

## Tech System 621

Chapter 621 Like a Bull in a China Shop

“Divert the lander and pick him up,” Ayaka ordered moments after watching the recovered video.

“Apologies, Commander. Orders from the fleet are that we’re to immediately proceed to rendezvous with the Khopesh. They’re non-discretionary, I’m afraid,” the lander pilot replied.

The lander continued rocketing straight up with over 20 subjective gravities of acceleration pushing its passengers into their acceleration seats and crash harnesses. The pilot would have gone faster, but his passengers were no ARES troopers or fleet sailors that had been trained to tolerate that kind of force; they were scientists, and scientists were by and large a sedentary lot.

Lasers from the Khopesh’s drones began firing, the ionization in the air from the storm making them visible as flashes of dim blue beams as they burned through root after root. The empire’s drones were designed to increase the strategic missile defense depth of the TSF, so handling relatively slow-moving roots was an easy task that could be left to their onboard VIs without worry.

Missiles in space battles would be traveling at a rate higher than .8c by the time they reached an intercept envelope, which was far too fast for any human to respond to, but the roots were only moving around a few hundred meters per second. Even if the VIs were completely incapable, or even entirely nonexistent, human drone pilots would still have been able to protect the landers.

Ayaka knew that, so she frowned and said, “The drones are perfectly capable of keeping us protected, Warrant. But Warrant Lee doesn’t even have those, and he needs rescue—”

“Sorry ma’am, the orders are nondiscretionary. And they came down from the admiral’s staff. No way in hell—” the pilot twisted the lander around in a wild corkscrew to dodge lightning bolts, lasers, and roots, “—am I violating them for an EF Commander. I get it, I really do. I’m sorry you lost your... whatever, but this train we’re on isn’t stopping ‘til it reaches the station. Ma’am.”

Ayaka looked back at the map display, where Joon-ho’s name was labeled alongside the seven other people he had been sent to save. All eight of the names were flashing yellow, showing that their connections had been lost. But at least that “connection lost” status gave her enough hope to go on; far more so than the solid red of “confirmed dead” did, anyway.

She decided to raise the issue with Captain Marinakis. He was an old friend of Admiral Bianchi’s, and perhaps he could get the task force’s leader to agree to divert a lander for a rescue mission. She knew, though, that it would be putting everyone in the lander in severe danger, but she could do no less than try. After all, she’d been the one that had ordered Joon-ho to go on the rescue mission, so hers was the responsibility for that task’s failure. She was also the one responsible for letting him go alone, without any form of backup or escort.

Her intentions had been good. She could have diverted a drone from the Khopesh to rescue the scientists, but the opportunity to get the Terrible Teenager off his ass and contributing to the mission

had proven impossible to pass up. And she knew, at least on a conscious level, that there had been zero indication that there was any danger at all. It was just a broken-down rover filled with scientists running one of thousands of experiments on the surface. It was supposed to have been a milk run, without any more danger than one would encounter while heading to the neighborhood bodega to pick up milk.

But as Ayaka was now discovering, guilt didn't take rationality into account. Her order had thrown one of her subordinates into life-threatening danger, and she couldn't possibly forget that. Nor could she forgive herself; at least not so soon, anyway.

"I'll come for you soon, so you'd damn well better survive. If you die, I'll kill you," she muttered under her breath, planning on how to make a rescue mission happen amidst the chaos of evacuations going on around her. Joon-ho would be returned to her alive, or she would see his corpse buried with who, or whatever had killed him.

The moment the lander settled onto its skids and opened its hatch in the boat bay of the Khopesh, Ayaka stormed down the ramp and headed toward a transport that would take her to the bridge of the enormous drone tender.

She had devised a rescue plan that would, she hoped, satisfy all parties involved without the risk of harm to any human life and was determined to have it carried out, come hell or... well, high water had already come. Now all that remained was to compose herself; she had been raised well enough that she knew anxiety or anger would only hurt the chances of her plan being accepted.

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On the bridge of the TFS Khopesh.

The low buzz of people hard at work filled the air, alongside the almost physical sensation of tension. As a drone tender, each wing of drones was commanded from the bridge, while the pilots of those drones were in VR pods in giant, cavernous bays deep in the guts of the massive vessel. Thus, compared to most imperial ships, drone tenders had a higher number of active personnel on the bridge.

Which meant that Ayaka had a much larger audience when she glided into the compartment and saluted the captain.

"Captain Chang, a word, please?" she asked, still holding the salute.

"In my ready room, Commander," the captain replied, then turned to his communications officer. "Lieutenant Commander Sanders, you have the bridge."

Then he stood and gestured toward his ready room, but Ayaka was already on the move. Perhaps her anxiety was showing through more than she would have liked.

When they reached the ready room, Captain Chang sat behind his desk and preempted the conversation. "I know what you have in mind, Commander, and I agree. As soon as the evacuation is complete, I'll send a flight of drones to rescue your awakener."

Ayaka was taken aback; she had expected she would need to fight for the rescue mission to take place. "Thank you, Sir," she finally said.

“But it’ll have to wait until after the evacuation is complete and the last lander—”

“Begging your pardon, Sir,” she interrupted. “But it’s imperative that we send the mission out now. The longer we wait...” she trailed off, unable to finish the thought. At least not out loud, anyway; the rest of the sentence was rampaging through her mind like a bull in a china shop. ‘The longer we wait, the more likely it is that he’ll be dead when we get there.’

Chapter 622 Understanding vs. Liking

Ayaka was still standing on the bridge of the Khopesh when the last evacuation flight passed Proxima Centauri b’s Karman Line and rocketed toward the TFS Escapade, the heavy cruiser it was assigned to.

She had—barely—been able to keep herself from pacing back and forth behind the drone wing commanders, but a thrill passed up and down her spine when she heard that the last lander had safely made it off the surface and she was unable to keep herself from practically vibrating in place. Only two decades of comportment and etiquette training, courtesy of her father’s expectations, kept her from showing how anxious she was.

She turned to Captain Chang, who shot her an empathetic glance as he began, “Don’t worry, we’ve already prepared the rescue mission. Wing three, prepare to—”

Before he could finish his sentence, the holotank in the center of the bridge turned red and an abort signal flashed, accompanied by a message: “All surface missions are suspended until further notice.”

The message was tagged as having been sent from the tactical officer on Fleet Admiral Bianchi’s staff.

Without another word, Ayaka stalked to the captain’s ready room just off the bridge. Captain Chang could only watch her go and shake his head in sympathy. He knew what she was about to do, but didn’t hold out much hope that it would work out well for the young commander.

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Captain’s ready room, TFS Khopesh.

Ayaka was standing in front of the display screen on Captain Chang’s desk, which had an open communication line to Fleet Admiral Bianchi. “Why was the operation scrubbed, Sir?” she asked, somehow managing to keep her worry and anxiety from appearing on her face.

