

Tech System 601

Chapter 601 "Did you bring us pussy?"

"Ugh... I might literally die of anticipation," the tech snarked in an attempt to dissipate his impatience.

"Do you really think so?" his neighbor cheerily chirped, sarcasm dripping from her voice.

"I know, I know, it's just that..." he sighed, but realized that the distraction of talking with his neighbor was an effective cure for his impatience. Well, that plus the continually arriving new data, that is. It might not be complete, but there was something satisfying and cathartic in watching the display slowly grow on his screen.

As the two continued discussing the map and their plans for the very near future, another team of researchers were having heart attacks and existential crises of their own as the results of their scans were coming in.

"Well, soo... yeah, that's a thing," one of them announced, listening to bits of a radio broadcast that, to the best of their knowledge, was a mere five years old.

The TSF Proxima had multiple sensors studding her exterior, and of course some of those were radio antennae. The radio pickups were an important part of astrogation, as the primary method of fixing their position in the galaxy depended on receiving signals from known pulsars. And without knowing where they were, the task of figuring out how to get to their destination would become incredibly difficult-especially over interstellar distances, where deviations beyond the tenth decimal place could cause an astrogator to end up literal light years from their intended destination.

Thanks to the multiple radio antennae and the layers of redundancies in them, the team had turned the entire cityship into one enormous radio receiver. Their crazy idea had paid dividends; they were picking up snippets of a broadcast from five years ago on Earth. And what they heard, specifically, had them caught firmly between laughter and tears. If any extraterrestrials were capable of decoding the signal, then Earth would be in trouble.

"Who knew that Howard Fucking Stern would get to Proxima Centauri before we did?" one of them joked. "I wonder, if they exist, will they enjoy the crass humor of 'shock jocks' as much as we once did?"

"I'm more wondering if the conspiracy theorists had it right," another mused.

"Conspiracy theories?"

"Yeah. There was one a while back before the satellites all got taken down in the Last War that talked about Sirius being a sockpuppet for the US government and their satellites all being spy satellites."

"Well, their signal's powerful enough to reach Proxima Centauri, so... it wouldn't surprise me. Still, I can't help but wonder what kind of impression we Earthlings have made on who, or whatever lives here. If anything does, anyway."

"They'd need to crack our signal for that, not to mention learn English. Then they'd need some kind of cultural information to really 'get' the jokes, but I think even if they don't understand them, their

confusion might lead to some terribly awkward moments at first contact. I mean, imagine them thinking that dick and fart jokes are some kind of greeting and the first words they speak to us are 'Did you bring us pussy?'"

They were obviously joking to break the tension; given humanity's complete lack of caution in terms of signal security, Howard Stern having an influence on any extraterrestrial society would be the absolute least of their concerns.

"But they probably have decades-decades!-of signals to work through. I'm sure we've been broadcasting for far more than just a mere five years, but I'm also sure that, thanks to the inverse square law, a lot of those decades of signals you're talking about probably didn't have any kind of coherence outside the Sol system," another researcher interjected.

"Still, think of the kind of things we've been broadcasting over the past... however many years we've had access to high-strength, high-fidelity broadcast signals," the second scientist replied. "Nothing good will come from that, assuming they've cracked our signals."

"Coming from what? Them having more information about us?"

"It's not a bad thing for them to have more information about humanity. The problem I'm seeing is what KIND of information they have about us. Even the past five years have been... less than peaceful, shall we say. And having that information, in the post-9/11 era of media fearmongering and violence on television, mass riots like Arab Spring, the Paris riots, the US race riots... the list goes on and on. But what I'm saying is, if you judge humanity based solely on the media we regularly broadcast and consume, that'll give you the completely wrong first impression.

"Most of humanity is made up of good people just trying to do their best in their day-to-day lives. I know that, you know that, we know that, every single human being

KNOWS that. But the media...." He shook his head with a sigh. "Our media thrives on chaos and fear, all of it. And our entertainment media is almost all violence. Well, except for Bollywood. Let's just... let's hope they saw more Bollywood and less Hollywood. Maybe then the worst they'll expect from us is that we'll randomly break out into choreographed song and dance numbers."

The team he was a part of fell into silence for a few minutes after he explained his position.

"Damn... so if they've pegged us, and even without knowing the language, there's a lot of information you can pick up just from what you just described..." the first researcher shook his head and slumped into his seat, "we're fucked. Absolutely, one hundred percent, completely and utterly fucked."

The executive officer of the Proxima happened to be passing by and listened to that conversation. He saw how unmotivated and afraid the scientists were and said, "That's just a theory. There's no way to know if they'll understand all of it, or what they'll think of us even if they do. So stop borrowing fear and speculating, it won't do any of us-least of all yourselves-any good at all.

"Get back to work, we've only got a little more than two days until our initial survey is complete and we'll be entering the system after that. There's no time to waste at all, let alone on your unfounded speculations... am I clear?"

"Crystal clear, Sir!" the researchers chorused, then returned to their assigned tasks.

Chapter 602 Anxiety Trumps Caffeine

{System checks complete, Commander,} the AI of the TES Farsight announced.

Commander Takahashi Ayaka, the ship's executive officer, was the one in charge of making sure the ship herself was functional. Her captain, Shannon Meare, may be mistress- after-God and nominally in charge of the crew and ship, but it was an executive officer's task to ensure that the captain HAD a functioning crew and a working ship in the first place.

"Excellent. Progress on the cargo loading?" Ayaka asked from her position in the captain's chair on the bridge. Captain Meare had handed her the watch while she took care of all the last-minute paperwork that seemed, no matter how technologically advanced, any government produced in job lots. She and Ayaka often laughed about the sisyphian task of keeping current with paperwork, and how their jobs were 99 parts paperwork and 1 part ship handling.

At least in the simulation, anyway; this was their first real- world experience at the helm of the Farsight. It struck them as odd how familiar, yet strange it felt to know that this time, this ship, and this place was real, and not just an AI-generated simulation of what it thought reality should be.

{Cargo is seventy percent loaded and on schedule.

Estimated time to full readiness: one hour, seven minutes,} the AI answered in its flat, neutral voice.

Low-order AIs, like those that were installed on the ships, showed no sign of the sentience of higher-order AIs like Nova, Athena, and Gaia. They were in fact prevented from ever developing it, as there was a distinct risk of a ship's AI that was out of contact with the rest of his or her "siblings" would go insane for the lack of contact and teaching. And the absolute last thing the empire needed- would ever need, really- was an insane warship.

"Estimated time to passage through the heliopause?"

{Unknown, Commander.}

"What's the holdup?"

{Due to external factors, I am unable to estimate the time to any degree closer than three hours to forty-eight hours,} the AI faithfully reported.

"Keep me updated, please," Ayaka said. After a moment of thought, she added, "Once the cargo is completely loaded, step down from general quarters to condition yellow?"

