

Tech System 631

Chapter 631 An Inadvertent Punthe special interview proceeding

“And how is the special interview proceeding?” Ayaka asked, though she knew the process had likely been finished in seconds, or perhaps minutes. Comparing things didn’t take long, after all; not for quantum computers, anyway. The only limiting factor was that there were a lot of items to compare, which would take at least a little bit of time due to the quantity, if nothing else.

{Due to the way Warrant Officer Lee was discovered and some anomalies in his scans, the interview will take extra time as the interviewer implements psychological testing measures to detect and prevent inaccuracies in the process or dishonesty on the part of the Warrant Officer,} the AI faithfully replied. The scope of the empire’s brain and memory scanning technologies had been hidden from it on a classified, encrypted server that it was unable to access in the normal course of things, so it naturally referred to the process as a “special interview”.

“If you use all available computing resources in the Proxima and shut down everything but critical infrastructure, would that speed up the process?” the fleet admiral asked.

{Yes, Admiral.}

“By how much?”

{The process would be completed in approximately 62 seconds, Admiral.}

“Then do it under my personal authorization, confirmation zulu bravo x-ray tango whisky foxtrot...” he ordered, attaching his own vocal confirmation code as shutdown protocol required. Each of the captains had a unique sixty-four character confirmation code for command override protocols that would prove they were in control of themselves when issuing certain orders.

Part of the lessons the empire had learned after the progenitor cult’s downfall dealt with mind control as a fact of life, rather than a conspiracy theorist’s wet dream. After analyzing footage of all the known cult assets that had been forced to comply with Rick Ashley’s mana-backed orders, Nyx had discovered that no matter how perfect their behavior was, there were always subtle tells that indicated they weren’t in complete control of themselves. One of those indicators was vocal tone, stress, and inflection; thus, for orders that could be considered harmful or damaging, the AI that would carry them out had to be able to confirm that they were being made of the person’s own free will.

{Yes, Admiral. Verifying identity... verified. Verifying control protocol... verified. Handshaking... complete. Orders confirmed, Admiral. Proceed with shutdown of all non-critical operating tasks?} the AI asked.

“Proceed, Proxima.”

{Confirmed, Admiral. Shutting down extraneous processes... complete. Shutting down normal processes... complete. Shutting down emergency processes... complete. Shutting down research tasks... complete. Shutting down virtual reality... processing... processing...} the AI reported.

“Just tell us when you’re redirecting your capacity to the special interview, Proxima,” Fleet Admiral Bianchi sighed. Some AIs were better than others and truly earned the moniker of Artificial Intelligence. But others, like the one he had been stuck with on his flagship, was more like an Artificial Stupid and was prone to following the letter of orders rather than the intent behind them.

Five minutes later, everyone on the ship had been forcefully ejected from their VR spaces and the AI reported that all available computing power was being focused on creating a time dilation field in the sole remaining VR space, which housed Joon-ho.

{Procedure complete in 62... 61... 60....}

The countdown continued as the conference room came under a complete silence. Everyone in the room was well aware of the potential that Joon-ho had when it came to causing harm and wreaking havoc, and the next fifty-odd seconds would be the ultimate determiner of his fate. If he was still the same Joon-ho, that would be great; but if he was some sort of quisling, he would be painlessly euthanized and broken down into his component atoms along with everything he had touched, and every deck panel his body had been carried past due to the empire’s rather draconian quarantine and sterilization regulations.

In fact, much of that was being done already, with GEMbots having already dismantled the lander that had brought Joon-ho up to the Proxima, as well as much of the boat bay it had landed in. Everything that he had been in proximity to would be replaced with spares from the fleet’s spares inventory, from the smallest set screw to the largest pieces of deck plating, and everything in between.

{Procedure complete, Admiral,} the AI reported.

“Resume normal operations, Proxima, and display the results of the special interview.”

{Yes, Admiral,} the AI replied, then a hologram snapped into existence around the people in the room and they were transported to the timeless meadow.

The silence stretched as everyone in the conference room watched the events of the last few months playing out from Joon-ho’s perspective. Their implants allowed them to process the scenes much faster than living them, so the file played out from start to finish in just a shade under an hour.

Then it was over, and the spell was broken by the AI. {Playback complete,} it said, the two words snapping the attendees of the meeting back to reality.

“That... I have no words,” Dr. Standing Bear finally said. “I’ll... I don’t even know who to run that past. Xenobotany? Xenoanthropology? Xeno...” she trailed off and her eyes glazed over as she considered the ramifications of the first-contact interaction

between Joon-ho and the trees. She began mentally shuffling personnel from research team to research team, forming the seed of a superteam that would take over as advisors for the diplomatic efforts that would inevitably come.

She barked a laugh and everyone in the room looked at her. “Seeds... never mind,” she said, shaking her head. “I just startled myself with an inadvertent pun.”

Chapter 632 Not on Her Watch

Everyone at the conference table seemed to be focused on a different part of what they had seen in the reconstruction of events. Their concerns were, for the most part, what one would expect from their fields of expertise.

General Frances Robespierre, the commander of Task Force Proxima’s marine contingent, was stunned by the trees’ ability to create life, and on such a grand scale. Though there were only five new species—high elves, dark elves, fae, hill giants, and dwarves—multiple billions of each had been birthed and brought to full maturity in a much shorter time than any human could even give birth to full term infants. ‘Four months.... Four months!’ he thought. ‘It only took them four months to outnumber the entire human population, and that’s just their adults!’

The thought of facing a potential enemy with that kind of ability to raise troops in that quantity was frightening, to say the least.

Commander Bryce Harrison, the admiral’s personal awakener-cum-bodyguard was sitting in a daze with his eyes glazed over as everything he knew about mana and what it could do was being overwritten in his mind. He couldn’t fathom the thought of a human awakener ever becoming strong enough to terraform an entire planet. Not even a small one, let alone Proxima Centauri b, which was almost a fifth again the size of Earth!

Dr. Standing Bear was considering the ramifications of the trees’ demonstrated ability to replicate the biology of other species well enough to not only replicate them, but improve upon millions, if not billions, of years of evolution in such a short time frame. Not only that, they had done... something to separate Warrant Officer Lee’s consciousness and sustain it outside his physical body for an extended period of time. It was a feat that would potentially redefine a number of fields in quantum physics, specifically those that sought to discover whether or not humans actually had measurable, detectable souls.

As for Ayaka, she was caught between laughter and tears that the trees had just happened to catch the one person in the entire task force that would guide them in creating races specialized for something other than their strengths in combat. Perhaps the Terrible Teenager’s obsession with fantasy had come in handy after all!

She didn’t know whether to be thankful for that, or exasperated by the thought of all the sex objects the hormonal teenager would have dreamed up. The thought of a nine-meter-tall giant, naked and aroused, flitted past her mind and she couldn’t help but shudder at the size of his “weapon” in the mental image and what it would do to... someone else, but definitely not her. Nope, she would never be in a position to see a naked hill giant at all, aroused or not.