She honestly didn’t know why she was so worried and anxious about the Terrible Teenager. But she did know she had been responsible for him, and she was the one who’d sent him out alone into the teeth of the storm, where his survival was still unknown. The fact that his signal had been interrupted was... more worrying than she would like to admit. And as godawful as the brat had been to deal with, she’d come to think of him as something like the little brother that she’d been forced to leave behind when she left her family.

“Commander, I don’t normally make a habit of explaining my decisions to my subordinates. But in this case, I’ll make an exception. You’ll know soon anyway, even if I don’t tell you now,” the admiral said.

He gestured to someone offscreen and continued, “This is why surface operations are being suspended. It’s not that we want to scrub them, but we have to.”

The display on the screen changed to a view of the planet from high orbit. A red film was rapidly working its way over it, obscuring the surface from view. “Approximately ten minutes before the last evacuation lander broke atmosphere, our Henry’s Eye sensors detected an upsurge in mana spreading from what we now believe is the source of all of the roots.”

The display rotated the planet, showing a pointer at an inconspicuous spot deep in the ocean near where the storm had begun brewing earlier. “All visual observation of the planet’s surface is being cut off, and our instruments can’t see it either. All we know is that it’s an extremely dense concentration of mana, and when we sent a recon drone to penetrate it, this is what happened.”

The display changed to a visual of a recon drone being fired from the destroyer, TFS Starry Sky. It completed one orbit, then attempted to breach the atmosphere, only to be crushed against the red film like a bug meeting a windshield at freeway speed. “As you can see, whatever that is is just as effective as our own planetary defense shields. My intelligence officer and tactical officer recommended—and I agreed—that it’s in our best interest to avoid escalating the hostilities against the being until we’re able to establish at least a rudimentary form of communication.

“All indications are that there’s a mind behind those roots, and we’re the visitors here. We should act like it,” he finished as the display screen switched back to a view of the admiral from his shoulders up. Behind him, uniformed personnel were moving on the flag bridge of the Proxima like worker bees in a hive.

“I understand, Admiral. Is there any way we can get at least a drone down to check on the Te—err, Warrant Officer Lee? It looks like the shield isn’t spreading all that fast and we should be able to get in and out before it reaches land. That’d give us an idea of what we’re dealing with, as well as whether or not further rescue efforts—” Ayaka paused and cleared her throat, “—would be... necessary.”

“We can do that much, Commander,” Fleet Admiral Bianchi said with a small, tight smile that wasn’t happy in the least. “And we already have. When the drone got there, this is what it saw.”

The view on the screen changed again, this time showing a mass of writhing roots piled together in the shape of an egg, or perhaps a seed, where the rover had broken down and where Joon-ho had been swatted from the sky.

“My god, Sir... what IS that?” Ayaka murmured, shock visible on her face for the first time.

“We don’t know, Commander. There’s just too many things we don’t know. I’ve ordered Captain Das to bring the Proxima into orbit of Proxima Centauri b. She’s the

only vessel we've got with the sensors and power to spare that might give us a chance of seeing exactly what's going on behind the shield. But until then, ground ops are suspended until further notice."

"Understood, Sir," Ayaka said. And she did understand; she might not particularly LIKE the situation as it stood, but she could definitely understand it. Until and unless they had proof that Joon-ho was still alive, and perhaps even after they had that proof, it wouldn't be wise to risk upsetting whatever being was on the other side of those tentacle-like roots.

## Chapter 623 Much Like a Fading Mirage

Joon-ho was floating in a warm darkness, his knees drawn up to his chest and arms wrapped around them. 'Is this what it feels like to be dead?' he thought. 'Just floating in... nothingness? Man, a whole lot of people are gonna be really disappointed when they die. No angels with trumpets, no pearly gates, no mythical beings or buddhas... and apparently no hot goddesses offering perks to be born on planets they're responsible for.' He sighed, or at least attempted to.

Suddenly he heard a muffled thud-THUD and two other noises that reminded him of conversation. One was a low-pitched murmur—a man, he thought—and there was another, higher-pitched sound. If the first was a man, then the second should be a woman.

'Why does this seem so... familiar?' he mused.

He drifted in the endless dark, listening to the murmuring and rhythmic thud-THUD. 'Well, if this is what the afterlife is like, then I guess it could be worse,' he thought as he floated in the warm, welcoming nothing that surrounded him in its embrace.

Time passed, as time always does, and a change came over his environment. The rhythmic pulsing thuds began speeding up.

Thud-THUD... thud-THUD... thud-THUD, thud-THUD, thud-THUD thudTHUD thudTHUD thudTHUDthudTHUDthudTHUD....

Soon, the "female" sound rose in pitch and volume and the warm darkness around him began pitching and tossing him to and fro, setting him spinning along three axes.

'What the actual fuck!?' he thought as he spun. With a concerted effort, he stopped spinning and reoriented himself, then the darkness squeezed him from all directions and he realized where he was.

'Am I in a... womb?' he mused. 'Maybe I really am being reborn on a new world!'

The pressure increased and he was squeezed into what felt like an endless tunnel mixed with a toothpaste tube. Finally, he was ejected into a blinding brightness and blinked until his eyes adjusted to the light. He looked up, expecting to see his new mother and father, but then....

"WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT!?" he shouted at the top of his lungs—or tried to, anyway, as the only sound that escaped his lips was a high, warbling cry. What he had seen when he looked at who his "parents" were was two trees, a slender cypress tree with

black bark and needles so deep purple they might as well have been black, and a tall, powerful oak tree, also with black bark and violet leaves so dark they, too, might as well have been black.

The “trees” had no faces, but somehow he felt the weight of their regard. A string of not-sound entered his ears and he recognized the “voices”, associating the deeper baritone with the oak and the softer mezzosoprano with the cypress. They were still unintelligible, but if what he suspected had happened was true, that would soon change.

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Years passed as Joon-ho grew out of infancy and into toddlerhood, learning to roll over, crawl, and form sounds with his mouth. The speech of his new treefolk “parents” lost some of its secrets as well, and he found himself picking out occasional words from the stream of gibberish. One weird thing was that he had none of the various issues that normal infants had; he needed neither food, nor sleep, nor diaper changes.

At first, he had been shy of his nudity and waved his chubby arms in an attempt to cover it, but he’d soon learned to simply accept it. He had no clothes, but he needed none. The temperature was always comfortable to him and it wasn’t like trees would give a shit about his genitalia, after all.

Day after day passed and his new “parents” never left his side, constantly babbling gibberish back and forth with him; them in obvious patterns and cadences of speech, and him in the constant babble of baby talk. He learned the words for the things around him, and for concepts like yes and no.