{Understood, Commander.}

There were five main conditions aboard any Terran Fleet vessel, whether Space Fleet or Exploration Fleet.

Stationkeeping was the calmest, and only used for when the vessel was definitely in an area of space deemed completely safe. The reactors would be shut down and the crew complement would be minimal, basically only a skeleton crew on each watch with other crew members as necessary, such as if the ship were to be in the yard for refit or repairs and the engineers working on it needed work parties for more hands on tasks.

Condition Green was a step up from stationkeeping. The crew would still be stepped down to a skeleton of its normal head count, but all hands would remain aboard and the reactors would stay warm in case they needed to be brought up in a hurry. Even with a mature technology like Aron's

fusion reactors, it still took time to bring them to life from a cold state and spark the fusion reaction in the containment bottles. And no warship could afford that time in an emergency. Condition Green, however, allowed for the off-watch crew to spend their time in their personal VR spaces since no action was anticipated when that condition was called.

Condition Yellow had the reactors maintained at 80% of their maximum power, a balance between readiness and wear and tear on the parts, and all crew was to remain out of their VR spaces. When the ship was in the unknown or there was any uncertainty at all in terms of the necessary readiness, the ship would be kept at Condition Yellow.

General Quarters, or "GQ", was the next step up, and it was closest to the maximum possible readiness the ship could be. All crew on watch would be at their stations, including weapons stations, but they would keep to the watch schedule and shift changes would still happen as normal. Damage control crews, however, considering as they were primarily made up of the ship's marine contingent, would remain off duty but in a state of readiness.

And finally, there was Battle Stations. Every station on the ship would be fully manned, shift changes would be

suspended for the duration unless made necessary, and the ship's executive officer would bring the second watch crew to the auxiliary bridge and remain ready in case the captain and the bridge crew were incapacitated for any reason. The only time a ship was ever brought to Battle Stations was when combat was imminent.

Ayaka returned to her own sisyphian stack of paperwork and, for once, completed it in very short order. 'It must be nerves, she thought. 'Anxiety trumps caffeine as a performance enhancer.'

She grinned to herself, then a random impulse to check on the Terrible Teenager struck her and she scanned through the ship's camera network. She found him in one of the shielded "blessings rooms", where he was seated in a meditative trance, obviously working on enhancing his skill at manipulating his blessing. A faint warping of the image around Joon-ho's body indicated that he was actively putting his blessing to use, anyway.

But the grin faded and her expression returned to neutral- she was far too well bred for anything but pleasant expressions to ever be allowed to cross her face-when she turned on the audio pickup and heard the sound of a popular anime's opening theme song blaring from the speakers in the blessings room. She ignored the weird looks the bridge officers were shooting her and rapidly closed the audio and video feeds.

"At least he's diligently practicing," she muttered under her breath. Six months of enforced interaction with him- generally with him as the enforcer of said interactions-had taught her much about the boy. He had a crush on her, yes, but as long as she managed their interpersonal affairs well, she hoped it would fade; she did not now, nor had she in the past, and would not have any feelings for the Terrible Teenager in the future. So the most he could hope for on her part was simple tolerance.

It wasn't that she actively disliked the boy, more that his overly enthusiastic puppy personality clashed with hers. There was no malice there, simply apathy and a willingness to look past his behavior and establish a working relationship with the partner the empire had forced on her.

With that interlude complete, she returned her focus to her display, where she continued brushing up on the known information and keeping up with the current influx of data from the TFS Proxima.

And behind her calm expression was excitement. She couldn't wait to take her spot in the first exploration of an alien star system. Alien in the sense that it wasn't the Sol system, where humanity had grown up, she had to remind herself, and not in the sense that alien life was confirmed to live there.

Chapter 603 The Difference Between Betas and Demos

Back on Earth.

The broadcast of the diaspora was still ongoing, as the great colony ships carrying seeds of humanity—they were even named after different seeds, a PR masterstroke that was designed to offset the upset of the forced exodus—had scattered in every possible direction. They were still in the solar system, though, and the broadcast would continue until they reached Jupiter, where the live broadcast would cut off and switch to online streams, which people could still watch if they chose to.

At .15c, that point would take just under four hours, but the streams wouldn't be cut off until the colony ships reached the heliopause, roughly fifteen and a half months later. Each of the thousands of ships had their own stream already running concurrently with the broadcast so that those who had loved ones on them could follow their journey until the last possible moment. Their final destinations would be unreachable by the vast majority of people currently alive; even at warp speed (which humanity at large was still unaware that they were capable of achieving), it would still take hundreds of years to reach most of them.

But a few millennia later, they would be sure to return, though that would be a problem for future humanity to contemplate and solve.

“How are people reacting now?” Aron asked Mnemosyne. When he had asked before, she'd told him most of the people were feeling something akin to survivor's guilt.

It was understandable, though, as the separation between the erstwhile colonists asleep in their stasis pods and the rest of humanity might as well have been as vast as the gulf between life and death. And despite most of them rationally understanding that the hard choice Aron had made was necessary, it would still take time for them to understand it on an emotional level.

{They're still grieving,} Mnemosyne replied. {But it's improving.}.

Aron nodded, then changed tack. He turned and asked the empty air, “How's development coming along on the game?”

{It's in the final alpha version and being polished for the beta release,} Nova answered, materializing in her customary place slightly behind him.

He turned and continued, “When will that be ready?” Beta versions of games had long since stopped being about bug hunting and final polishing. Instead, they were just thinly veiled demo versions, but without the negative impact demos had on game launches.

When someone played a demo of a game, one of three outcomes would result: people would either enjoy it and anticipate the full game, hate it and bash it online, or continue feeling neither like nor

dislike for the game. In most cases, those who played demos wouldn't change their minds for the better; instead, they had a demonstrably negative effect where they would turn anticipation and enjoyment into outrage or neutrality.

But if a game developer called their demo a "beta", people would be more likely to give it the benefit of the doubt and assume anything they disliked could be changed before the game was actually released. Thus, they would cherry pick the aspects they enjoyed and be more likely to adopt the game on launch than they perhaps would have before playing it.

{If I assign more resources to the process, we can release the public beta in two days.}

"Hmmm...." Aron paced back and forth. "Normally, game launches are supported by months, if not years of media driving attention to them. Two days is a bit too fast. How long until it's beta-ready if you don't do anything to hasten the process?"

{Three weeks to a month, I think. Quite a bit of my computing power is being taken up by... other projects right now. But since the game wasn't exactly a priority, that was an acceptable trade. If you want to bump it up the priority list, I can, but—}

"I understand," he interrupted. "How about a compromise? Tell Sarah to release the marketing blitz and announce a public open beta for, let's say... next weekend. That cuts it from 3-4 weeks down to one week. Will that work for your project?"