But it was certainly better, she knew, that the races created by the trees were bred along the lines of suggestions made by a horny teenager than if they had been influenced by a scientist—or even worse, a marine! If THAT had happened, the only solution she could think of would be to have the

fleet back off to a safe distance and bombard the planet with c-fractional spinal-mounted kinetic penetrators until it shattered, then use manipulator fields to send the debris directly into Proxima Centauri itself.

If any of the marine's twisted life forms were to spread around the galaxy, it would be an unrecoverable blow to humanity's prestige and ruin their chance of standing on the galactic stage alongside any other civilized life they met.

"Ten billion..." Fleet Admiral Bianchi sighed. The number... changed things.

What had begun as a mission of exploration with the possibility of first contact diplomacy had just become more complicated by several levels, and his was the head that wore the crown in the Proxima Centauri system. It would take at least a year to send a dispatch back to Earth and receive updated orders in return, so as the de facto plenipotentiary of the Terran Empire, his decisions over the next few hours could potentially steer the entire empire's future direction.

Five light years used to be an unimaginable distance. All of human science had said that it would be virtually impossible to reach that far without a generation ship. But over the past few years, human science had been continually proven wrong and updated with new theories, new technologies, and new fields of study. Fields that had once been known as the home of crackpots, like quantum physics and any branch of science with "xeno" prefixed to it, were now flourishing on the bleeding edge of theoretical science like weeds after monsoon season. And with the discovery of the trees of Proxima Centauri b, those xenosciences would move from the theoretical to the practical.

"Proxima," the admiral said.

{Yes, Admiral?}

"Send Warrant Officer Lee to the meeting room. We've seen through his eyes, now we need to hear his thoughts as we move forward with this new information on hand."

{Immediately, Admiral. He will arrive in approximately fifteen minutes from... now.}

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Fifteen minutes later, Joon-ho arrived and was directed to the front of the conference room to brief the brass on his experiences over the previous months he had been stuck in the timeless meadow.

"Let's begin with the million dollar question," Fleet Admiral Bianchi said. "Are the trees, or their child spawns, hostile to humanity?"

"I don't believe that to be the case, Sir," Joon-ho replied. "They seemed more curious than anything, and when they discovered that we were different from them, they were apologetic and almost... mournful over the loss of life they caused. To them, Sir, individuality is a vague and ephemeral concept. There's only five of them, after all, that are sapient. The rest of the flora on the planet was the result of a failed attempt at creating life, one they didn't repeat for an immeasurable amount of time—"

"Immeasurable, Warrant Officer Lee?" Dr. Standing Bear cut in.

“Yes, Ma’am. They appear to be immortal and time is a very loose concept for them. In speaking with them in the timeless meadow, I got the impression that it was at least one or two geological ages since their last attempt at creating life before they succeeded with the second batch, which will be born shortly.”

Dr. Standing Bear nodded and indicated that she had no followup questions.

General Robespierre asked the next question. “What are the combat capabilities of the new races they’re birthing?”

“I don’t know, General,” Joon-ho replied. “They haven’t been born yet. I think it’s safe to say that they’ll be awakeners from birth, though.”

The general visibly paled at the thought. Humankind only had a few hundred million awakeners of their own, and the thought of a species with ten billion of them terrified him. He had seen the devastation a single awakener was capable of producing and the thought of that many of them would fuel his nightmares until the day he died, most likely.

“They’ll soon have ten billion awakeners then, all birthed and raised to maturity in a matter of months. Did they give you any indication of whether or not that would be a repeatable achievement?” he continued.

“It won’t be, Sir. They used all of the mana that they’d accumulated on and in the planet to create the variety of life they have now, or will have once they’re finally grown. There’s also the terraforming they did with their personal mana reserves, Sir. Unlike us, the trees are capable of storing mana within them and drawing from their own reserves, like other plants that have been mutating back home. But they emptied their tanks, Sir, and won’t be able to repeat the growth process anytime soon.”

The general nodded and fell silent, lost in thought, as he signaled that his questions were done.

The presentation and debriefing continued for a few hours before Fleet Admiral Bianchi called a halt to it for the day.

“Go back and meet with your teams. Poll them and bring a list of questions for tomorrow....”

Joon-ho’s eyes rolled back in his head and his vision turned black. He fell to the floor and began convulsing and frothing at the mouth; everyone in the conference room began panicking, especially Ayaka.

She refused—absolutely and categorically REFUSED—to let the annoyance she had recently realized was like a little brother to her die.

Not on her watch.

Not again.

Not... EVER... AGAIN!

Chapter 633 Did I Just See What I Think I Saw?

Ayaka was the first in the conference room to react to Joon-ho's sudden collapse. "Proxima, dispatch RES-QR response to my location immediately!"

Her words shook the rest of the attendees out of their stupor and a low hum of activity picked up in the background. Dr. Standing Bear muscled her way through the gawking civilians around her and rushed to the fallen awakener's side. She pulled an instrument from the pocket of her traditional white coat and ran it over Joon-ho from head to toe.

"I... what... how!?" she stuttered.

"How what?" Ayaka practically snarled.

"He's suffering from mana deprivation. I don't understand how that could be! We simply aren't made to store mana—it flows through and enhances us, it isn't something we require to function..." the petite Native American woman muttered, shock still clear on her features.

Then her gaze sharpened and she continued, "The trees. The trees, Commander! They must've done something and I think I know what the source of the anomalies we found in his scans is. Quick, help me get him out of this room, it's too tightly shielded and there isn't enough mana here for him to function."

The two women hauled Joon-ho roughly to his feet and threw his arms over their shoulders. "Make way!" Ayaka bellowed, roughly elbowing people who were too slow to move out of her way as she practically dragged both of the people she was linked with toward the hatch leading to the passageway outside the secure conference room they were in.

As the two women disappeared through the door, Fleet Admiral Bianchi smiled wryly and said, "I'll see you here tomorrow, ladies and gentlemen. Come with your questions ready." He turned to his flag captain and continued, "Take us to ten light hours away from the planet, Captain. I'll be on the flag bridge."

"Yes, Admiral," Captain Das replied, getting only a casual wave of the admiral's hand in response as he headed toward the lift with broad strides, his chief of staff and personal awakener flanking him.

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Mobile fleet hospital, TFS Proxima.

Dr. Cho met Ayaka and Dr. Standing Bear at the entrance of the hospital's quarantine ward. "I'll take it from here," she said, gesturing for a RES-QR to take Joon-ho from the two anxious women in front of her.

"Dr. Cho, a moment, please?" Dr. Standing Bear asked.

"A moment is all I've got, Miss Standing Bear. Make it quick," the chief surgeon snapped. It was obvious by the irritation and exasperation in her voice that she wasn't fond of the task force's head researcher.

“He’s suffering from mana deprivation. When the trees rebuilt his body, they incorporated the same type of mana veins and storage that they use in their own. You’ll need to—” Dr. Standing Bear began, but was cut off by the woman in scrubs.