Time seemed endless, as he experienced nothing but the single room where he had been “born”, nor did he meet any other beings but the cypress and oak trees as he went from crawling, to standing on unsteady legs, to walking, then running. And the communication between him and his “parents” improved at a rapid pace, both trees and human communicating in the method that any parents with small children would know in a language all of their own.

Then, one day, something entirely different happened. The room surrounding him disappeared and he was left in what seemed to be a forest meadow, in his normal eighteen-year-old body but still as naked as he had been through the past “years” he had spent growing and learning to communicate with the treefolk.

Around the edge of the meadow were the cypress and oak, but they had been joined by others. A graceful birch tree, still with black bark and violet leaves but somehow giving the impression that it was white; a gnarled, squat mangrove with knobby roots growing out of it like a skirt; and a short, wide crabapple tree had joined the cypress and the oak, each one taking up a distinct section of the meadow’s edge.

“Who-what-when-where-why are you-yours-not-us?”

Joon-ho somehow knew which tree the question was coming from and turned to the birch tree.

“Me?” he asked, pointing his index finger at his face.

“Yes, not-us. Me who-what-when-where-why?” the birch asked again.

“I’m Lee Joon-ho, a blessed awakener of the Terran Empire and member of the imperial exploration fleet.”

As he spoke, memories flashed through his mind. Growing up in North Korea, the American and South Korean invasion, the formation of the empire, awakening to mana, and going through hero academy and signing up for the fleet whizzed through his consciousness seemingly at light speed.

“We understand,” the birch said. “Who-what-when-where-why is this?”

The image Joon-ho had seen after pushing “Ayaka” away flashed through his mind. “That’s Hatsune Miku and Deedlit.”

“Who-what-when-where-why is Hatsune Miku and Deedlit?”

“They’re, umm... Hatsune Miku is an avatar, and Deedlit is a character from an anime.”

“Who-what-when-where-why is anime?” another “voice” interjected.

Joon-ho turned to the crabapple tree and said, “It’s a form of entertainment on my planet.”

“Who-what-when-where-why is entertainment?”

“Entertainment is....”

The question and answer session, or perhaps interrogation went on for a long time before the tree people seemed satisfied with what they had learned.

“Who-what-when-where-why is elves?” The birch had once again started asking questions.

“Well, elves are friends of nature and they live in trees, I guess,” Joon-ho answered, memories of all the media he had watched containing elves flashing through his head.

“We understand,” the birch said, then slowly vanished from the clearing much like a fading mirage.

## Chapter 624 Debriefing and Demerits

Joon-ho felt a thrill pass through him at the question. It was a question he had been waiting for, seemingly for his entire life. He didn’t know many people from the task force, having spent the entire journey out either practicing his mana manipulation skills or in his private VR space, but he firmly believed that he was the leading expert in the Proxima Centauri system on all things fantasy, sci-fi, and anime.

He began lecturing the trees on all things elven, all the way from the mythological alfar and dokkalfar to present, including the races’ representation in novels, video games, and movies. He provided every detail he could think of, and as he spoke, he saw them in his memories, including his emotions and thoughts as he first discovered the rich body of entertainment through humanity’s history. He recalled heroes and villains, epic tales of adventures, and the struggles and challenges that each individual went through in each story he recounted to the trees.

As he spoke, the trees asked questions. Questions about other races he mentioned seemed popular, and Joon-ho figured that there was something about them that spoke to a primal facet of each individual tree around the meadow he was in. The oak, for example, seemed very interested in tales of giants, particularly those of hill giants from a popular tabletop role-playing game that Joon-ho played in his personal VR space.

The longer Joon-ho spoke, the more memories flashed in his mind and the more questions the trees asked him. And he basked in the attention; for most of his life he had been ignored, overlooked, or bullied due to his introverted personality and neurodivergent behaviors. So having an enthusiastic audience that not only respected his knowledge, but thirsted for it, satisfied a deep drive that he never knew he had possessed.

Then came a rather unexpected statement. The trees actually apologized for the attack on the lander and the later destruction of the rover with all hands aboard it. They had thought that humanity was like them, and losing individuals of the species would be much like trees shedding leaves, or perhaps twigs. But along with the realization that each human being was an individual came sorrow, sorrow that they had cut short a life with all that that entailed.

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While Joon-ho was giving the lecture of his dreams, perhaps quite literally, Ayaka was busy dealing with the many tasks that a Commander in the exploration fleet and executive officer of an exploration cruiser had to deal with. It wasn't made any easier by the emergency evacuation from the planet's surface, either. It took her two days to untangle the personnel issue alone and ensure everyone was returned to their proper places after the "ad hoc temporary personnel reassignments", as someone had jokingly referred to the post-evacuation chaos.

The work helped some, at least. It kept her mind off her responsibility in Joon-ho's disappearance, but every time she recalled that he was listed as missing, presumed killed in action, she felt a stabbing pain in her chest and a burning sensation in her eyes. He wasn't the only person she knew in the doomed mission to the surface, but he was the one she had worked the closest with, and one that she'd personally ordered to go into harm's way.

After she finished sorting out the personnel tasks and the resulting paperwork, she stretched and leaned back in her chair, rubbing her tired eyes with the heels of her hands. A soft chime sounded in her office, announcing that she had a visitor. She blinked away some of the tiredness from her eyes and said, "Enter."

A young, red-haired Ordinary Crewman with a sprinkle of freckles across his cheeks, wearing a steward's uniform, entered the office and said, "Ma'am, Captain Marinakis' compliments and he'll see you in his ready room at 1400 hours."

"Thank you, crewman," Ayaka replied, a touch more formality in her tone. Having the captain's steward deliver the captain's order—and an order it definitely was—didn't portend well for her upcoming debrief; perhaps the admiral had been put out more than she thought by her questioning his order a few days ago.

The steward saluted, then smartly turned on his heel and walked out of her office. She sighed and pulled up her report on the doomed rover and awakener, reading it again to ensure it was fresh in



her memory. She checked the time; it was 1345, just enough time to straighten out her uniform and make it to the captain's ready room.

She schooled her face into a pleasant expression, then walked out of her office.

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Captain's ready room, TES Farsight.

At precisely 1400 hours, holograms of Fleet Admiral Bianchi and his chief of staff flickered into existence. Ayaka and Captain Marinakis stood and saluted.

"Sit down, you two," the admiral sighed. "What a clusterfuck this mission is shaping up to be."

He turned to Ayaka. "Commander Takahashi, walk me through what happened on the surface. Your report was thorough, but there are still questions."

Ayaka nodded, then stood. "Yes, Sir. When we were notified of the supercell, we began preparing to weather the storm. Then the evacuation order came down...."

She narrated the events of the evacuation and its aftermath up to the present, after she had straightened out the inadvertent chaos caused by the emergency order. Once she was finished with her presentation, the questioning began.