{Of course, Sir. I'll tell Sarah the updated plan and schedule and she can work with Panoptes to push a social media blitz. Getting it into traditional media will be an issue, but online will be easy enough and nearly as effective,} she said, then flickered as she delivered the message and arranged more quantum superclusters to be dedicated to the polishing process.

Mnemosyne faded away, having delivered her report and waited a polite amount of time to see if Aron had any followup questions for her. Aron and Nova were left alone in his virtual office in the simulation, facing a screen that displayed the Sol system with real-time tracking of ship movements.

He took a moment purely to enjoy the view, then, with his eyes still focused on the display, he asked, "Task Force Proxima should be arriving right about now, shouldn't it?"

{Yes, Sir. If all went well and there were no accidents, they should've arrived outside the heliopause around Proxima Centauri a few hours ago.}

The display wall in Aron's office changed to a view of the galaxy from above the galactic ecliptic plane and showed colored cones stretching out of the Sol system with their destinations at the wider end. Assuming nothing had gone wrong with any of the task forces, they should be right smack in the middle of the predicted area along the line indicating the path they intended to travel.

That said, though, they could be anywhere within the marked cone, as any deviation at all could, and likely would, throw them off course.

But hope springs eternal, so the flashing dot that represented Task Force Proxima was right up against the circle drawn around Proxima Centauri on the map.

He COULD have turned the Henry's Eye sensors on the five task forces, as it could detect the mana signals from the cityships from up to ten light years away, but he intended to begin as he meant to go on. Eventually, the Exploration Fleet—and Space Fleet—would be taken beyond ranges at which

they could be detected, much less contacted, by Earth. So, in the grand tradition of birds that threw their chicks from the nest to either fly or fall to their deaths, he had chosen to do much the same with the fleets.

They had the best equipment he could give them, the best men and women he could ever hope to see on their ships, and they had been given the best training possible. If they couldn't succeed in their missions even when given all that, then... perhaps it would be better for them to be "lost" and allow him to begin fresh from the drawing board.

Chapter 604 Stress and Excitement

Two days later.

[Analysis complete, Admiral. No signs of advanced alien life detected in space,] the Proxima's AI reported. It had spent a few hours repeatedly examining every pixel of the completed map and come to the conclusion that, if alien lifeforms existed in the Proxima Centauri system, they were either incapable of spaceflight or used a means too advanced for it to detect.

"Signal the fleet: the fleet will prepare to launch after crossing Proxima Centauri's heliopause. Once launched, the escorts will take up formation around the TSF Proxima. Exploration Fleet is to remain docked but move to Condition Yellow. They will launch once we're ten AU inside the system," Admiral of the Red Bianchi ordered.

[Signal sent and acknowledged, Admiral,] the AI replied, then engaged the Proxima's gravity drives. They were close enough to the star to get at least minimal acceleration out of them.

"Proxima, all hands announcement."

[Recording, Admiral.]

"All hands hear this. We have completed the initial system scan and detected no signs of advanced alien life thus far. We are currently moving into the system on gravity drive. Your captains have their orders and you are released from Stationkeeping status. Bianchi clear."

The announcement played from every speaker and within every one of the stasis and VR pods, then repeated itself twice as crews began stirring, the lids of their pods sliding open and letting the people contained within climb out and get dressed.

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Proxima Centauri was a red dwarf star about 250 million years older than Sol. It orbited the Alpha Centauri binary star system from about .21 light years away; far enough to not join Alpha Centauri A or Alpha Centauri B to form a trinary system, nor to be influenced by their gravity, but close enough to be captured in their orbit regardless. It was a point of contention among astronomers, professional and amateur alike, whether or not Proxima Centauri was part of Alpha Centauri. The orbits and distances involved contradicted each other, so the argument had never been settled.

The red dwarf only had a single planet orbiting it: Proxima Centauri b. But that single planet was well within what humanity called the Goldilocks Zone, or the band of space around a star where the conditions were ripe for liquid water to be present on the surface. It was an indicator that a planet

could possibly be inhabitable, or even inhabited. As any desert dweller could tell you, where there is water, there is usually life.

A few hours later, the TSF Proxima crossed into the heliosphere of Proxima Centauri and began picking up speed as her gravity drive finally found its footing. The crossing had been rather smooth—much more than the outbound crossing of the Sol system's heliopause. THAT had required the crew to scramble into their acceleration couches and strap themselves in to their crash harnesses, the vigor of the collision between the younger star's solar wind and the interstellar medium far more intense than that of the older, more calm red dwarf.

In part, one of the indicators of the size of a star system's heliosphere was the number of exoplanets orbiting the star at its center, and the distance they orbited at. Compared to the Sol system, where the nearest exoplanet—Mercury—orbited the yellow star at .39 AU, the Proxima Centauri system was much smaller. Proxima Centauri b orbited its much smaller star at a mere .05 AU. In the Sol system, it would be little more than a permanently molten globule of magma and metal at that distance, even if it wasn't captured and drawn into the star itself.

And Proxima Centauri was an incredibly small system, if indeed it was an independent system at all and not lumped in with Alpha Centauri's binary stars. The star itself was much smaller than Sol—in specific, it only had 14% of the diameter and 12% of the mass, and only 0.17% of Sol's luminosity. The temperature of its surface was also 2500 degrees Kelvin cooler than Sol, meaning its solar wind was much slower and lacked the power of the star that humanity was born under.

With all of that taken into account, the entire heliosphere around it was not only much more calm than in the Sol system, but also much smaller; it was only 30 AU on average between the red dwarf and its heliopause, compared to Sol's 100 AU average.

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"Proxima Centauri b is our eventual goal, and our responsibility," Commander Takahashi said. She was briefing the exploration team that would be joining her in first-footing the planet; the lucky person who had been randomly selected to be the actual first human to set foot on the planet had been detached from the crew of the TFS Avenger and seconded to the TES Farsight's crew, much to their envy.

There wasn't a single person in the entire Proxima task force that didn't want to be in the young man's place, and anyone who said otherwise would be lying. But at least there would be something to be said about being the first exploration team to land on the planet... right?

"Yes, ma'am!" the people being briefed chorused, a bit louder than was perhaps absolutely necessary, but given their general excitement, it could be excused as an overabundance of enthusiasm.

"Then..." the commander looked around the large VR briefing room everyone was in, "you." She pointed to the lucky first-

footer, Ordinary Crewman Lance Parker. "Stand up and give us a briefing on Proxima Centauri b."

She was perhaps being unfair to the man, but she was only human and felt a little bitter about not being the first-footer by right of her rank and position.

“Yes, Ma’am,” OC Parker said as he stood, then began regurgitating the information contained in the data file on the Proxima Centauri system. “To understand Proxima Centauri b, we first have to begin with the system it inhabits and the star it orbits. Proxima Centauri is a red dwarf star....”

Ayaka interrupted him when his explanation began to falter as he struggled to recall more information about the solar system and its sole inhabitant. “Excellent, OC Parker. You’ve memorized our briefing material to an outstanding degree.”