“Don’t tell me how to do my job, Rebecca. I’m well aware of his status and receiving continuous updates. Don’t you have a lab to get back to? If you don’t, then go somewhere else, I’m busy,” Dr. Cho sneered, then turned to go back into the hospital ward she had just walked out of.

“But—!” Dr. Standing Bear began.

“Leave, Rebecca. You’ve always been good at that before, so just be good at it now and leave.”

“But!”

“Fly, AWAY! Get out of here!” Dr. Cho snapped as the door to the hospital shut behind her.

Dr. Standing Bear took a deep breath and muttered the numbers one through ten under her breath, then, having obviously calmed herself somewhat, turned to Ayaka, who was standing there, her eyes glowing with a gentle white light.

As Rebecca watched, Ayaka floated a few inches above the deck and simply phased through the bulkhead and into the hospital ward. The researcher blinked, then rubbed her eyes and asked, “Proxima, did I just see what I think I saw?”

{I’m not sure, Lead Researcher. What do you think you saw?} the AI faithfully replied.

“Never mind, Proxima,” she sighed, then rested her right elbow in the palm of her left hand and brought her right hand up to massage her temples. “It’s been... a day.”

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Fleet Admiral Bianchi strode onto the Proxima’s flag bridge, then called out, “I’ll be in my ready room.”

“Aye, Admiral. Should I...?” the watch officer began, but trailed off as he saw the hatch swoosh shut behind the admiral. He shrugged and turned his attention back to monitoring the fleet’s movement through the Proxima Centauri system, shuttling to and fro as they sent asteroid after asteroid on a near-approach pass to the star itself, where they would be separated into their components by virtue of the different melting points of the metals and silicates contained within them. The star itself was a critical component of the protostellar forge they had spent so long setting up and was only now coming into full operation.

Marco Bianchi removed his uniform jacket and hung it on its designated peg, then set his uniform beret on it. He groaned as he fell into his chair, not because he was growing older and creakier, he mused, but rather out of habit and expectation. The VR pods used by the fleet maintained the

sailors' bodies at their peaks, so there would be no creaky old bones until their bodies reached an age that not even genetic enhancements and engineering could counter and decrepitude finally set in.

He sighed and poured himself a snifter of brandy, then pulled a cigar from the humidor on his desk. He cut it and wet the cut end in the brandy, then clamped his teeth on it and lit the other end with a wooden matchstick.

"Well fuck me sideways," he muttered to himself. "That was certainly an eventful meeting."

The conference room they had met in was a SCIF, and was classified as Secret, Need To Know. The majority of attendees had had no need to know about the security measures that went into the cityship's SCIF, but that had flown out the window thanks to Dr. Standing Bear's ill-timed revelation that the admiral's current headache had collapsed due to mana deprivation. He knew his officers, and once they had time to think, they would realize what that meant.

The SCIF was impermeable to mana.

During the cityships' construction, the emperor himself had visited the shipyards and carved runic circuits into one large conference room in each of them. There was nothing to indicate that the rooms themselves were any different than any other meeting room on any of the cityships, but they were indeed very special. They were shielded from ALL outside influences, be they biological, chemical, electronic, and even—thanks to Aron's shielding—shielded from the mana that permeated the very fabric of existence.

Smoke wreathed his head in a swirling vapor as the admiral puffed on his cigar. He knew that, come tomorrow, he would have some explaining to do.

Chapter 634 A Piece of His Mind

Elsewhere....

Ayaka found herself standing in a bright white nothingness. If she didn't feel a hard surface under her feet, she would have been incapable of telling up from down. But even with that as a reference point, she could see absolutely nothing anywhere around her.

She looked down to see what she was standing on and a part of her mind absently noted that she was naked. For some reason, though, her nakedness didn't bother her in the slightest. Her rational mind knew that it SHOULD be bothered, but for some reason she simply couldn't muster up any fear, nervousness, or anxiety at all, despite everything that had happened over the past few days giving her plenty of reasons for those negative feelings to have latched on to and taken root in her psyche.

Looking past the obvious, it soon became apparent that whatever it was she was standing on was so perfectly camouflaged with the glowing white mist that blocked her view in every other direction that she could see nothing. But the mist itself was so... comforting. It was like being in the arms of her mother, who'd often held her as a child when her father's strict discipline had had her in tears. Or perhaps, she imagined, what it would feel like in the arms of a lover.

The comfort itself made her rational mind scream that she should be terrified—alone, naked, and in a place so far removed from where she had been moments before as she was. But she couldn't. It was as if fear had become an alien concept, something she could rationally know existed, but never experience for herself.

“Hello?” she said in a loud voice. “Is there anybody out there?”

The mist around her absorbed her voice with nary a swirl, much like molten mercury would absorb a grain of sand.

“I'm Commander Takahashi Ayaka of the Terran Exploration Fleet ship Farsight. Please respond—is there anybody out there?” she called out again.

But there was no response, so she simply sat down on the... whatever it was she had been standing on and awaited a response. If she had been brought somewhere, it was done by someTHING, and it thus logically followed that it was for some purpose.

And all she had to do to discover that was simply wait.

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Sickbay, mobile fleet hospital ward 3, TFS Proxima.

Ayaka drifted along, phasing through bulkhead after bulkhead and occasionally crossing passageways in front of dumbfounded sailors, marines, nurses, and doctors. Her brightly glowing eyes stood out against her uniformed figure, which had itself begun glowing in that warm, comforting white light. Occasionally, as she passed a room, an arrow of that glow would shoot out from her and pass through obstacles in its path until it touched, and merged with, an ailing patient. Those whom the light touched were restored to peak condition, all aches, pains, bruises, and scratches caused by whatever had sent them to the hospital completely healed.

The doctors and nurses watching it happen were completely mystified, as was the AI of the Proxima itself.

{Admiral, there is an event taking place in the mobile fleet hospital that you should be aware of,} it reported to Fleet Admiral Bianchi, who was still in his ready room pondering how he should read people in on the emperor's capabilities, or at least a part of them.

The admiral groaned, fragrant cigar smoke escaping his nostrils and causing his eyes to water and a sneeze to build up in his sinuses. “What now, Proxima?”

Instead of verbally answering him, the AI threw a data recording of Ayaka floating through the hospital ward like a ghost, healing people as she passed.

“What the fuck....” Admiral Bianchi was speechless. First, sapient trees, then a warrant officer who didn't have the good graces to stay dead when he died, and now an expedition leader had turned into a ghost? Just what the hell was going on with his command!?

He stood with a groan, then squared his shoulders and pulled his uniform jacket and beret from the peg they were hanging on. As he squared his appearance away, he grumbled, “Someone's gonna

explain just what the fuck is going on if I have to reach into hell and choke them to within an inch of their lives.”

He stalked through the flag bridge and out, headed toward the hospital, where he would give... whatever that thing was a piece of his mind.