"Why did you send your awakener, Warrant Officer.." the admiral began, then his chief of staff leaned in to whisper something in his ear. "Yes, Warrant Officer Lee. Why did you send him out for the rescue instead of a lander? And without escort, at that?"

"There was only one lander at the research base at the time, and it would've taken longer to reach the rover and the science team, Sir," Ayaka began. "Also, I felt that we should reserve the lander we had for any emergencies that arose during the storm. Warrant Lee couldn't bring a team of marines with him, not and travel as fast as he could alone, and I judged that speed was of the essence in rescuing the seismology team."

"Why did it take you so long to realize he had failed in his mission?" The admiral's face appeared to have been carved from granite, giving away no clue as to what he was thinking.

"By the time we got the report that we'd lost connection with him and the team in the rover, the emergency evacuation was in full swing. The base VI judged it as a low priority issue and didn't report it until the evacuation was well underway. By that point, the base's quantum supercluster was in power-saving mode and couldn't be brought back up to full power before the evacuation was complete. So I made the call to divert the lander I was assigned to go and pick up the stranded personnel, but by that time the evacuation order had been made nondiscretionary and I couldn't divert the lander."

“What is your impression, Commander? Do you think there are survivors down there?” the admiral asked.

“I believe so, Sir.”

“Do you have any evidence or is it just wishful thinking?”

“A bit of both, Sir. Warrant Lee is a concept-level awakener, and a strong one at that. I have to believe that he could survive the attack seen in the video we recovered.”

“Very good, Commander. And I happen to agree with you. A conceptualist wouldn’t die so easily. We will continue monitoring the planet as best we can and send a rescue mission at the soonest opportunity.”

The admiral turned to Captain Marinakis and continued, “Enter a disciplinary note into Commander Takahashi’s file regarding her breaking the chain of command. She’s to be docked a month’s pay and confined to quarters for a week, pending the needs of the fleet. VR access will be denied for the duration of the confinement.”

“Yes, Sir,” the captain replied.

Fleet Admiral Bianchi looked at Ayaka again. “I trust you’ll do better in the future, Commander Takahashi.”

“I will, Sir,” she said, and saluted him.

“Very well. See that you do. Bianchi clear.”

## Chapter 625 A Xenobotanist's Wet Dream

A month passed and the red mana shield around Proxima Centauri b was still present, just as strong as it had been when it was first raised, if not stronger. The TFS Proxima had been in a high polar orbit practically the entire time, and it seemed like the shield had detected her sensors and strengthened itself as a result.

But if they had been able to see through the obscuring shield, the members of Task Force Proxima would likely have been rather surprised. Who wouldn’t be surprised if they saw continents springing up seemingly out of nowhere?

That said, the continents hadn’t been created out of nothing. Rather, it was more like the roots occupying the ocean floor had mostly withdrawn, lowering the water level and exposing continents that had already been there, but flooded by the water.

And following the law of unintended consequences, the withdrawn roots had taken most of the mana with them from the water. But as energy, including mana, could neither be created nor destroyed—barring certain types of conceptual and esoteric mana that specialized in delivering hearty fuck yous to the laws of physics—that mana had somehow been redistributed across the new continents, balancing the density between land and water. It was at a slightly lower level, of course, but still significantly higher than the mana density of Earth.

Another surprise was waiting for the task force on the new continents. One would think that any land mass submerged in the hostile environment of any saltwater ocean would be scoured of all but

the hardiest archaeobacterial life, and in most cases, they would be correct. However, on Proxima Centauri b, the newly revealed continents were undergoing an extreme cycle of vegetation growth, to the point that in but a few more short months there would be no difference between them and New Australia.

The growth was enormous, both in size and scale. Lush violet forests were springing up, blending kilometers-tall oaks, squat crabapples, tall and slender cypress trees, dank and murky mangroves, and straight birch trees into a cohesive whole that would never be seen anywhere on Earth. And all of them were dozens of times the size of their more prosaic counterparts on humanity's homeworld.

Xenobotanists would have an absolute field day when they discovered the mixed forests.

And in the middle of what used to be a much bigger ocean was a singular "tree" made up of woven roots twisted together whose crown brushed against the mana shield over a hundred kilometers from the water's surface. It was practically a supercontinent itself, and each of the five main branches grew a specific type of tree and its accompanying symbiotic vegetation on a mass of twisted roots and soil from the bottom of the ocean that would put most of Earth's continents to shame, if they were to be compared in size.

The lowest of the main branches was home to vast groves of crabapple trees. The forest floor was covered in moss, and surrounding the crabapples were dogwood, serviceberry, and hazel shrubs, each of which had their own attendants. Great, broad ferns of all kinds surrounded them and an enormous rocky mountain range split the continent-sized branch practically in half, running from northwest to southeast.

The next-highest branch was covered in rolling, grassy hills and knolls, all of which were home to oak trees that grew in groves to the height of two or three kilometers. Each grove had between twenty and a hundred oak trees surrounded by witch hazel, dogwood, mountain laurel, and rhododendron shrubs. Interspersed between and around the oak groves were vast meadows of wildflowers, lilypad- and duckweed-covered lakes, and rivers lined with cattails and goldenrods. The oaks themselves were home to lush curtains of ivy and honeysuckle, and the rocky areas of the hills were covered in mosses and lichens.

Above the oak-forested branch was a wetland surrounding a single vast mountain peak that reached eight kilometers into the air, practically brushing the bottom of the branch above it. From that mountaintop ran great, rushing rivers in all directions that split and meandered through the wetlands surrounding the foot of the mountain until they poured themselves off the edge of the branch itself, falling to the ocean surface as a fine mist. On that particular branch grew tall, slender cypress trees surrounded in mist and rainbows, albeit muted ones. Alongside them were wax myrtle, alder, and buttonbush shrubs that surrounded meadows filled with moss and grass, from which sprouted mushrooms in scattered rings here and there.

Still higher was a branch covered in dank, dark swamps, from which grew great and twisted, gnarled mangrove trees. Accompanying them was a low ground cover comprised mostly of marsh grass, sea purslane, glasswort, and seawort with marsh ferns scattered here and there peeking out of the low fog and swirling mists that covered the ground. This continent-sized branch had very little solid ground, most of which were sand dunes and sandbars that rose a few feet above the algae-covered swamp waters, stabilized by sea oat plants that prevented them from being washed away by

the shifting swamps. And riddled throughout the mass was a deep, dark network of tunnels and caves.

And on the highest branch of them all was a vast forest of graceful birch trees, rising so near to the mana shield that, if one were to stand atop the tallest of the birch trees, they would be able to reach up and touch the shield itself without stretching or straining. Surrounding the birch trees like attendants were alders, dogwoods, and weeping willow shrubs, and carpeting the ground itself were grasses, sedges, and wildflowers of all kinds, occasionally giving way to meadows filled with bluebells. The birches themselves were organized into groves where the trees grew so close that their branches intertwined on multiple levels, creating broad paths above the ground.

