given an opportunity to fulfill his recently discovered drive for heroism.

The truth, though, was that he would never in a million years have been allowed to go on his own, had anyone thought there was even an iota of risk to him. He was the sole awakener on the Farsight's crew, and the only one cleared for ground operations in the entirety of Task Force Proxima. So he was a precious resource to the fleet and would not, under any but the most dire of circumstances, be allowed to risk himself.

And because of that misunderstanding, he'd not only been put at risk, but had been thrust into a life-threatening situation.

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A whimpering cry escaped Joon-ho's lips as rage boiled over within him. He wanted to roar, he wanted to shout, he wanted to scream his defiance and spit in the eye of whatever... thing... was on the other end of the roots holding him down. He refused—absolutely REFUSED—to go down without a fight!

The silvery-gray glow in his eyes brightened as mana coursed through his body and a wave of sheer force blasted out of him, tearing the roots around him to shreds, along with the tattered remnant of his environment suit and the uniform he wore beneath it. He rolled over, stifling a moan of agony that momentarily penetrated the rage driving him as he used his less-injured arm to force himself to his hands and knees.

His head held low, he panted as an enormous flood of mana wrapped around him, responding to the primal thought that he must stand. He must face his death on his feet, as a man, not as a coward on his knees. Exhaustion didn't matter. Fatigue didn't matter. Pain didn't matter. All that mattered was his pride as a man and his will to push on in the face of a world that had declared itself his enemy.

He rose to a standing position, his feet drifting inches off the ground as his mangled legs were incapable of supporting his weight. In his mind, he issued a hearty "fuck you" to the laws of physics as he recalled his training back at the hero academy.

Looking off into the distance, he saw the massive roots that had flattened the rover he'd been sent to rescue and all conscious thought left him. His animalistic instincts took over and he raised his good arm, pointing his palm toward the base of the roots rising from the flood water a hundred or so meters away from him.

"Die!" he snarled, then put everything he had left into a single focused area of gravity that swept out in a beam, ripping, tearing, and shredding the roots apart from their very tips down to the ground beneath the water.

If he'd had anything left in him, it fled at that moment and he collapsed bonelessly to the ground, his eyes fluttering as he drifted in and out of consciousness beneath the pouring rain and rumbling thunder.

He felt himself lifted from the ground and enveloped in a warmth and, in his delirium, saw Ayaka leaning over him. "You shouldn't have come," he slurred. "You're in danger. Leave here!"

He mustered up the last dregs of his mana and threw "Ayaka" from him, only for her to be replaced by what looked like a hybrid of Hatsune Miku and Deedlit, from Record of Lodoss War. 'Am I... dead?' he thought as he finally lost the battle to remain awake.

A new, and much smaller, root quested its way to him and wrapped around him. It was soon followed by another, then another, and still more until the only thing remaining was a writhing pile of worm-like root tips floating on the rapidly rising flood that was accompanying the incoming storm.