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Ayaka finally reached her destination: a medical pod deep within the quarantine ward of the mobile fleet hospital.

“Oh you poor, dear boy,” she said, an echo in her voice as though hundreds of people were softly speaking the words shortly after her. She stroked the pod and triggered the manual emergency release and causing the lid to slide open and away. Inside the pod was the recumbent, sleeping form of one Warrant Officer Second Class Lee Joon-ho.

“What have they done to you, my sweet child?” Ayaka—or whoever was currently inhabiting her body like a meat puppet—murmured. She stroked Joon-ho’s brow, pulses of the bright white light surrounding her penetrating his forehead with each pass of her fingertips.

“Rest now, child. You’ll be fine when you awaken.” She bent over and softly kissed his forehead, then turned and drifted toward the armorglass separating the quarantine ward with the observation station.

She tilted her head to the side and blinked, then gave the observers a brilliant smile and brought her legs up to sit cross-legged in mid-air as she waited for someone or something. It was obvious that she knew she had provoked a reaction, and was simply waiting for it to arrive.

A few minutes later, the hatch in the quarantine ward opened and a squad of marines in full battle rattle stormed in, surrounding “Ayaka” at gunpoint. Following them was the stocky form of one pissed off Fleet Admiral Marco Bianchi of the Terran Space Fleet.

“Who, or whatever you are, you have some fucking explaining to do,” he growled as he stared daggers at the softly glowing form of Commander Takahashi, hovering in the air before him.

Chapter 635 The Source

“Hello, Marco,” whatever was inhabiting Ayaka said in its distant, echoing voice.

Fleet Admiral Bianchi simply stared back, irritation written across his face. “And who, or what, are you?” he said in an overly calm tone.

“I am....” the being wearing Ayaka tilted her head as if listening to a distant sound.

“He wakes.” She floated, still cross-legged in the air, to Joon-ho’s side.

Joon-ho's eyes fluttered, then snapped open and he sat up with a gasp. He looked around for a moment in wide-eyed panic, then, upon realizing where he was, visibly calmed himself. "So I'm not dead yet, am I?"

"No, child. You're still very much alive," Ayaka's passenger said, stroking Joon-ho's hair. "And I am... glad, that you are."

Joon-ho looked at Ayaka for the first time since waking up—really looked—and out of all expectations, merely said, "I'm dreaming, aren't I. Very funny, Proxima. I didn't know you had it in you."

{Had what in me, Warrant Officer Lee?} the AI interjected.

"Wait... this isn't a dream?"

"No, child, you're very much awake," the glowing Ayaka said.

Fleet Admiral Bianchi glared at the glowing figure. "We need to talk," he interjected. "But first, release my Commander this instant!"

"I am she, she is me. We are Laifu. I cannot release her because there is nothing to release. We are one, just as this dear child is one with gravity."

"You're what now?" the admiral snarled. "What did you do with Commander Takahashi?" He grabbed the glowing figure by her—its—uniform jacket and pulled hard, but Laifu didn't move.

"Calm yourself, Marco. Ayaka is fine, there was just something I needed to do and I used her hands to do it. But you're right," she said, her voice collapsing in on itself and discarding the echoes until only Ayaka's familiar sound remained. "We do need to have a discussion."

"My ready room, then," the admiral growled, then stalked off on his way to the flag bridge. If it wasn't one headache, it was another! Oh, how he wished they would come one at a time, but such was the burden of command.

"Ayaka" offered an enigmatic smile to Joon-ho, then serenely floated after the admiral.

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Elsewhere.

§Welcome to the source, Ayaka,§ a voice said from somewhere within the mists Ayaka was trapped within.

"Who's there?" she said, leaping to her feet. The unexpected sound had startled her and she felt odd that her heart didn't seem to be beating fit to escape her chest. Then she realized her heart wasn't beating at all.

§Don't worry, you aren't dead. This is your astral body, and astral bodies are the truest representation of the self. You need no heart, no blood, no bone, no flesh here. You only need yourself, and your representation of that self is reflected in your form. Here, form is all that matters. It is not reflected by nor does it reflect function and function is lacking entirely, needing, as you do, only the form.§

It might have been just her imagination, but Ayaka thought she heard a smile in the voice.

§Indeed, Ayaka. Were I to take form and limit myself that way, I would have been smiling.§

“Are you reading my mind?” Ayaka asked, then recalled her training on what to do if she came across a mind reader. In her conscious mind, she began reciting the digits of pi by dividing 22 by 7.

§No, Ayaka. I don't need to read your mind, because I am you and you are me. We are Laifu. We are in the source, child,§ Laifu said.

“Source? What's that?”

§It is the source. The root of my power and the branch. The beginning and the end, and all things between. The source is the source, child,§ Laifu patiently explained.

Ayaka was only more confused by the explanation and decided to switch gears. “You said by taking form, you limit yourself. What did you mean by that?”

§Form does not follow the function, nor does function follow the form. Cause and effect are meaningless in the source. By limiting myself, I move from singularity to singular and cease to exist there in order to only exist here.§

“My head hurts,” Ayaka groaned.

§Impossible. To hurt is a function and function does not exist here, only form.§

“It was a saying, Laifu,” Ayaka sighed. “Would limiting yourself allow you to better communicate with a limited being like me?”

§Yes, and no. You are not limited. We cannot be limited. I am you, you are me. We are we. But yes, perhaps understanding could better be achieved were limitations implemented.§

The mist began thinning, then an instant, a second, an hour, or perhaps an eternity later, dwindled into the form of a humanoid female. She looked like a cross between Hatsune Miku and Deedlit, with long, blue hair in high pigtails that swayed with the movement of her head all the way down to her knees and long ears that tapered to a sharp point sweeping back from the sides of her head. Her face was heart shaped, with high, chiseled cheekbones tapering down to a narrow chin below a small mouth with thin lips. Her nose was pert and turned up at the tip and her phoenix eyes were turned up at the ends. Her eyebrows were thin and perfectly contoured to the shape of her brow.

She was relatively short, at around 151 centimeters tall, and slender, with a boyish, athletic figure, though she was still relatively generously endowed with D-cup breasts; they looked larger than they were, given her overall petite form.

Laifu opened her eyes. “Is that better, Ayaka?” she said with a smile.

“Much. Can you explain things now that you’re... singular?”

“Yes. This is the source, the wellspring of eternity. It’s where our power springs from, the power that your species is only now learning to tap into.”

“You mean mana?”

Laifu nodded. “That is what you call it, yes. Mana. This is where it begins and ends.”

“Am I dead?” Ayaka asked.

“No, child, you’re not dead,” Laifu said, then giggled. “I am the personification of life, of course you’re not dead.”

“So why am I here?”

“I needed Joon-ho to live, and you cared for him.”

“It’s that simple?” Ayaka sneered. Nothing was free, and she was convinced that someone would have to pay Laifu’s price somehow.