From each tree on every level of the enormous “world tree” grew giant, eggplant-shaped fruits. The fruits pulsed with a rhythmic red light, almost like a metronome, or perhaps a heartbeat. They ranged in size from the 4-5 foot long fruits on the crabapple trees to enormous 16-20 foot long fruits on the great oak trees. The cypress trees had irregular fruits, some of which were as small as four feet long, while others were nine or ten feet long and almost as wide in diameter. The birch and mangrove trees were home to fruits in the 6-7 foot long range.

The explorers of Task Force Proxima would be in for quite the surprise, if and when they ever made it back to the surface of the planet.

## Chapter 626 Brute Forcing It

Three months later.

Ayaka and Captain Marinakis were in the captain’s ready room on the Farsight, attending a virtual meeting with the task force’s leadership. Things had settled into a routine, and the meetings had gone from daily, to weekly, and now this was the second monthly meeting they were holding. Nothing of any note had yet been accomplished; the situation remained unchanged.

“We’re still functioning on skeleton crews to reduce resource consumption. Even though we have the replicators, our problem with the algae in the feedstock tanks remains unsolved, but we’re still working on it and should have a solution soon,” the fleet’s head of logistics reported.

For the past six weeks, the crews of the ships had been rotating in and out of VR training simulations, with only skeleton crews maintaining the ships in reality. The initial mission planning had called for restocking their algae tanks and supplementing them with organic compounds from asteroids in Proxima Centauri and on the surface of Proxima Centauri b, but they had yet to discover any asteroids rich in organics and the surface was unreachable. Thus, their dilemma.

The stopgap solution the leadership had decided on was to step down the crews of the ships and put them in long-term training, rotating skeleton crews in to stand physical watches in case disaster struck. They had plenty of nutrient mash stock for the VR pods, but they hadn’t counted on the mana-triggered mutations in their algae tanks making them completely unusable in the food replicators. It only took three deaths and a wave of illness before they tracked down the problem and decided on a solution.

Efficiency was the hallmark of the empire, after all.

“Confidence level?” Admiral Bianchi asked.

“About 75%, Sir.”

“Not the best, but acceptable. Keep working on it.” The admiral turned to the fleet’s head engineer. “Anything to report, Scotty?” he asked.

“We’ve completed the protostellar forge and are working on the construction queue, Admiral,” Commander Gail “Scotty” Coleman reported. All head engineers were, by longstanding tradition, given the nickname Scotty when they took over the engineering department of their ships, or even task forces. It was only engineers that weren’t assigned to shipboard positions that had other nicknames.

“How long until the exploration crew’s build requests are ready?” Ayaka asked.

“You’ll be at the head of the build queue as soon as the planet becomes reachable, Commander Takahashi. We’ve only got a hold on your modified landers and upgraded satellites because there’s nothing we can do to get you in place to actually use the gear you’ve requested, so until that changes, you’ll just have to wait, I’m afraid,” Scotty replied.

“You’ll be at the head of the build queue as soon as the planet becomes reachable, Commander Takahashi. We’ve only got a hold on your modified landers and upgraded satellites because there’s nothing we can do to get you in place to actually use the gear you’ve requested, so until that changes, you’ll just have to wait, I’m afraid,” Scotty replied.

“Speaking of the planet,” Admiral Bianchi began, turning to Dr. Standing Bear. “Do you have an estimate for when the shield will come down?”

“Although our Henry’s Eyes sensors are still being overloaded and rapidly burning out, we’ve been detecting a steady reduction in mana density across the entire planet. If the falling density remains constant and our calculations are correct, we estimate it’ll be somewhere between two and seven E-days from now when we can brute force a sensor signal through the noise, Sir. And after that, we should be able to get landers through to the surface in about a month, assuming, of course, that the reduction in mana levels remains steady,” Dr. Standing Bear replied. She wasn’t lazing around, nor was her staff, despite not having much to do in regard to the planet.

“How long will our spares inventory hold out, Scotty?” the admiral asked.

“About another three weeks, Admiral.”

“Long enough, at least, to verify our calculations and see if the trend continues,” Dr. Standing Bear interjected.

“Throw your estimates to the engineers,” the admiral said, then turned back to Scotty. “When you get the data from the researchers, reorganize your build queue and time it so the exploration crew gets their equipment by the time the planet’s open to landers again, or no later than two weeks after. So six weeks from now, give or take.”

Turning to Ayaka, Admiral Bianchi continued, “I’m afraid you’ll have to wait a bit longer than that to use your new toys, though, Commander Takahashi. We’ll need to reevaluate the planet before sending crewed missions to the surface, so expect to repeat the process you used when we first arrived.”

“Understood, Admiral,” Ayaka said, her face schooled into as pleasant an expression as she could force it into without it coming across as forced.

“No shortcuts, Commander.”

“Yes, Sir.”

The meeting continued until everyone in attendance had a chance to report on the progress of their departments, but it was still a case of stagnation. Things hadn’t become so hopeless that they would abandon the mission to Proxima Centauri and move on to the binary Alpha Centauri system, but they were still edging toward that level with every day that passed. If the planet remained inaccessible and they failed to discover organics in the asteroid belt, the entire mission might have to be scrubbed and Task Force Proxima would be forced into an early return to Earth with a failed exploration mission under their belts.

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Two days later.

A constellation of upgraded Henry’s Eyes satellites had been completed at the protostellar forge and moved into position around Proxima Centauri b. Powered by fusion reactors with many times the output of the standard recon satellites, their sensors matched the performance of those on the TFS Proxima, but without the risk of burnout. After all, they had been designed to be used to brute force their sensors through the jamming effect of the mana shield and the increased atmospheric mana density under it, while the cityship herself could only do that in a pinch, and only as long as the spares in her cavernous holds could last before they ran out.

Aboard the bridge of the Proxima, a soft chime sounded at the sensor station as the cityship’s AI alerted the watch of a change in status.

{Henry’s Eye sensors have detected something,} the AI reported.

“Captain!” the watchstander said with some anticipation in his voice.

“Yes, Lieutenant Commander?”

“We’ve got something, Sir!”

Chapter 627 The Last Human in Proxima Centauri?

“Oh. My. God,” Ayaka murmured. Her murmur was caught by everyone else in the meeting, as they had all been stunned into silence by the hologram the AI had generated in the middle of the conference table. All of them couldn’t help but agree, as the visual of Proxima Centauri b was starkly different than when they had first laid eyes on it.

“Proxima, generate a comparison hologram,” Admiral Bianchi said once he recovered his voice.