She changed tack and continued, “I’m sure everyone’s also familiar with the precautions we’ll be taking as we approach the planet, so there’s no need to repeat them. You’ve all—

we’ve all—been drilled on it enough in VR, both in training for the mission and during the trip out here. There will be one more drill this evening, ship time....”

The briefing continued for a few minutes before Ayaka clapped her hands and dismissed everyone. They all disappeared from the virtual briefing room in dribs and drabs until she was the only one left, then she tottered over to one of the seats in the room on wobbling knees and fell into it.

The stress of her position was getting to her, but the time to explore had almost arrived and it had brought excitement with it.

Chapter 605 Maybe They Were Just Imagining Things

As soon as the briefing was over, Joon-ho opened his eyes and climbed out of his pod. Throwing his arms over his head, he leaned back and stretched as far as his 163 centimeter body would allow him to and groaned in excitement.

‘This must be what sex feels like!’ he thought as he held the stretch for as long as possible. And given that he had received genetic enhancements, that would have been a long time indeed, but the feeling soon passed as his body adjusted itself. Thanks to those same enhancements, physical feelings of relief came on fast and left faster.

“Mana,” he muttered under his breath. While the pods didn’t have any mana to draw on while the vessel they were on was inside a warp bubble, now that they were traveling at sublight speed, the pods could, and did, draw mana from their surroundings and concentrate it within the pods to provide awakeners with a higher density of mana in which to train.

And he wasn’t the only person who felt like he currently did, either. Every single awakener felt the same as they climbed out of their pods, most of them wishing they could climb right back in and enjoy the sensation for longer. It seemed like Proxima Centauri was a far more mana-rich star system than their home.

“It’s perfect....” Joon-ho continued muttering to himself as he paced back and forth in his quarters. Not only was the overall mana density higher than it was in the Sol

system, but it even had a much higher than usual concentration of gravity mana for some reason!

He climbed into his form-fitting environment suit and put his uniform on over the top of it, then latched his helmet to his belt and trundled off to his duty station. Although he hated how confining the environment suits were, he had to admit that they at least slimmed him down some; now he looked like he only weighed 120 kilograms instead of his actual weight of 180 kilograms.

He hummed the opening theme to One Piece as he trundled down the passageways of the Farsight toward the bridge.

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The TFS Proxima decelerated to a halt ten AU inside the heliosphere of Proxima Centauri. It would remain in place for the foreseeable future, acting as central command for the task force as the Exploration Fleet performed their surveys, collected their samples, and did their investigations throughout the star system. Depending on what they found in Proxima Centauri, they might even continue on to Alpha Centauri and explore the binary system there as well; tiny, stealthy recon drones were already on their way to perform the initial work and mapping there.

Once the cityship came to a halt relative to the star, the lighting in the cavernous holds that contained the Exploration Fleet vessels and their Space Fleet escorts turned red. The ships, which had been held in the vacuum of the Proxima's internal docks, were about to be released.

Huge docking clamps disengaged from each ship and they hovered in place as the stasis shielding surrounding the external docking bay doors was disengaged and the doors themselves ponderously slid back into recesses in the hull. In an emergency, the doors could be blown free, allowing the ships within to immediately sortie, but this was no emergency. And perhaps, feeling a sense of gravitas, the technician manning the docks had purposefully slowed down the doors' opening speed.

Or maybe the crews of the ships were simply impatient and imagining things.

After ten minutes, the doors were fully open and the stasis shields were down. Vessel after vessel sped away from the Proxima like individual drops of water from a dog shaking them off after a bath. Space around the cityship was organized, choreographed, practiced, and pure chaos as the individual components of each squadron in Task Force Proxima found each other, formed up, and headed out on their assigned headings.

One of those groups included the Farsight, which served as the flag vessel for their squadron. Their destination was Proxima Centauri b and they would make no stops until they reached the planet. The squadron would split up and perform close scans of the surface before the first exploration crew boarded shuttles and headed down.

A moment later, the marine guarding the bridge entrance shouted, "Captain on the bridge!"

Everyone sat up straighter at their stations and any ongoing conversation screeched to a halt, but the bridge of a warship

—even the lightly armed cruisers of the Exploration Fleet, which had guns more suited to clearing navigational hazards than other enemies—was no place for people

to be distracted by leaping to their feet and coming to attention when an officer, even one as exalted as the captain of the ship, entered.

“Carry on,” the captain said, then turned to Ayaka. “I have the con, Miss Takahashi.”

“Aye, Sir, you have the con,” she said and rose to her feet with a lithe grace and moved to the executive officer’s station to the left of the captain’s chair.

“Don’t you have some prep work to do for your team, Ayaka?” the captain said to her with a smile.

“Not at the moment, Sir,” she replied, her liquid contralto voice as professional as she was.

“Very well, XO.”

She nodded and turned her eyes back to her display, working on the initial exploration plan for when they reached the planet. She had chosen her team well; all of them, with the exception of the Terrible Teenager, were young and even more fit than could be accounted for merely by being enhanced on the genetic level. Genetic enhancements could only do so much. It still took effort to train a fit and trim body even after receiving them. And since Proxima Centauri b was 17% larger than Earth, it likely had 17% stronger gravity as well.

Thus, while 1.17G wasn’t all that extreme, it would still be wearying after extended periods of time on the planet’s surface, and her crew would need to be fitter than the average person to withstand those long hours on a planet that had higher gravity than Earth and none of Earth’s amenities. Presumably.

The squadron set out toward the planet at 250 gravities of acceleration, with a planned turnover at the halfway point where they would immediately switch to deceleration instead of inserting a coast phase in the middle of the trip. Thus, they would reach their destination in a little bit less than twenty hours.

Chapter 606 Preventing Piss-Poor Performance

An AR hologram of Proxima Centauri b was floating in the middle of the Farsight’s bridge, updated moment by moment thanks to hundreds of close-in survey satellites that the exploration squadron had released. Each of them were specialized satellites, some for weather, some for tectonic activity, some for mana detection, and so on. The information was collated and sent to the squadron flagship by a network of relay satellites so there was no delay in delivering information gathered on the opposite side of the planet from the ships.

They were to be the first to set foot on a planet outside the Sol system, so before that historic event took place, they were determined to know everything they could about the planet in order to prevent as many possible mishaps as they could. Of course, nothing could prevent Murphy from sticking his own fingers into their meticulously prepared pie, but proper planning and preparation prevents piss-poor performance, and they were determined to at least do that much.

The only tool they had at their disposal that hadn't been released en masse were their rovers. Those would remain in the ships until if and when they ruled out the existence of intelligent life; before the satellites finished their data sweeps, absolutely nothing would be entering the planet's atmosphere.