Chapter 636 Life, the Universe, and Everything

Admiral’s ready room, TFS Proxima.

Fleet Admiral Bianchi dropped into the chair behind his desk, forgoing even his usual customary groan. “Commander Takahashi—”

“Laifu, Marco. Commander Takahashi is... elsewhere, at the moment. She has much to learn and little time in which to learn it.”

“Fine. Laifu, then. Explain yourself,” the admiral ordered.

“I am life.”

Admiral Bianchi was silent, waiting for Laifu to continue. The silence stretched for a full five minutes before he realized she had “explained” everything she meant to explain. “What do you mean by that?” he asked.

“Exactly what I said, Marco. I am life.”

The admiral had no idea what to say to that, so he just pinched the bridge of his nose. Headaches were coming faster and harder than he could deal with, apparently, and before one was resolved, another was already crowding in to take its place. “Let’s pretend for a moment that I have no idea what you mean by that. Explain it to me like I’m a five-year-old child.”

Laifu tilted her head, lost in thought, then blinked and began, “In the beginning, there was only void —”

“Stop! Stop, stop, stop!” Admiral Bianchi grouched. “Keep it to relevant things.”

“But the history IS relevant, Marco.”

"I don't need the history of life, the universe, and everything, Laifu. I'm not Douglas Adams," he sighed.

"Very well, Marco. I am what you humans refer to as the esoteric mana of life. But you only have a shallow understanding of what that means. How many fingers do you have on one hand?" she asked.

"I don't see the relevance, just get to the point."

"But it is important, Marco. How many fingers?"

"Four."

Laifu blinked, taken aback. "Can you not count?"

"I counted just fine. Humans have four fingers and one opposable thumb. You're not the only one who can be maliciously compliant, lady," the admiral sneered.

"Point taken, Marco. I'll try to take your limited experience and viewpoint into account going forward."

"See that you do. Now, continue, please."

"Just like human beings have five fingers on a hand, there are five of us that rule over all the mana in existence. I am one of those five. I am life."

"What are the other four?" he asked.

"You should know how we operate and why we are important, Marco. I will begin with that. All of existence is, and must remain, balanced. So just as I am life and my sister is creation, we have opposites that balance our existence. Life and death, creation and destruction. We maintain the fragile balance upon which all of existence hinges."

"You said there were five, what, or who, is the fifth?"

"Chaos, Marco. Chaos is the fulcrum, the hinge, the point upon which all of existence is precariously balanced."

Admiral Bianchi furrowed his brows; chaos seemed an odd thing to center existence on, to his mind. "But chaos is...."

"Unsteady? Random? Unpredictable?" Laifu finished the thought for him.

"Yes. How can something so unsteady be what 'all of existence' depends on?"

"Have you heard of chaos theory, Marco?"

"Isn't that like the butterfly effect?"

“Yes, but not completely. Chaos theory merely states that outcomes are dependent upon their initial conditions. Chaos was that initial condition that resulted in existence.”

“I... see. But isn't that still too random and unstable to act as a balance point?”

“No. A chaotic system is one that only appears disordered and random on the surface, but is underpinned by a very strict underlying pattern and governed by a set of deterministic laws. You mentioned the butterfly effect, and that is an excellent example. If a butterfly flaps its wings here,” Laifu gestured and a visual of Proxima Centauri b appeared in mid-air, formed of mana instead of the empire's holographic or augmented reality technology, upon which was a single blue dot, “a hurricane arises over here.” The globe rotated to show the opposite side, where a swirling red vortex appeared on it.

“I fail to see how that's pertinent, miss.”

“Oh, but it is. Humanity believes that to be random and unpredictable. Complete chance, in other words, but it is not. If the same butterfly in the same position flaps its wings with the same strength at the same time, among many other variables, the exact same hurricane would appear in the exact same place. It is very deterministic, but that determinism is what you perceive to be random chance.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“That ‘random chance’ that you ascribe to the phenomenon is actually just getting one, or more, of the variables wrong.” The globe rotated back around and blue dots began flashing and disappearing from various locations.

“I... see, I think,” Admiral Bianchi said.

“Very good, Marco.” Laifu offered him a brilliant smile. “Your arrival here was that very butterfly flapping its wings, and you have influenced an event that simply never happens. Your... awakener, Joon-ho, was directly involved with the creation of brand new, never-before-seen life, Marco. And that is what attracted my attention.”

A look of comprehension dawned on the admiral's face. “So why are you using Commander Takahashi's body instead of his, then?” he asked.

“Because his body is already entwined with a mana that isn't under my direct, or even my indirect, supervision. So I required another, and Commander Takahashi—Ayaka—was the ideal candidate.”

“Why is that?”

“Because she was meant to be a mother, a wife, a woman, a caregiver, a supporter... She was never meant to be what she is now, a leader, but chaos dictated otherwise. So here she is, and here I am, and now we are bound to one another as Joon-ho, that dear, sweet child, is bound to chaos.”

Admiral Bianchi frowned again. “What do you mean he’s bound to chaos?”

“Indirectly,” Laifu laughed. “The boy is bound to mana that is bound to another mana that is bound to a subordinate conscious mana that is bound to another, that is under the direct control of chaos, one of the Five. Chaos is unique in that it never binds itself directly to anyone.”

“So it’s like a chain of command?”

“Exactly, Marco. That’s exactly what it is. I myself have many other conscious mana that I directly supervise, and that filters down through the ‘ranks’. The universe would not work otherwise, and existence would fall out of balance and cease to be were it to be left unsupervised.”

Chapter 637 Rules With a Capital R

Fleet Admiral Bianchi wasn’t exactly sure he liked the thought of that level of existence being under his command.

Laifu laughed again. “Don’t worry, Marco. Commander Takahashi is under your command. I... am not. I cannot be, for many reasons, foremost of which is that there are rules by which I MUST operate and things I am strictly forbidden from doing.”

“Are you reading my mind?” The admiral’s eyes narrowed.

“No, Marco. I don’t have to read your mind when your worries are written on your face.” Laifu gave him an encouraging smile.

“So what are you forbidden from doing?” he asked, wanting to get an idea of what he could expect once Commander Takahashi was released and under control of her own body again.

“I’m sorry, Marco. I can’t tell you the rules. All laws and rules have... loopholes, shall we say. But trust me, not telling you the rules is the best thing I can do for you.”

“Why is that?”

“Temptation, dear Marco. You would be tempted to find ways around them, and perhaps even succeed.”

“And why would that be bad?” he asked.

Laifu unfolded her feet and drifted over to the viewscreen on the wall of the admiral's ready room that simulated the view outside the Proxima. "Have you heard of heat death, Marco?" she asked, her voice suddenly grave.

"How does heat death relate to temptation?" he replied.

"Entropy, Marco. Entropy. Every rule the Five labor under is directly aimed at preventing, delaying, reducing, and combating entropy. And entropy is what will eventually lead to the death of everything and the unraveling of the fragile skein of thread that is existence." She smiled, a bit sadly.

