

59 Hours After the First Round of Interloper Interrogations. UNAFS Perseverance. Hangar Bay.

Lysara

A compromise had finally been reached.

One that seems to have satisfied all parties involved, for both practical gain, and moral imperative.

For the former, we now had a guarantee of cooperation from the alien, one that would most assuredly shed some much needed context as to the interloper's machinations on this world. Once again, I was reminded of the simple fact that xenoarcheology was very much an extrapolative field, one that was limited to the datasets we find buried in the dirt. And no amount of inference, with any degree of xenoarcheological expertise, could ever hope to match first hand accounts of a living breathing being providing vital context, recounts, and clues, that would be otherwise lost or inaccessible from iron and concrete buried in rock and sand.

For the latter, we now had self-directed voluntary cooperation from the alien to continue on with the course of postoperative observation and care Vir had lined up for her. This matter might not have seemed important in the grander scheme of things, but given that we'd directly intervened with the course of this alien's life through emergency medical intervention, it was now up to us to see it through. That was, at least, a sentiment that both of us had in common. Vir on the part of humanity, and me on the part of Vanaran kind.

"So our mystery friend knows of the signal station. No, *more than that even*, she knows enough about it that she seems just as invested as we are in getting a peak of what's inside." I offered whilst leaning my back against the shuttlecraft, feeling nothing but the squishy thermoregulators of my undersuit, and the hard metals of the oversuit. My body attempted, yet failed to find any comfort in the multi-role exo-suit that was clearly designed for humans in mind. I tugged, pulled, and shifted this way and that to no avail, spending my time perpetually trapped in *suit waddle* mode whilst awaiting the arrival of the alien in question.

"That does appear to be the case, yes. Which would mean her presence in the forest might be related to that structure. More than that though, I think it's important to delineate between two possible outcomes right now. One: that this is simply a coincidence, and that we're looking too deeply into things. She's a scavenger on a dying world after all, no offense of course, but seeing a bunker that's for all intents and purposes a *treasure trove* of pre-collapse tech, equipment, and materiel? I'd say that's enough of a motivator as any for any self-respecting wasteland survivor to gun for. Maybe that's her angle." Vir's platform shrugged, or rather, the floating repair droid that took the place of his platform began miming what would've been the physical gestures of his actual primary platform.

A platform which was currently preoccupied with accompanying our alien friend to the shuttle bay.

It was... strange at first, dealing with the realities of working with an AI. There was no doubt in my mind that most would see an AI for their platform first and foremost. That's how it was for me as well. However, as time progressed, so too did my realization at just *what* Vir actually was. And with each passing interaction, I began to intuitively understand the unintuitive. That the AI certainly wasn't limited to his platform, nor could I really see his platform for him. No. Vir was more akin to a spirit, a floating consciousness, one that could inhabit literally anything and any device on the ship.

This made interacting with him without his platform difficult at first. But given the months that had gone by now, this strange and novel form of interaction was starting to become mundane.

"But given our track record... I highly doubt it's that simple." Vir continued, pulling me out of my reverie again as the repair bot dipped its 'head' in frustration. "Statistically speaking, we keep getting into situations where the improbable trumps the probable, where the simplest explanation seems to never be the case. So I'm going to entertain point two: that our mystery friend here is somehow involved in some grander conspiracy with the signal station. What that mystery is, is anyone's guess." The AI's current platform 'shrugged', the movement consisting of the lifting of its forklift-like appendages several meters off the ground. "So take your pick, are we looking at a soap opera where there's some intimate family mystery spanning the ages, with this station at the center of it all? Or are we looking at a centuries-long government conspiracy, with our mystery alien carrying with her some sort of generations-long mission to finally crack the code of this station? Or maybe it's something much more metaphysical than that." Vir shrugged once more. "Who knows, I literally just described the plots of two human space operas that were both relatively popular back in my day, because heck... reality seems to be blending in with fiction with each passing moment."

I didn't know whether the AI was venting, or whether this was another one of Vir's tangential tirades that bordered on the unhinged.

Regardless of what it was, it no longer frightened me as it had in our initial few weeks, where I thought these long winded monologues were a precursor to digital rampancy or some cascade failure of internal logic functions.

"Or perhaps... This might have something to do with the *other* bunker we discovered." I offered, referencing a discovery that we hadn't yet truly delved into.

"Oh, that? I mean, perhaps. But that place is geographically isolated from our signal station. More than that, they have no outwards-facing sensor arrays or communications systems to speak of. I don't know, maybe our friend can shed some light on that bunker. But I doubt it, given the distance between it and the airport she claims to hail from."

“Whatever the case may be, it’s important to note that there’s at least *some* hope of a recovery for this world after the wars’ end.” I offered.

“Oh?” Vir shot back with a cheeky tone of voice, his signature cocky ‘face’ manifesting on the little control console’s interface. A small screen the size of a small PDA positioned awkwardly on the repair drone’s side, formerly displaying the drone’s various statuses. “We’re getting really confident now are we?”