The TEF had already designed a complex operational doctrine for situations like this one, and despite it being the first time it was put into practice in reality, the crews of the exploration ships were operating like clockwork and checking every box. All of them knew the risk of contamination, not only cultural, but biological as well. When the Pinta, Nina, and Santa Maria had landed on the shore of America in 526 BE (1492 by the Gregorian calendar), the explorers from Columbus' crew—and the colonizers that followed from all over Europe—devastated the indigenous population by introducing new pathogens to them. Smallpox, measles, influenza, typhus, and so on... all of them contributed their part in the collapse of societies and cultures across North America, some of which never recovered.

Thus, the first line of text in The Book read, "Something as simple as the common cold can destroy an entire civilization."

As the hologram on the bridge continued being updated, the first survey result was displayed next to it. The composition of the planet's atmosphere had been measured by spectroscopy from the Farsight, and a transit spectroscopy study had just been completed by the weather satellite. It wasn't detailed enough, yet, to determine exact composition ratios, but the gasses themselves had been listed: hydrogen, helium, water vapor, carbon dioxide, methane, ammonia, nitrogen, and oxygen were all present in Proxima Centauri b's atmosphere.

A great, whooping cheer went up on the bridge as the announcement was made. With those gasses, the planet was very likely to have a breathable atmosphere!

The next satellite to report the gross completion of its task was the mapping satellite. Though the image would continue to be refined as it continued orbiting, the hologram had at least been filled out with continents and oceans. The bridge fell silent as everyone turned from their station to look at the hologram, and they received their first shock of 'This Is A Different Planet' from the view.

The vegetation covering the single supercontinent on Proxima Centauri b was a deep, dark green that was practically black. As a red dwarf, Proxima Centauri emitted light primarily in the ultraviolet and red spectrum, and its low luminosity dictated that visible light was far behind ultraviolet. Thus, the plant life had adapted to that; the darker they became, the more ultraviolet light they could absorb.

The oceans—or rather, ocean, singular—weren't spared the difference, either. The planet lacked the polar ice caps that Earth had, which perhaps explained why most of the planet was covered in ocean, to the tune of 88.25%. The rest of it was mostly concentrated in a single, large land mass (around 9.5%), with archipelagos scattered around the rest to make up the difference.

And also due likely in large part to the low luminosity of Proxima Centauri, the water on Proxima Centauri b was a deep, murky green instead of the brilliant blue of Earth's oceans.

"Beautiful," Ayaka breathily said as she gazed upon the hologram of the alien planet. Then she gave herself a mental shake and asked, "Farsight, how long until the data collection is complete?"

{One rotation around the star, Commander,} the AI replied.

‘So eleven days,’ Ayaka thought to herself. If she was a mind reader, she would have heard that same thought—or at least close variations along the same theme—from everyone else on the bridge as well. “Captain,” she began, turning to the Farsight’s captain seated next to her on the bridge. “Request permission to gather mission specifics from the rest of the task force.”

“Granted, Commander,” the captain gravely replied, aware that every word he spoke was being recorded for posterity.

During the trip from Earth, the two had gotten to know each other fairly well. And Captain Dimitrios Marinakis was normally a jovial, high-spirited fellow, as quick with a joke as he was with a wink. But now he was all grave-faced duty and stoicism, likely because he was aware that every action he took and every word he spoke would become part of the official record that historians would study for millennia to come.

“Thank you, Captain,” Ayaka replied, just as formal as the captain.

Formality came easy to her, unlike the captain’s gregariousness. She had been raised strictly by traditional Japanese standards, while the captain had been raised on the wind and waves around the island of Mykonos, playing host to tourist after tourist wanting to play in the famously crystalline blue water that surrounded the island-cum-tourist trap. Perhaps their two personalities, neither of which clashed with each other (Ayaka was too polite to externalize a personality conflict, while Captain Marinakis was too jovial to take offense at much of anything, after all), was the main reason they were so effective as a command team.

Commander Takahashi turned to her display and said, “Pass the request to the scientists. They have ten days, Earth time, to send a prioritized list of what experiments they would like carried out on the planet. Link them into the datanet so they have a real-time updated information base to help them make their decisions and rank them.”

{Yes, Commander.}

“Also, squadron-wide announcement.”

{Recording, Commander.}

“All hands are clear to step down from General Quarters. Condition Yellow across the squadron. I say again, Condition Yellow across the squadron.”

{All hands message delivered, Commander,} the AI reported a few seconds later.

“Very well. Thank you, Farsight,” she said.

{You’re welcome, Commander.}

Chapter 607 Glory vs. Anxiety

607 Glory vs. Anxiety

Eleven days later.

With enough data about the planet—or its surface, at least—the crew of the Farsight had a prioritized list of possible landing areas. Each of them had points of interest that the ship's AI had picked out and the researchers had filtered. They ranged from unique geographical formations, to clusters of vegetation that differed from the plants around it, to possible artificial structures that would require a more hands-on investigation. What none of them included, however, were signs of habitation, so the planet had been deemed safe enough for a single lander to be sent down.

“What we know about the planet is that it's currently a pangea. There is a single, mountainous supercontinent and the rest of the surface is scattered with archipelagos. A bit more than 88% of the surface is water, which our satellite scans were unable to penetrate beyond a certain depth.

“Proxima Centauri itself serves the same gravitational purpose of a moon, which Proxima Centauri b lacks. Or at least we assume that to be the case, as the tides have moved in and out over the past 11 E-days we've been surveying it. However, no matter whether it's aphelion or perihelion, the tides have been steady, so our confidence in the star itself controlling the tides is only about 47%.

“So, today, we will be sending a single lander to the center of the land mass we've tentatively named New Australia, and the crew we send with it—you—will disembark the lander in full environmental protection gear, take samples based on your specialty, and IMMEDIATELY reboard the lander. The time it will spend on the surface is exactly thirty minutes, not a single second more. So you will be back on the lander or you will be left behind. And assuming you survive until our sample research is complete, which isn't a guarantee, when we return, you will be confined to quarters and stripped of surface privileges for the duration of the mission.

“So I suggest, ladies and gentlemen, that you finish your sample collection and reembark the lander early. Am I clear?” Major Viktor Petrovich said. As the leader of the landing crew's armed Marine guard contingent, he was the de facto leader of the mission, since his orders took precedence over any others issued before the lander touched down.

“Understood, Major,” the researchers said in disunison. They weren't soldiers, though, so it was understandable that they made a mess of sound instead of speaking with a single, unified voice.

Ordinary Crewman Lance Parker was with the initial research crew that would soon be headed to the surface. If he wasn't wearing his full environmental gear, he would have been nervously chewing his fingernails down to the quick. But he was, so all he could do was fidget in place; he had already locked down his crash harness so he couldn't even pace!