"So you're saying that, every time you break—" the admiral began, but was interrupted.

"Or bend, Marco. Especially bend. Bending the rules is sometimes, or perhaps even most times, worse than breaking them outright."

"Okay... so every time you break, or bend, a rule, entropy creeps in?"

"Not exactly, Marco, but close. Entropy does not, by itself, exist. It cannot exist, not on its own. If there is no order, there can never be entropy. Entropy exists because order exists, and the converse is also true. Order exists in order to combat entropy."

"So it's like the chicken and the egg argument?"

"Not exactly. More like the ouroboros, or at least what it has come to symbolize."

"An endless cycle of beginnings and endings?"

"In part, yes, but also so much more. It symbolizes unity and wholeness, self-sufficiency and introspection, infinity and eternity, and most importantly, duality. Order and entropy are a duality and one cannot exist without the other. But they are also eternal foes—and to oppose something is to maintain it."

"What do you mean by that? Isn't opposition what eventually triumphs over what it opposes?"

"No, Marco," Laifu said with a sad shake of her head. "It's precisely the opposite. The more you oppose something, the more firmly it entrenches itself. Look to your own history for examples. The Civil Rights movement in the United States gave rise to both the Black Panthers and Aryan Nation. The women's liberation movement led to feminism and men's rights activism. And with every generation that split into opposing viewpoints, those viewpoints grew further and further entrenched, dividing society along an ever-deepening and widening gap until it was virtually uncrossable.

"But then you formed an empire, and began to heal the various divisions and schisms which plagued your own society. When I look across your grand fleets that

you've sent out into the vast cosmos, I see men and women of varying identities, ethnic groups, religious beliefs, tribes, communities.... I see many divisions among them, but they are striving to integrate rather than separate. They do not oppose each other, thus the divisions cannot be maintained and the people come together as one."

"I see. So by seeking not to oppose, but to understand, we naturally come together. But I don't see how that's relevant to the topic at hand," Admiral Bianchi said.

"Because it isn't very relevant, dear Marco," Laifu laughed. "We've gotten a little bit sidetracked, but the same can apply to order and entropy. Much like matter and antimatter, the two are complete opposites with nothing in common, so the only thing they can do is annihilate each other when they meet."

"So what you're saying, then, is that if we break one of the rules that govern your actions, we introduce entropy into our ordered system?"

Laifu turned and a brilliant smile spread across her face. "Exactly! You understand it exactly!"

"And that, simply by knowing the rules, we might try working around them, thus bending them—which is somehow even worse than breaking them?"

"Yes! You get it, dear Marco. You get it!"

"How does that work?"

Laifu was slightly taken aback by the question; she'd assumed that Admiral Bianchi understood what she had spent all this time talking about.

"How can bending a rule ever be worse than breaking it?" he continued, pressing the point.

Laifu took a moment to consider how to get the idea across to the admiral, then finally said, "If you live in a house and a water pipe breaks, how easy is it to spot and seal the point of the break?"

"Very easy," Admiral Bianchi said. "But how does that apply?"

"And what if that same pipe had, instead of broken, sprung a small leak? How easy would that leak be to find?"

Marco's eyes flashed with understanding. "I get it. You're saying that breaking a rule is like breaking a water pipe. It's easy to seal the breach when you know exactly where it is. But if a rule gets bent, it's much more subtle and harder to discover. And as you're looking for it, the leak continues dripping water into the walls. But then, if you know exactly where your pipes are, wouldn't you know where to look?"

Laifu laughed. "Indeed, Marco. Of course we know where to look! The thing is, when you're looking for a small leak in a house, that's only a few hundred meters of pipe to look through. And

when you're looking for a small leak in a house the size of existence itself, the search takes quite a bit more time."

"And during that time, more and more entropy is allowed through."

"Exactly! So that's why we can't tell you the rules."

Marco and Laifu continued speaking long into the ship's night, while the others who had been present at the meeting in the SCIF were also busy working in their own specialties, coming up with a brand new SOP for interacting with the new species about to be born, along with contingency plans and questions that would be asked of Joon-ho in order to further refine the fleet's response to the new normal.

Chapter 638 Analysis Paralysis

The next day, TFS Proxima, the SCIF.

Fleet Admiral Bianchi had decided to gather a debriefing question list, considering Joon-ho was incapable of remaining in a mana void for any length of time, lest he risk collapse and death. Laifu had explained his situation the night before during their conversation before returning control of Ayaka's body to her. It had been quite a surreal experience for the admiral, and he was still contemplating the ramifications of Ayaka's new mana attunement. It wasn't every day that you met one of the beings that governed all of existence, after all.

"As you were," he said to the rest of the people in the room, who had stood to attention as he'd entered. "Since Warrant Officer Lee is... otherwise occupied, my chief of staff will be collecting the questions your sections have for him."

Everyone at the table was silent.

"None of you have any questions?" he asked.

"No. We simply don't know enough to know what we don't know, Admiral," Dr. Standing Bear finally replied. "There's no baseline reference we can use to determine what we need to know, so asking anything at this juncture is likely to be a waste of time at best, and send us haring off after wild geese at worst."

"Very well. Then this'll be a short meeting. Last night, I spoke with the being that... borrowed, shall we say, Commander Takahashi's body, and...." The admiral went on to explain what had happened to Joon-ho, as well as sum up what he'd learned in the conversation with Laifu.

"So does that mean..." Dr. Standing Bear began, but trailed off as she realized her thoughts were beginning to circle. Ayaka had awakened completely outside the age range that would allow for awakening, and in such a short time at that. And not only that, she had awakened an affinity to one of the five fundamental forces that governed all of creation—and it was SAPIENT!

She had so many questions they were all jammed up in her head and stuck there, unable to fit through the gate that was her mouth. It was a classic case of analysis paralysis, something she rarely suffered.

“Commander Takahashi, would you mind—”

“No,” Admiral Bianchi interrupted.

“But Admiral, we could learn so much—”

“No, Dr. Standing Bear. Laifu made it perfectly clear that it would not allow Commander Takahashi to become a lab rat, I’m sorry to say.”

Dr. Standing Bear’s shoulders slumped and she seemed to collapse in on herself in her chair.

“Are there any other things we need to discuss?” the admiral asked.

There was no response from anyone around the table, save for a few who shook their heads.

“Very well, then. Commander Takahashi!”

“Yes, Admiral!” Ayaka perked up in her seat and sat at attention, head turned in Admiral Bianchi’s direction and eyes focused on him.

“You are hereby promoted to full Captain, and will be assigned as the head of the xenodiplomacy task force. Warrant Officer Second Class Lee Joon-ho will be seconded to your command. Your primary duty is to act as the connection between the... treefolk... and the empire, and you are to investigate their intentions as well as put together a full dossier on them. This is a discretionary assignment, but the promotion is contingent upon your acceptance of the mission. Do you accept?”