{Comparison generated, Admiral,} the AI said as a hologram of the planet as it was appeared next to the current one.

The two planets looked completely different. When they had first arrived, there was only one continent on it and some scattered islands. But now, one, two, three.... “Five continents,” Dr. Standing Bear said, her tone filled with shock. “Great Coyote, that should have taken millennia, not just months.”

She wasn’t wrong, either. Change on a geological scale took time that was better measured in eons, not months! Earth had once been a pangea as well, back in the late paleozoic period—roughly 335 MILLION years ago—and continental drift had only broken it apart in the early mesozoic period, roughly 175 million years ago. In other words, Earth’s continental drift had taken around 110 million years to change the surface to what it was now, and the drift was still ongoing; Earth had looked different as “recently” as 65 million years ago.

Ayaka gasped, and everyone turned to her. They thought she had been struck by the absurdity of the situation, but that was far from the case. The realization that Joon-ho was likelier dead than alive had just hit her like a gut punch in the feels and she was trying to hold back her tears and stay strong.

Before seeing the changed planet, with no sign of human presence at all, she had held some small hope that Joon-ho, and perhaps some of the other scientists, would still be alive. They could have made it to Research Base New New South Wales over the past few months after escaping the ambushing roots, but now.... The research base was gone, and it had taken that tiny flickering flame of hope along with it.

Furthermore, even though she was no geologist, or any kind of scientist at all, really, she still knew just how much energy and force it would take to change a planet to the extent Proxima Centauri b had been.

That knowledge was like a jackboot that came crashing down to trample the small seedling of hope.

The only thing preventing her from breaking down into a sobbing mess was, again, her more than two decades of comportment training, which ensured that she could keep a straight face no matter how she felt inside. It was her armor, and now it had become her reliance. Perhaps later, when she could think straight, she would whisper a thank you to her father, who had forced her through those lessons and prevented her from having a normal childhood. But for now, she continued paying attention to things in the virtual conference room around her.

The hologram of the newly redecorated Proxima Centauri b was still blurred due to all of the mana interfering with their sensors, but some markers bled through. The five continents, roughly the size

of Eurasia, South America, Africa, Australia, and the Eden-Esparian Archipelago, were visible in the hologram, along with indicators showing that they were completely covered in plant life with no non-organic materials present.

“We should adjourn until our sensors are able to get a clear image of the surface, Admiral,” Dr. Standing Bear began. “It’ll save time in the long run for us to not come to any conclusions based on rapidly evolving ‘fuzzy’ data, then need to throw them out whenever new data comes in.”

It wouldn’t be that long a wait, either, so long as the mana density on the planet continued dropping at the same rate it had been over the past months.

“Agreed. Meeting is adjourned until our next monthly meeting, unless things on the surface become clear enough to gather data from orbit,” Admiral Bianchi said, then blinked out of the VR conference room as though he had never been there to begin with. He, too, needed time to recover from the shock and come up with plans for the new situation.

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Joon-ho had spent the last few months in the timeless meadow, or his “jail cell” as he jokingly called it. All things considered, he could have been in a far worse situation, though it was cold consolation when he thought of the unchanging environment and the endless questions the trees had for him.

“So they’re going to be born soon?” he asked the cypress, which was the chattiest of the bunch.

“Yes, our children are almost ready. We have already drained too much of our world’s mana in hastening their growth, but all has gone according to plan,” the tree replied in its—her—gentle tone.

Thanks to all of the conversation, the trees now understood almost everything Joon-ho knew about humanity, and they had become much better conversationalists as a result. Getting them to understand what, to him, were simple concepts had been frustrating for... well, he didn’t exactly know how long. Time was a loose concept for him, stuck in an unchanging environment as he was, but they had finally understood simple things like the difference between “you” and “me”, and the six question words “who, what, when, where, how, and why”.

“Oh, the plan. Right. The plan,” he said, giggling to himself. He might have become slightly unbalanced during his time in the timeless meadow; he had to admit as much to himself in his more lucid periods. “So can I ask you something?”

“Go ahead, Joon-ho,” the cypress replied.

“What plan?”

“The plan to populate our world.”



“Right, populate. That’ll be nice. Will you bring some of your children here to visit me? I mean, don’t get me wrong, you’re all nice enough and everything, especially considering that I’m basically an invader, but a change would be nice. Yes, a change. That’s what we need!”

“But we’ve already changed the world, Joon-ho,” the cypress responded, a quizzical note in her tone.

“You have?! Great! Let me out so I can go and see!”

“We can’t do that yet.”

“Why not?”

“You currently don’t have a body. Well, you have a body, but it’s not ready to be born yet.”

“Right, I don’t have a.... Wait. I don’t have a body? I DON’T HAVE A BODY!?” He rushed over to the cypress and tried to shake her, but even as hefty as he was, a 280 pound man trying to shake a tree that was hundreds of meters tall was an impossibility to begin with. Especially considering that he lacked a body at all at the moment and was present only as a phantom of his consciousness.

“Indeed, Joon-ho,” the oak interjected in his rumbling basso profundo voice. “You lack a body because we had to use you as a pattern to create our children. Before humanity came, we only knew ourselves and each other. There was no other but us, and we lacked a certain... spark, so to speak. You brought us that spark, willingly or not, knowingly or not, and for that we will be eternally grateful.”

“So you tried birthing children before?” Joon-ho asked, his mood rapidly swinging from anger to curiosity.

“Yes. We came together for the first time to create children, and you’ve seen those children. They lack what you humans call sapience, and they fear us and our power. That’s why the continent we created first was covered by our children, but there was a vast separation between them and us, caused by their fear and reverence. We’ve always mourned the loss of what could have been.”

Joon-ho was completely lost and couldn’t comprehend the thought of what the trees had accomplished. He would just have to bring smarter people than him to figure out what exactly the oak was talking about.

That is, if there was anyone smarter left in the solar system to begin with. He couldn’t be sure of that without knowing how long he had been trapped in the timeless meadow; he might just be the sole living human left in the Proxima Centauri system.

Joon-ho had taken to sleep as a way of measuring time in the timeless meadow. Although he never knew how long he slept, or when he fell asleep or woke up, for that matter, at least he could count “days” by tracking his sleep schedule. Currently, his count was at seven hundred and sixty-three.

He had no way of knowing how accurate it was, but at least the practice kept him sane. Time had proven a difficult concept to communicate to the trees, who seemingly lived forever and saw no point whatsoever in dividing days into hours, minutes, and seconds, or years into months and weeks. The only thing the trees cared about were seasons; there was a season to sleep and a season to grow. Everything else was superfluous to them.

Currently, he was laying on the soft grass, trying and failing to fall asleep. Not only was he excited by his impending rebirth, but the role he had played in the creation of new life had his thoughts in a tizzy. Though the trees had done all of the work of birthing the new species, Joon-ho had given them the final piece of the puzzle necessary for those births to happen: a spark of inspiration.