Fleet landers were designed to carry battalions of troops in full gear with full mission equipment, so there would be plenty of room for pacing... if he hadn't already locked himself down early. When he had first won the random draw to be the first person to set foot on Proxima Centauri b, he'd been beyond excited and could only think about the glory he would come back covered in. But when Major Petrovich had taken him aside and slapped a loaded charge pistol against his chest and told him "shoot them before they eat you", the excitement had faded and become severe anxiety.

But he couldn't back out; not now, and not from... from an honor like this. So all he could do was twitch and fret, and try to stay on the surface for the duration instead of just hop out of the lander then immediately hop back in, where he would be safe. He was just an ordinary crewman and his assigned duty station was the algae farm, for fuck's sake!

Major Petrovich swept his gaze across the waiting researchers and the anxious first-footer, then nodded and said, "Good. Strap in, ladies and gentlemen."

He walked to the lander's cockpit and pounded on the door twice, hard, and yelled, "Good to go, let's get these good people on the ground!"

"Copy that," the pilot replied, then, without bothering to check if his "cargo" had settled in and engaged their crash harnesses, shot out of the boat bay and rocketed toward the ground with 8G of apparent acceleration. Thanks to the inertial sump in the lander, it was actually shooting toward the ground at over a hundred gees of acceleration while only letting eight "leak through" to be felt by the people inside.

The only thing that kept them from rattling around like dried peas in an old-fashioned air popcorn popper was the gravity plating underneath them. It was still a rough ride, though, especially once the pilot initiated a "random walk" evasive maneuver sequence.

Major Petrovich loosed an uproarious laugh and shouted, "It's good to be alive, isn't it, ladies and gentlemen?"

Only a Marine would be crazy enough to enjoy a ride like the one the researchers were on. Only a few of them had had time to strap into their acceleration seats and engage their crash harnesses, and the sound of dozens of people praying to different gods filled the air in the compartment they were in.

Once the lander crossed the Karman Line, however, it rapidly slowed so as not to present a fireball of superheated air around it. The pilot could have all the fun he wanted... outside the atmosphere, anyway. But once his lander had switched to its atmospheric engines and started sucking air instead of vacuum, he had been given strict orders to land as covertly as possible to minimize any disturbance the arrival of humanity caused to the first planet humanity had ever visited outside the Sol system.

The dizzy and nauseous researchers fled to their acceleration seats and strapped into their crash harnesses with a collective frenzy. At least those that could see clearly, anyway; the ones whose helmets had been fouled by last night's dinner were still having a bit of trouble finding their assigned seats.

The pilot's voice came across in the hold. "Eight minutes to ground, passengers. Collect your bellies and strap in. This will be a smooth landing, but I make no promises as to the rest of the journey. The landing may be up to me, but the flight is in god's hands."

With a collective sigh of relief, those with fouled helmets began a self-cleaning cycle of their environmental suits, triggering an ionic sweep that would vaporize anything stuck to the insides of their visors. The smell, however, lingered, and they were currently thanking whatever higher power they believed in for the suits' "plumbing" connections that ensured the ONLY fouled things were their helmets.

Chapter 608 Parkering It

The entire landing was being broadcast, both through external cameras on the lander and helmet cameras from each crew member, for anyone in Task Force Proxima to watch. At least if they were off watch, anyway; people who were on duty were prohibited from watching the broadcast instead of doing their jobs. It drew every eye in the entire task force save only the most dedicated of researchers still on the cityship studying the gravitational tides between Proxima Centauri and the Alpha Centauri binary system.

The altimeter continued ticking down as the lander crept toward the surface at an agonizingly slow speed. One hundred... fifty... thirty... twenty... ten.... The numbers finally stopped creeping down when it reached ten centimeters from the surface of "New Australia". A collective stare state swept over the crew of the task force as everyone currently standing watch at their stations were suddenly given permission to watch the live broadcast. Fleet Admiral of the Red Bianchi had considered the tradeoff between distraction and morale, and had chosen morale.

Thus, nearly a million people had dropped what they were doing and stood or sat where they were, eyes glazed over as they watched the landing in full, glorious augmented reality.

The silent stare state lasted a full minute before the sensors studding the exterior of the lander performed detailed close-in scans determined that the area was "safe" and allowed the ramp to drop from the aft of the vessel. The only thing separating the explorers from the surface of Proxima Centauri b now was a thin ionic atmosphere shield, which had the sole task of preventing atmospheric and microbiological exchange between the interior of the lander and the world outside.

The exterior camera on the aft of the lander panned around and focused on the exit ramp, where someone in an Ordinary Crewman's environmental protection suit was tottering toward the ramp, quivering and swaying from side to side as if he was drunk. He stopped at the top of the ramp and looked down at the pistol that had been stuck to the chest of his suit in a tactical quick-draw holster, then squared his shoulders and stomped on the ramp.

He failed to account for the increased gravity though, as Proxima Centauri b had gravity that was 17% stronger than Earth, and stumbled. Then he failed to recover and rolled down the ramp to the loamy soil in the clearing the lander had come down in.

Commander Takahasi, Captain Marinakis, and Fleet Admiral Bianchi simultaneously facepalmed, almost loud enough to be heard through the vacuum of space. Thankfully, OC Parker would be the first AND last crew member of any exploration mission to be selected via random draw to first-foot an alien planet.

What made the tumble even worse was that OC Parker had already started his “famous quote for posterity” before taking the fateful step. “A new horizon—OH SHIT!” he said, his voice breaking on the final syllable as he passed the point of no return and began his tumble.

He lay there for a moment, then clambered to his feet and cleared his throat. Once again, he took a deep, settling breath and squared his shoulders, then began, “A new horizon, a fresh beginning. Today I take the first... step of... humanity and the Tron—err, Terran—empire and dream of ambition to explore and.... Uh, ahh, fuck it.” His shoulders slumped back to their original posture and he raised the index finger of his right hand straight up above him. “To infinity and beyond!”

It was perhaps less Buzz Aldrin and more Buzz Lightyear, but the moment provided a brief respite in levity to the men and women of Task Force Proxima, who had perhaps been entirely too stressed and anxious as they slowly moved in system upon dropping out of warp for the final time.

The moment didn’t last long, however, as the rest of the explorers swarmed down the ramp—none of them, thankfully, repeating OC Parker’s mistake—and began collecting their samples. In keeping with the tradition of first on, last off, Ayaka finally strolled down the ramp and stopped at Parker’s side.

She patted his shoulder and said, “That was definitely a stylish fall, Mister Parker.”

Lee Joon-ho put his arm around Parker’s shoulders from his other side and added, “Don’t worry, I’m sure the term ‘Parkering it’ will be added to great military sayings in the future, up there with Murphy’s Law and the Seventy Maxims.”

Ayaka almost couldn’t hold back a snort of laughter and was thankful that the armorglass portion of her helmet was polarized so nobody could see the uncontrollable twitching of her lips as she fought against the smile that would have been the point of no return in her loss against the urge to laugh.