“We’re inching closer towards discovering mysteries that yet lay hidden, Vir.” I offered confidently. “And we’ve just done something that no other mortal has ever done. We initiated discourse with an interloper and survived to tell the tale. Now, this may truly be a result of my loss of a Vuark, but there’s a fire that burns within me that causes me to think that we will somehow have a not-too-insignificant role to play for the conclusion of this whole affair.”

“And yet we still can’t figure out how our alien friend fits into all of this.” Vir chided back once more. But whilst it might’ve sounded like he was pulling the wind out of my sails, these little reality-checks were something that had become a natural part of our friendly banter.

“Hey, I *did* say *inching closer* didn’t I?” I shot back once more, prompting the AI to raise those industrial-grade ‘claws’ towards me, in an awkward attempt at what he referred to as ‘finger guns’, a human gesture that was oh so very mischievous.

“You got me there, partner.”

Soon enough, we were both pulled out of our back and forths by the loud *hissing* of pneumatic doors in the far distance. As Vir’s ‘prime’ platform approached with our wheelchair-bound friend, whose manner of dress most certainly did not match her current choice of locomotion. As in the place of a medical gown that was to be expected, were combat boots and military fatigues. With these already worn-out garments expertly patched with pieces of leather, inlaid with plates of ceramic and metal, imbuing the alien with an aesthetic truly befitting of a post-collapse survivor.

Throughout it all, her hand remained practically *glued* to her chemical projectile launcher, a dedication to personal vigilance that I truly had to applaud.

“A bit convenient that the landing zone you designated is an airport of all places.” I offered in a jocular fashion, the speaker systems closest to the alien relaying those words to her with a slight artificial tinge.

“*Was*, an airport. Emphasis on the *was*.” She corrected darkly, a brooding cloud of pessimism coloring each and every one of her words.

“Ah, my apologies.” I responded intuitively. “Well, regardless, it does look like we should be able to make a relatively clean landing. There seems to be a large enough clearing at the tail end of the runway that we can-”

“No.” The alien interjected. “That’s too much of a risk. Too much distance to be covered out in the open with my friend.” She spoke, as Vir’s prime platform rolled the wheelchair-bound alien into the shuttle.

It was at this point that Vir’s proper platform became my main terminus of communication, and the larger repair drone began slinking away; its purposeful motions now returning to the cold and mechanical movements betraying a return to its intended function.

“Well in that case...” I paused, before bringing up a holographic projection of the local area. A compilation of satellite imagery, telemetry, and local sensor readings courtesy of the drones loitering around the area, were more than enough to provide ample details of the entire airport. I quickly highlighted the control tower, then, towards the balcony that seemed surprisingly intact despite whatever had brought on the collapse and the years of decay that followed. “You said you’d prefer your LZ to be as close to the tower as possible, correct?”

The alien didn’t respond for the longest time, their eyes practically *glued* to the holographic projection, with pupils that were so fixed in their dilation that it looked as if Vir had upped the dosage of one of the many postoperative meds they were currently on.

“Are you okay there, friend?” I sheepishly inquired, prompting the alien to come hurtling back down towards reality as she blinked several times in rapid succession.

“Yes.” She responded, not once addressing what just happened, as she tentatively raised a finger, pointing to the tower, before plowing her hand all the way through its projection and then pulling back just as quickly.

It was clear that this was perhaps her first experience with a proper high-fidelity holographic projection.

I didn’t interject or intervene, allowing her time to become accustomed to the tech, which it was clear she was able to do relatively quickly given the circumstances.

There was always a certain level of... danger to be had when two peoples of disparate levels of technological sophistications met, where ego could manifest in the pride and the hubris of those on the more advantaged end of the spectrum.

It was easy to feel high and mighty when one was in a position of objective superiority, which was why it was important to show respect and humility.

To do otherwise would be to walk the same path as the Interlopers.

Moreover, as the alien quickly showed, that disparity in technology wasn’t at all indicative of a species’ sophistication. But rather, all it really meant was that one simply had the *time*

advantage on the other. More time to develop, more time to advance, more time as a result of the roll of the cosmic dice.

All that advantage was, was just a starting advantage.

“That’s a good idea, but there’s a problem.” The alien finally continued, completing their thought, just as they burst my own little branching reverie. “The elevator inside is broken. I cannot guarantee that my friend will be able to move on his own power for long.”

The translator clearly needed a bit more work, but it was clear that at the very least, the accuracy was there.

“That’s alright. We’ll have some repair drones accompany us.” I responded with a grin. “A simple elevator mechanism can be put in the place of the old one, and we’ll have your friend out of there in short order.”

Evina’s eyes widened at this, but not so much in shock and disbelief this time, but rather in excitement as she nodded approvingly. “Then let’s do it.” She replied with a toothy grin, prompting me to shiver internally in response.

It wasn’t long before we all took our seats, with Vir’s primary platform remaining on the ship. The rear ramp closed with a satisfying *ka-thunk*, and in a matter of seconds I felt that distinctive gut-churning effect of inertial dampeners and onboard artificial gravity stabilizers ramping up, signaling our departure from the ship and all of its various subsystems.

We were now well and on our way, poised directly for the planet.