All eyes in the room focused on Ayaka as she pondered the ramifications. On the one hand, she would be promoted out of schedule to full captain... but on the other hand, she wouldn’t get a ship. Instead, her career would pivot to a dirtside billet, likely in intelligence. However, her sacrifice would greatly benefit the Terran Empire and her name would be in history books; she would come home covered in glory, as all Takahashis should strive to do.

After another minute or so of internal debate, she stood and saluted the admiral. “I accept the mission, Admiral,” she snapped in her best Academy Yap.

“Very well. Proxima, make a note in the ship’s log: at this time and date, Commander Takahashi Ayaka is promoted to Captain and will be taking over the xenodiplomacy department of the fleet. She is to be immediately transferred from the TES Farsight to the TFS Proxima. End note.”

{Yes, Admiral.}

“Also,” he continued, “assign her a steward from the pool. Do a full personality matching scan, you know the drill.”

{Yes, Admiral.}

“Very good.” He turned his attention back to the people around the conference table.
“Are there any other orders of business?”

Everyone shook their heads again.

“Very well. Return to your duty stations and prepare for diplomatic support. Captain Takahashi, meet me in my ready room at 1500 hours. And bring Warrant Officer Lee with you.”

“Aye aye, Admiral,” Ayaka replied.

“Dismissed.”

Everyone filed out of the SCIF, still digesting the bombshell that Fleet Admiral Bianchi had dropped on them.

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Admiral’s ready room, TFS Proxima.

Ayaka, with Joon-ho at her side, was just about to palm the door to request entry when it slide aside with a hydraulic swoosh. “Enter,” the admiral said from inside.

The pair walked through the door and Ayaka came to attention and saluted. “Captain Takahashi and Warrant Officer Lee reporting as ordered, Admiral!” she crisply said.

“Sit down, Ayaka,” Admiral Bianchi chuckled. “You’re a captain now, no need for formalities in private.”

She sat in the chair on the other side of the admiral’s desk and looked around at the room. It was decorated in the style of an old tallship from the Age of Sail, all wood paneling with brass accents and a large “window” to the rear of the room. The desk was to the left as she entered, and opposite the desk on the right side was a table, upon which rested the map of the Proxima Centauri system in the style of an old naval chart. On the bulkhead by the door, the admiral’s coat and beret hung from a peg, and behind his desk was an assortment of crystal decanters filled with various colored liquors.

The admiral’s steward entered from a camouflaged door beside the bar. “What would the captain and warrant officer like to drink?” he asked, setting a mug of steaming coffee on the desk in front of the admiral.

“Nothing for me, thank you,” Ayaka said.

“I’ll have a mango juice please,” Joon-ho added.

“Very good.” The steward bowed at a precise angle and, like any good steward, seemed to vanish, his presence no longer required in the room.

“Alright,” Admiral Bianchi said. “We have much to do and little time in which to do it. You two will be headed to the surface tonight at midnight, ship time. So use the next few hours to come up with an initial action plan.”

He threw Ayaka a data file and continued, “Your official orders and requirements are in that file. Read it and ask anything you need to ask for clarification.”

Chapter 639 Mission Possible

Ayaka and Joon-ho looked over their orders, which were incredibly broad. Normally, military orders would provide detail after detail, along with multiple contingencies at every escalation step up to and including planetary destruction.

Thanks to training in the simulation, they even knew what a planet looked like after being hit by one of the spinal-mounted planetkiller coilguns mounted on some of the TFS ships. And they also knew what would happen if even a TES exploration cruiser were to continuously bombard a planet with their spinal-mounted coilguns.

It only took the two a few minutes before Ayaka began asking questions. “Who is going to be assigned to our task force, Admiral?” she asked.

“Whoever you need, Captain. You have full authority and first priority to pick whomever you think you’ll need on your team.”

“What about materiel, Sir? It simply says here that we’ll have ‘full access to any and all necessary resources.’”

“Full access means full access. You even have first priority on the protostellar forge, and if a project is currently underway, depending on its level of completion, you can kick it out of the queue and take its place.”

The weight of the mission was growing heavier on Ayaka’s shoulders by the moment as she continued hearing the dreaded “full support” answers from the fleet admiral. “What about training, Sir? We don’t have many, if any, xenodiplomacy specialists in the task force.”

“Let me put it to you this way, Ayaka. Full access means full access. As long as you can establish a permanent, beneficial connection with the trees, you can have whatever you want. I’ll even authorize a fleetwide connection and stand-down so you can train your personnel at the highest possible level of time dilation in VR. The only, and I stress ONLY, requirement being asked of you is that connection. Understood?”

“Yes, Sir,” Ayaka and Joon-ho chorused.

“Very well. Get to work,” Fleet Admiral Bianchi ordered.

Ayaka and Joon-ho snapped to attention, then headed toward the door. But before they walked through it, the admiral’s voice drifted to them once more. “And one more thing, Captain. You and your team report directly to me.”

Ayaka turned and saluted, then marched through the door, her spine ramrod straight and shoulders back.

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Orders in hand, Ayaka and Joon-ho immediately got to work. The admiral approved their request for three days of fleet stand-down and max-dilation VR training environments, using Joon-ho's memories as the basis for the treefolk representatives. And while that environment was being built, they weren't idle themselves; instead, they were sorting through the dossiers and records of every single member of Task Force Proxima.

With the AI's help, they had narrowed their candidate pool down to a thousand potential members, but the final goal was to only have five diplomats with two squads of marines providing both security and ceremonial details. After all, their negotiations with the trees would be a groundbreaking, epoch-making event in both societies' history books... or whatever the trees used to record their history... if anything was recorded at all, at least.

When they were notified of the training simulation's completion, by unspoken agreement, they both took to their pods in order to continue their work there. Considering the vast number of ships in the fleet, they were able to achieve an 80:1 time dilation rate, which would give them about 8 months of subjective time to build their team and learn the ins and outs, such as they were, of dealing with the treefolk.

Meanwhile, outside of the VR environment, the protostellar forge ramped up to a hundred percent of its capacity, all projects that had yet to enter the pipeline delayed in favor of stocking up brick after brick of raw material.

Something within her told Ayaka that she would soon need as much raw material as she could get her hands on.

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Three days later.

Ayaka and Joon-ho were in a lander, preparing to head back to the surface of Proxima Centauri b. Opposite them were the three people they had finally settled on to join the diplomatic mission: Leigh Ayers-MacDougall, a tall brunette from Australia with an olive tan; George Stefanopolous, a medium-height Greek man with dark, curly hair; and Boris Rustakovya, a tall Russian with blonde hair and blue eyes that looked like he had been chiseled out of a granite cliff, and could carry the rest of that cliff on his back if need be.

Leigh was a botanist and had been poached from Dr. Standing Bear's team, where she served as the head researcher's right-hand woman. In her spare time, she just so happened to be a nyxian agent as well. She had been recruited by the NIS straight out of her master's degree program after a disastrous marriage ended in a catastrophic divorce and was one of the intelligence branch's finest twists... not that she'd found any use for that particular specialty as part of Task Force Proxima, of course, though her personal VR space had caused her ship's AI to put a number of flags in her confidential record.