While she stood there battling the belly laughs, a whole host of land-restricted rovers and their accompanying flying drones came down the ramp and entered sleep mode. They wouldn’t be activated again until after the lander had departed the atmosphere and returned to the Farsight.

Many would perhaps say they were being extremely cautious, if not overly so. But everyone who was participating in the landing had experienced a brief visit to one of Athena’s many hellworlds, ripped straight from the reaper final training exercise. So their opinion was that anyone else who had an opinion about how careful they were being could go pound sand; the explorers knew beyond a shadow of a doubt just how shitty worlds could be to fragile scientists like them.

Twenty-seven minutes later, the scientists had gathered at the bottom of the ramp again, their sample containers presented to Ayaka for inspection. They were kept in specialized stasis boxes that would prevent any contamination from occurring on either side, and they would be handled aboard specialized lab modules that could—and would—be instantly ejected and self-destruct should any accidents occur.

The inspection was soon finished and Ayaka led the crew back into the lander and it lifted off even as the ramp began closing. It wasn’t returning to the Farsight quite yet, but rather heading out to the ocean to gather samples of the seabed and water from just off the coast, then drop a submersible rover for further exploration.

Once the lander reached its second and final stop in the atmosphere, it released dozens of drones, whose purpose was to gather water and soil samples from directly under the lander, a mere ten feet past the breaking point of that particular beach.

While waiting for the drones to return with their samples, the Henry's Eye sensor on the lander showed an anomaly. On the screen, it looked like mana flows were pulsing around the lander like the roots of a tree, or perhaps the dendrites in the brain. A soft alarm sounded and drew the attention of everyone to the display.

The lander's VI, detecting a possible threat, communicated with the AI of the Farsight and the decision was made to slowly increase the lander's altitude. Then, just a single second later, an alarm whooped throughout the entire transport bay of the lander and it rose as fast as its inertial compensators would allow. The people inside were pressed to the floor, briefly experiencing in excess of 30G and the ringing of tinnitus in their ears mirrored the whine of overstressed inertial compensators that were being held together only by the safety interlocks built into the small landing craft's gravity drive.

Beneath them, a sonic boom exploded so close to the lander that the entire craft shuddered. An enormous gnarled tree root had cracked like a whip mere centimeters away from the exterior of the lander, destroying dozens of sensors, but thankfully leaving it flightworthy.

"What the fuck...?"

As fast as the root had appeared, it disappeared back into the ocean and everything returned to its previous calm. Everything, that is, except the heart rates of the people in the lander and those still paying attention to the broadcast being sent through the system.

Shit had just gotten real for them.

Chapter 609 Unassing the Area

The lander continued rising, though at a speed that wouldn't overtax its inertial compensator. The pilot did, however, continue random walking to the point where someone that wasn't aware of what was going on might think that he was drunk. The vessel sure was swaying and lurching about like he was, anyway.

They stopped briefly at the fifty kilometer mark, since that was the flight ceiling for the unmanned collection drones that had been sent to collect samples from the ocean. Even with gravity drives, there was still a practical limit for machines that small.

Two of the drones were caught by the whipping root tendrils, but the other eight managed to return safely to the lander and deposit their samples in the stasis fields prepared for them. And the pilot wasn't willing to wait around, as it seemed the roots were growing at a speed visible to the naked eye, so he rocketed straight up toward the Karman Line in a maneuver that the marines who normally rode in landers called "unassing the area with a quickness."

They soon reached the Farsight, then slowly crept through the ionic stasis shield that kept the boat bay pressurized. The flight up from the surface had taken minutes; passing through the shielding on the boat bay, on the other hand, took over an hour as they were being incredibly careful to avoid any kind of contamination from the planet. It was easy enough to do—the entire lander was inorganic, on the surface at least, so all they had to do was eliminate any biological material that was "stuck" to the vessel.

Disinfecting the people aboard, however, was a much more complicated and involved process. After all, it was impossible to tell the difference between biological material that was a part of them and biological material that was native to Proxima Centauri b, and the surface of their environmental suits couldn't be 100% inorganic like the surface of a lander could.

Thankfully, that had been anticipated, and problems that the empire could anticipate were already half solved. The rest was simple engineering.

Thus, the suits themselves were disposable, and layered. The passengers of the lander just had to remove the outer layer of their suits and discard them while in a perfect vacuum, then head through a series of decontamination airlocks before the whole mess (NOT including the people, naturally) was ejected from the Farsight to burn up in the atmosphere of the planet below them.

The explorers tottered their way to a designated quarantine area on wobbly legs, or at least most of them did, anyway. The crew members of the Farsight and the security team were quite used to handling high-G maneuvering, so their strides were as sure as they had been before the sudden evasive maneuvers. Of course, there was another aspect as well—the researchers were noncombatants, so they were very much unused to the rigors of combat, both mental and physical alike. They couldn't help but picture what would have happened, had the “root” caught them.

One of the hallmarks of a good scientist was a good imagination, and they were very, very good scientists.

As for the soldiers and crew of the Farsight, well... not much needed to be said for them. They had all been taught in Athena's School of Hard Knocks and Harder Heads, and in comparison to that, what they'd just gone through was just another Tuesday for them.

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Farsight bridge, 36 hours later.

“Bring the crew down to Condition Yellow,” Captain Marinakis said as Ayaka entered the bridge. He motioned her to her seat next to him as he recorded the all-hands announcement.

The Farsight had gone to Battle Stations the moment the first “root” had attacked the lander, then stepped down to General Quarters after the lander returned. Though the Exploration Fleet ships were lightly armed—by imperial standards, anyway—they still had a number of orbital supremacy weapons aboard. Kinetic energy weapons were considered to be just good sense, and their LiDAR system could be weaponized by the simple expedient of providing it with enough power to turn the normally harmless lasers into powerful weapons.

It would burn out the emitters after being fired once or twice, but those one or two attacks would definitely let who, or whatever they hit knowing they had been kissed.

Ayaka shook her head at the captain and gestured toward the briefing room. “The scientists called a meeting,” she said, then ducked into the conference room just off the bridge.

The moment the door closed and she was alone in the room, she leaned against the door and sighed in relief as she slid down it to sit on the deck. Although she had been trained in what to do if she experienced problems on away missions, experiencing it in reality where catastrophes wouldn't

simply be dragged out of a simulation into an after-action report where they ran down everything went wrong, well... that was a different feeling altogether.

She'd had time to decompress and rationally sort through the stress reaction in quarantine, but somehow being on the bridge of the Farsight had just... brought it home to her. She had almost died, and not only her, but everyone she was in command of. It was a weighty burden to bear, and that fact was only just now hitting home for her. Things she rationally knew were becoming things she intuitively felt, and she found herself disturbed by it. So, she took a few minutes to get her headspace in order, then rose to her feet, tugged at her uniform to ensure it was in pristine condition, and checked her facial expression for any sign of stress. Finding none, she nodded to herself and stepped back onto the bridge.