Oftentimes, the barrier between success and failure was simply the knowledge that success was indeed possible. And humankind’s mere existence had given the trees that knowledge, which they used to successfully birth individual lifeforms that were separate from the collective communities that the trees had formed on their first attempt.

From what he had gathered, humanity’s advancements in genetic engineering were kindergarten-level to the immortal trees. No, not even that, humanity wasn’t even in the same ballpark!

If it had to be compared to something, humanity was a newborn infant that hadn’t even learned to open their eyes yet, much less crawl, walk, or run. That, he thought, might be a fairer comparison, though he was tempted to put it even farther back in a human’s development cycle. Perhaps humanity’s knowledge of genetics and evolution placed them on the level of a sperm cell, whereas the trees were adult olympic sprinters.

They were so far advanced, in fact, that they couldn’t even explain their knowledge in terms that could be understood by humankind. Everything Joon-ho knew about evolution told him that it took millions of years for a species to evolve, all the way back from when the first single-celled amoebas living in the primordial soup devoured the even smaller mitochondria and developed a symbiotic relationship to the present. Millions of years passed as evolution worked its slow, inevitable magic on developing and pushing forward the species.

And when he had asked the trees, their response was simple: “We just let them grow.” They were either unable, or unwilling, to elaborate further. Joon-ho suspected it was an inability to couch it in terms he could understand, as the trees were otherwise incredibly forthcoming in their answers to his other questions. They held nothing back from him, and even forthrightly told him that it was their compensation for having killed the science team and “eating” his physical body.

When the trees had brought that up, he’d wholeheartedly accepted their apology. He figured he might as well get upset at a newborn puppy making a mess by pottying on the floor. The trees hadn’t known any better anymore than that newborn puppy, so his fate wasn’t something he could exactly blame them for. Sure, it had taken him a while to come to terms with being eaten and all, but he’d never blamed them for it.

His thoughts continued racing until, without realizing it, he crossed the line between wakefulness and sleep, then completely lost consciousness. It was almost as if a light switch labeled “Lee Joon-ho, human awakener” was flipped from on to off as he ceased to exist.

The moment he lost consciousness, a vast torrent of mana was forcefully thrust into his “body”, which slowly broke up into particles of pulsing light. If anyone were present that cared to count, they would see more than 37 trillion small blinking dots that drifted up into the sky above the timeless meadow before being gathered into a stream and fed into what looked like a very small black hole.

Before all of the particles had been absorbed by the black hole, the cypress turned her attention to the last little bits of what was formerly known as “Lee Joon-ho, human awakener” and a distinct sense of fondness projected from her to the particulate stream. It was almost... maternal in nature; obviously, the cypress was the one who had been most affected by the trees’ interactions with the young awakener.

The trees themselves appeared to have been physically present in the meadow, and they took a different exit. Instead of dissolving and flowing into the sky as a stream of particles, they slowly sank into the loamy soil until there was nothing left of them above the ground. Soon, all that remained of the timeless meadow that Joon-ho had grown so familiar with was nothing but a large, grassy meadow lit in a dim light that seemed to have no individual source and cast no shadows.

If Joon-ho had been conscious, he might have mistakenly thought that his mother had come to join him in his last moments, which would’ve been quite confusing. He was five light years, more than forty-seven trillion kilometers, away from Earth, where his mother still was!

But he wasn’t conscious. In fact, his entire existence was still in question and he may have crossed over the line between life and death instead of that between wakefulness and sleep.

## Chapter 629 The Yap

Proxima Centauri b, one month later.

At the former site of Research Base New New South Wales, a single tree grew. Unlike any of the other newly created vegetation, it was alone in the center of a vast clearing and was of no particular species of tree. And on that tree was a single fruit, pulsing with a rhythmic red light.

Motes of shining mana were flowing into the fruit, causing it to sway from side to side. As more and more motes struck the fruit and passed through its skin, the swaying sped up with each passing second until cracks spread on the fruit’s surface. They continued spreading and widening until the fruit fragmented much like an eggshell, dropping a slim, hairless human figure to the ground, covered in a clear, slick goo. The man, for man he obviously was, given the equipment between his legs, stood and wiped the goo from his eyes.

“Fuck me!” he cursed as a wave of dizziness swept over him and he nearly fell to the ground. “I think I forgot how to walk. Do I have to grow up AGAIN!? FUCK!”

He took a deep breath and looked at his slimy form. “Holy shit! I have an eight pack now!” he exclaimed. “Sweet!”

The man lay on his back, staring up at the red sky of the planet, then crazily cackled, “I’m back!”

He was none other than Lee Joon-ho, and he had escaped certain death a second time.

Once his laughing fit passed, he rested, regaining strength with every breath he took. It felt like he was inhaling something together with the loam-scented atmosphere of Proxima Centauri b, and he immediately deduced what it was: mana.

“I wonder how long I’ve been, err, well... out of it,” he mumbled to himself. He was completely out of the habit of silently thinking after having spent such a long time in the timeless meadow, where the only sound was that of his own voice. “I hope I’m not the only person left here.”

He raised his hand to his eye and gazed through the circle formed by his thumb and forefinger. “Gravitational lensing,” he enunciated, willing the gravity mana around him to form a telescopic lens.

His eyes flashed silver as a small blob appeared over his right eye, much like a monocle. Through it, he saw a rapidly disintegrating mana shield above him. But that was all; he couldn’t see through the mostly opaque construct. He sighed and dropped his hand from his face.

“I’ll try again later,” he said with a grin. “Not like there’s an answering machine anywhere around here I can leave a message on.... Or wait, is there?”

Joon-ho tried accessing his quantum microcomputer implant, but got no response. “That’s weird,” he murmured, then began pacing back and forth. He tried accessing it again, then again, and kept making attempts, like picking a scab. “Why isn’t it working?”

Finally, he stopped trying and sighed. It did make some sense that he couldn’t access it; after all, the trees were geneticists, not biomechanical device specialists. “I guess I’ll just wait until the shield drops.”

He closed his eyes and started drifting off to sleep before a sudden realization jolted him back to full awareness. “Wait a minute! I couldn’t use gravitational lensing before... not without using my implant to run the calculations. So why’d it work so well for me now, if I don’t have my implants at all?”

An hour of pondering passed, then he snapped his fingers. “They must’ve incorporated my implants into my new body! That has to be it!” he cackled, imagining what it would be like to “double up” on his implants. Then he yawned and murmured, “I’ll think about it after a nice nap.”

TES Farsight, Proxima Centauri b orbit, an hour and a half earlier.

“Captain!” the sensors officer on the bridge called out. “We have an enormous mana signature flaring up on the surface where Research Base New New South Wales used to be!” He flicked his fingers, slaving his display to the main screen and overriding what was previously on it.