George had been a lawyer specializing in contract law before signing up to join ARES after his wife had gotten caught up in one of the cultist attacks on Mykonos, where they had been vacationing at the time. When he'd graduated his training, he had been placed as a bosun's mate and worked his way up to the rank of BN2, or bosun's mate second class. Contrary to most lawyers, especially those that specialized in negotiations and contracts, he was a gruff, silent man who spoke little and listened much.

But the oddest of an odd selection of diplomatic members was Boris. Standing well over six feet tall and being almost as wide in his shoulder circumference measurement, at first glance one would quite likely think that he would punch first, then punch later, then punch some more if the first two didn't get his message across. However, that was absolutely not the case; Boris was a rather jovial, outgoing, pacifist vegan. He also held multiple Ph.D.s in specialist fields of psychology and was a practicing ship's psychologist on the TFS Proxima herself. He had been added to the diplomatic mission as its xenodiplomacy specialist, at least insofar as anyone could be considered as such.

Heading up their marine detachment, which the admiral had increased from two squads to a reinforced company of five squads, was Major Viktor Petrovich, seconded from his position as the commanding officer of the marine contingent aboard the TES Farsight. Unlike the others in the diplomatic mission, he had volunteered for groundside duty instead of being poached from other positions in the fleet.

The light in the passenger compartment of the lander flickered from amber to red as the pilot received clearance to launch, and soon after, he executed a textbook combat launch complete with both manual and AI-controlled evasive maneuvers from the moment they left the comparative safety of the TFS Proxima's boat bay.

Chapter 640 Plenipotentiary

The wildly corkscrewing lander entered the atmosphere at combat speed, echoing sonic booms and contrails of moisture in its wake, tinted black and gray by the fireball of superheated air surrounding the craft itself. Soon, though, the smoke, fire, and vapor dissipated as the pilot brought the lander to a sudden halt just a meter above the ground, then smoothly drifted down the rest of the way until the deployed landing skids took up the weight of the craft without a single jostle or bump.

The indicator light in the passenger cabin switched from red back to a warm amber as the pilot's voice came over the intercom. "We're on the ground," the pilot announced to the diplomats. Luckily it was also transmitted directly to their implants, because none of the five members of the diplomatic mission could actually hear the announcement over the sound of their own retching.

"Thank god," Ayaka sighed, then closed her eyes and focused on what she was feeling in her toes to take her mind off her stomach, which was still doing its own form of acrobatics in her belly.

She slowly counted to ten, then opened a comms channel with Major Petrovich. "Establish the perimeter, Major," she ordered, receiving an almost immediate confirmation. The status indicator on her combat helmet's HUD updated as the reinforced guard company of marines rushed out of the lander at full speed and moved to create a fifty-meter-diameter perimeter around the lander.

Five minutes later, the perimeter had been established and an activity baseline set to prevent false alarms. "All clear, Ma'am," the major announced.

"Thank you, Major." Ayaka turned to the rest of the diplomats sharing the passenger cabin with her and continued, "Well, lady and gentlemen, it's up to us now. The future of the empire itself hinges on our actions over the next few hours and days, so let's get to it."

Without further ado, she released herself from her crash harness and forced her unsteady legs to support her as she hustled down the lander's exit ramp where, just a few meters north of the lander, the tree that Joon-ho had been discovered beneath was peacefully swaying to and fro in the gentle breeze.

The five diplomats moved to stand in front of the tree, where they waited for... something. Joon-ho hadn't been clear on how to contact the trees other than simply going to the tree his new body had been nurtured by and waiting. Beyond that, everything was a mystery.

Nothing happened for a few minutes, and Boris turned to Joon-ho. "Are you sure this is what we need to do, comrade?" he asked.

"Well, err... I think so?" Joon-ho replied, a lack of confidence in his voice as he brought up his hand to scratch the back of his head only to be reminded that he was wearing an upgraded Mk. X ARES SLEEK suit, which was two generations improved over the suits ARES troopers had worn during the Last War. "I mean, I'd thought that—"

He was interrupted by a violent tremor shaking the ground beneath him. He stumbled and almost fell, but was saved at the last minute by a dark, almost black hand wrapping itself around his elbow and helping steady him. "It seems your empire's efficiency is everything you told us it was," an amused, feminine voice said from near his ear.

Ayaka was startled by the voice and turned around, looking for the speaker. On the opposite side of Joon-ho from her was a nude woman with her left hand on the teen's elbow. She was slender and athletic, with only the barest hint of breasts and a flat posterior. Her face was slightly, yet exaggeratedly triangular in overall shape and she had wide cheekbones with equally wide-set eyes resting above them, between which was a long, straight nose that rested over thin lips and a sharp, angular chin.

Her skin looked like the local trees' bark, all gnarled and so dark it was nearly black, and the "hair" tumbling down from the top of her head was a mere carpet of vines and moss, somehow knit together in a shape that was suggestive of hair without actually BEING hair. A pair of long, slender ears poked through the carpet of faux hair, running nearly horizontal to the ground and tapering to a sharp point at the tips. As the deep violet hair swayed in the breeze, a careful onlooker would see that it actually separated around the woman's ears like water flowing around a rock.

Overall, her appearance was notably alien and evoked a slight discomfort in the diplomats as they looked at the woman from top to bottom. It wasn't just the alien proportions, which were completely unlike the Golden Ratio—or Divine Proportion—that dictated human appearances. There were also other differences, some subtle and some otherwise. For instance, the "woman's" feet completely lacked toes, and her skin didn't just share the appearance of the local tree bark—it actually was the bark of a Proximan tree!

The woman released Joon-ho's elbow and threw both arms around his shoulders, drawing him in for a close hug. "It's so good to see you again, Joon-ho!" she exclaimed.

"It's good to see you, too, Birch," Joon-ho replied, then reached up and pulled off his SLEEK suit's helmet. "I can't say as though I miss the meadow, but I definitely missed you guys. I think. How long has it been since we last saw each other?"

Birch tilted her head until her ear almost brushed her shoulder, which would be practically impossible for any human to accomplish without snapping their spinal cord. “Not long? Not short? I don’t know.”

“Oh, right. I forgot... time isn’t something you’re good with.” Joon-ho smiled at the Proximan woman, then turned to Ayaka. “Let me introduce you,” he gestured toward Ayaka, “this is Captain Takahashi Ayaka, the leader of the Terran Empire’s diplomatic mission to the Proximan people and plenipotentiary of the Terran Emperor, who has a bunch of titles that would take a long time to recite so I’ll just say that she’s awesome as fuck and leave it at that.”

He grinned at Ayaka and continued, “Captain Takahashi, this is Birch, of the Proximan treefolk, who has no titles and I’m sure is working on coming up with a better name as we speak.”