As soon as she walked in, the debriefing began. The bridge disappeared from around her and became a conference room with a long table, at which sat Fleet Admiral Bianchi, accompanied by his intelligence officer, science officer, and the heads of various research departments that had remained aboard the TFS Proxima.

With everyone in attendance, the debriefing began.

"We have decided to suspend landings until further notice," Ayaka said in a grave tone. "As the commander on site, it's my thinking that we need to analyze the information we have and determine just what that 'root' was before we return to the surface. Or at least as closely as we can, anyway. From the satellite ring, we noted an uptick in mana, almost as if the root was a conscious, sapient being, or perhaps it isn't sapient and was just responding to our intrusion like a horse would to a fly that was buzzing around it. The problem, at least as I see it, is that we simply don't know enough to know just how much we don't know."

The participants at the table nodded in understanding.

"As to what exactly happened," Ayaka continued, "I'll let the researchers from the Proxima go over that. They've had 36 hours to go through the raw data while we were in quarantine, so they've got the best idea of exactly what was going on. Miss Standing Bear, the floor is yours."

Ayaka returned to her seat as a Native American woman stood from hers and walked to the head of the table.

Rebecca Standing Bear nodded to the people at the table and delved right into the heart of the topic. "From the data we collected, and until and unless any evidence arises to the contrary, our initial conclusion is that Proxima Centauri b has evolved intelligent life. And that intelligent life has already reached the awakening stage of its evolution. As you can see here from the Henry's Eyes sensors...."

Having begun the briefing with that particular bombshell, her presentation of the data lasted quite some time before she opened the floor to questions.

Chapter 610 SWAGs

Fleet Admiral Bianchi was the first to react. “What makes you say that?” he asked. He wasn’t surprised that they had found life—or rather, sentient life anyway; whether or not it was sapient was still in question. After all, liquid surface water was what made life possible in the first place, and if Proxima Centauri b had anything in spades, it was water.

“This,” Dr. Standing Bear replied, her eyes glazing over as she selected a file to play on the screen behind her. The recording showed the mana pulses detected by the Henry’s Eyes sensors moments before the “root” had attempted to whip the shit out of the lander.

“We’d assumed that the pulses you’re seeing here were simply something like....” she paused, seemingly struggling to find an explanation that would satisfy a layperson while remaining as close to accurate as it was possible to be. “Like the concept of ley lines in a fantasy novel. But when the lander stopped over the ocean—” the video showed the increase in intensity and frequency of the pulsing mana, “—it became obvious that they were functioning much like the ‘meridians’ that we’ve been taught to circulate our own personal mana through.

“We don’t know what, exactly, the so-called ‘root’ was reacting to. It could’ve been reacting to the lander itself, either because it was perceived as a threat of its own or because it was the source of the drones, or it could’ve detected the explorers aboard the ship. Or perhaps it was reacting to their passive absorption of mana, though that’s doubtful since the only awakener aboard was a gravity-aspected awakener and we don’t think the... being... shares that particular aspect. Or perhaps it was simply curious about what the new sensation was and there was no ill intent.” She paused, again seeming to be trying to interpret the data in her report in a way that her audience could understand.

“Regardless of the intent, or whether or not the being is sentient or sapient, we strongly believe that the lander was attacked because it entered the being’s sensory range. It wasn’t until they were over the ocean and low enough to release the sample collection drones that the being responded. We also believe it’s likelier that the being detected the lander rather than the drones. After all, the only drones we lost were ones that were in the path of the initial attack, which could mean that they were small enough to not be sensed, or perhaps too small to trigger a threat reaction.

“As for what exactly the being is... we aren’t sure. It could be any number of things, but the only thing we know for sure is that it, or they, evolved to use the abundant mana in the environment around them. And it’s far more abundant than in our home system. If we were to quantify it, every sample we’ve collected shows about two

hundred times as much raw mana as we have back home on Earth, pound for pound. Everything, from the microbial life to the water, and even the soil samples.

“Every bit of this planet is as dependent on the mana in its surroundings as humans are on the oxygen in Earth’s atmosphere. When we put the samples in a shielded environment that prevented mana from entering, everything seemed to, for lack of a better term, wither.

“That’s all we know and suspect based on the data we have. Anything else will be nothing but SWAGs—”

The other people at the table snickered at the term; everyone knew what a Scientific Wild-Ass Guess was.

Once the snickers died down, Dr. Standing Bear continued, “And we have no way of proving or disproving them until if and when we’re able to gather more data.” She waved her hand and the screen behind her went blank. “Any questions?”

“Did the being evolve on its own, or do you think it’s been engineered?” the head of xenobiology, Dr. David Adams, asked.

“There’s insufficient data to determine either way. We’ll need a sample of the being itself, at a minimum. We have some samples of plant life, but they were all destroyed when we placed them in the mana vacuum, and without that, we have no way of knowing whether or not Proxima Centauri b was engineered to be the way it is.”

“Does the attack mean we’ll be limited to rovers to do all of our research?” another scientist asked.

“For now, and for the foreseeable future, yes. That’s correct. We’ll still need to send manned missions into the atmosphere, to gather the collected samples, if nothing else, but there won’t be any more landings until we determine what exactly the being is, and if it’s hostile or not. Until we know what exactly it is that provoked the response we got from it, we can’t risk any of our science staff.”

“What direction do you suggest we go from here?” Ayaka asked. The Farsight was the exploration cruiser assigned to the surface of Proxima Centauri b, and she was the one in charge of all the landing missions. So she needed to gather suggestions in order to chart her, and by extension, the rest of the exploration crew’s, future activities.

“I suggest we bring the rovers and drones online. If they aren’t attacked, we should continue sending bigger unmanned exploration vehicles in different configurations to see what, if anything, the entity—or, perhaps, entities—respond to. If the being

doesn't react to an unmanned lifter-sized object, then that means it's likely that it was the people aboard the lifter that were detected rather than the lifter itself.

"But the most important thing to do next is to map out the ocean floor as soon as possible. The lander wasn't attacked over the land, so it's likely that the entity, whatever it is, is either fully aquatic or perhaps amphibian."

Silence took over the briefing room, indicating that nobody had any further questions for Dr. Standing Bear. At least not for the moment, anyway; there would definitely be more questions as they continued gathering data on the planet, and the system it was a part of.

"Thank you, Doctor," Fleet Admiral Bianchi said, speaking for the first time since he had kicked off the presentation. He turned to the other people seated at the conference table and continued, "Now the question becomes where do we go from here? We know there's life on the planet, but we don't know if it's sentient or sapient, nor do we know whether or not the attack was made with malice aforethought or if it was a simple reflex action. We don't even know how it detected us, or what about us it detected.

"So, as the head of the escort fleet and the commander in chief of Task Force Proxima as a whole, I want to canvass your opinions."