Everyone on the bridge stopped what they were doing and stared at the screen. It showed a spot of mana that was so concentrated that it looked almost black, instead of the usual medium blue that mana normally showed on the Henry’s Eyes sensors.

“What is it?” Captain Marinakis asked.

“No telling yet, Sir, but whatever it is... it’s big. Really big, Sir,” the sensors officer replied. “It’s coming through clear because the mana shield around the area seems to have thinned. It might finally be disappearing, Sir.”

Captain Marinakis exchanged a glance with Ayaka, then nodded. He turned to the security officer on the bridge and ordered, “Prepare a lander for a remote mission to check out that signal.”

The security officer came to attention and snapped, “Aye aye, Captain.” He was just short of saluting.

“And belay the academy yap, Lieutenant,” the captain said in a wry tone.

An hour later, the sensors officer on the bridge of the Farsight reported, “Looks like the shield is down, Captain. I’m getting good returns on all sensors.”

Captain Marinakis acknowledged the report, then turned to the security officer again. “Send the lander mission, Lieutenant. Remember: remote piloting only, no sense risking the few flyboys we have aboard.”

“Aye—” the lieutenant began, but was shortly interrupted by the captain.

“And can the yap, Lieutenant!”

Everyone on the bridge fell into a sudden coughing fit as they stifled their laughter.

Chapter 630 Doomsday Archive

TFS Proxima, mobile fleet hospital quarantine ward.

Joon-ho was lying unconscious in a medical pod undergoing scan after scan at a blistering pace. In a side room, separated by a thick plate of armorglass, doctors were scurrying back and forth from screen to screen, tracking the real-time data coming from the medical pod.

All of them were mystified at his miraculous survival. Sure, he had lost weight, but he’d survived for months on the surface of a planet with hostile life forms, yet showed no sign of the hypotrophy they expected from someone who hadn’t had a bite to eat in all that time.

They weren’t alone in their surprise, either. Every single crew member aboard the Proxima, naval, marine, and scientific staff alike, were curious as to how Joon-ho had survived. Anyone who wasn’t currently standing watch was focused on the public security feed, tapping into it with their implants and staring at Joon-ho’s medical pod, searching for the slightest sign that he was about to be released from it. Even the off-watch medical staff had clustered in the passageway outside the quarantine ward, practically choking it off; calls of “make way” and “make a hole” occasionally rang out in the packed mass of doctors and corpsmen.

A small group of researchers had gathered in the mobile fleet hospital’s wardroom, each of them holding a cup of coffee or tea, or a soft drink, and were discussing what the fleet had already dubbed “The Miracle”.

“So he’s the only survivor, eh?” one of the researchers asked. By the flash on his lapel, he was a seismologist, making it likely that he knew one of the researchers in the doomed rover.

“Seems that way,” another answered. She was wearing a lapel pin that showed her specialty was xenanthropology. “I heard the Proxima did a full-powered scan of the entire equatorial orbit looking for other anomalies similar to the one in the clearing they found Warrant Lee in, but....” She sighed and her shoulders slumped a little. “They didn’t find a damn thing.”

“It does make a certain amount of sense for him to be the only survivor, though,” a third researcher—another seismologist—interjected. “He’s an awakener and he was in the middle of a mana-infused storm of unimaginable proportions. With that much mana at his fingertips, he would’ve been like a fish in water.”

“Agreed. But we’ll have to wait until he wakes up and can tell us what happened to him before we can reach a conclusion, though. PCb has given us so many surprises that any hypothesis we come up with before that would just be us shooting in the dark and hoping we hit something,” the first seismologist said.

“PCb?” another person at the wardroom table asked, his head tilted a bit in confusion.

“Proxima Centauri b. It’s a mouthful, so I took a page from the marines and shortened it,” the seismologist laughed.

The xenanthropologist couldn’t help but sigh in disappointment. She wasn’t friends with any of the seismologists who hadn’t been rescued, but they did share a mission and a sense of scientific curiosity that had brought them this far. And that made her ponder the realities of existence, the discussion around her fading into the background and becoming white noise as she fell deeper and deeper into her own thoughts.

A few minutes passed like that before she came back to reality with a jolt, then stood and headed back toward her lab without a word.

The other researchers at the wardroom table, used to the hyperfocused state that some scientists would enter when they were on the verge of a breakthrough in their research, didn’t think anything of it and the discussion of The Miracle proceeded apace.

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As Sun Tzu once said, the world is run by meetings and Fleet Admiral Bianchi had called another general meeting of his staff, plus the doctors working on deciphering the results of Joon-ho’s scans. Also in attendance were Ayaka and Captain Marinakis of the TES Farsight, present in the form of holograms.

“Are you one hundred percent positive that this—” the admiral gestured at a pair of holograms floating over the conference table, “—is the same Warrant Officer Lee Joon-ho that survived the attack during the storm?”

His skepticism was understandable; the “new” Joon-ho was taller, had more defined, toned musculature, and was somehow even better looking than before. Not that that was really a stretch, given that he’d previously had squinty eyes and facial features that were covered in a thick layer of fat, hiding his features and making them indistinct. Overall, he looked like he had matured by a few years and now appeared to be around twenty-five years old instead of his actual age of eighteen.

[The probability of the awakener in my medical pod being one Warrant Officer Second Class Lee Joon-ho approaches unity, Admiral,] the Proxima’s AI reported.

“We have a 99.999% match across all biometrics, Sir,” Dr. Elaine Cho, Task Force Proxima’s chief surgeon added. “We’ve compared retinal scans, facial scans, fingerprints, and DNA sequencing, and it’s all a hundred percent match to the same person who was originally assigned to the task force. The only questions we have are a variance in his mana signature and the unexplained absence of any of his fleet implants. We’re comparing the results of his situational interview with his akashic record as we speak for a more positive identification.”

Since the security clearances of those at the meeting varied, and some weren’t cleared to have been read in on the empire’s memory mapping and modification technologies, the good doctor was using “situational interview” as code for the comparison of Joon-ho’s memories with the memories in his akashic record files. No interrogator, no matter how good they were, could possibly get every single memory—even the ones a person had completely forgotten—out of their subject’s minds. The only thing the empire knew of that was capable of that was their own brain scanning tech, which was still currently held as tightly secured as the classification levels allowed.

And the only people in all of Task Force Proxima who had been read in on it were the fleet admiral, his flag intelligence officer, the chief surgeon, and Ayaka herself, who had the need-to-know as the head of the ground exploration team. After all, while they had expected that something like Joon-ho’s... condition... was possible, the probability of it happening was so vanishingly small that the protocol for it was only held in the hardcopy vaults of the mission contingency plans. Or as people in the know called them, “the think tank’s doomsday archive”.