

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

Lysara

Things had progressed rather well with our alien friend. Moreover, it seemed as if my initial attempts at placating her worries by arming her with her primitive kinetic weapon had managed to bridge that daunting chasm that was trust. This had led to a series of back and forths, with each and every successive interaction progressing our understanding of one another and the circumstances we both found ourselves in by virtue of this unplanned first contact. More importantly however, the constant back and forths had begun to slowly but surely accrue valuable data points that were just, if not more valuable, than any written artifact found on the surface.

This was, once again, a xenoarcheologist's dream. Or more specifically, a xenolinguist's dream in this case.

The whole affair was made even more interesting with Vir on hand. The AI having practically dissected each and every back and forth to the point where he made xenolinguistics a game of advanced mathematics and heuristics limited not by his capabilities, but by the quantity and quality of the data points he was being given.

It was clear he was having a blast with things, if those half-lidded, semi-circle eyes were of any indication.

"I never took you for one to be interested in linguistics, Vir."

"Oh, no, it's not the linguistics in particular that I'm excited about. It's the nature of first contact, of actually meeting a real life alien. *You* were my first, but our friend here is my second."

Another dimension of this whole interaction quickly dawned on me, as the human captain's words once more rang loudly in my head.

Humanity has yet to have made *true* first contact.

Vanarans, namely myself, was in fact their first tentatively successful attempt at doing so.

But even then, that was limited to a sample size of one, which meant there was practically no gross cultural impact that came about as a result of it.

They were, for all intents and purposes completely and utterly alone, save for the interlopers that threatened their very existence.

This meant that their children, their AI, would've had the same data sets to work with. Which meant that first contacts such as these were far beyond the norm as they typically were for Vanarans and any other *hibernative species*, as Vir put it.

They were, after all, awake, whilst the rest of us were asleep.

Either that, or they were *sleepwalking*, a term Vir had used to describe the phenomenon of the interloper's use of Vuark-bound species' trance-like state following the great stalemate.

With all that being said, it took us a few hours until we managed to enter the realm of the spoken tongue. The alien's eyes lit up about the same time Vir's did, as both parties seemed absolutely enamored by the prospect of these real-time breakthroughs in xenocultural studies.

Though as momentous and as groundbreaking as these developments were, the first few back and forths spoken in this new alien tongue, translated live by human derived technologies, were anything but expected.

As only after a few basic questions, came a request, no, a *demand* that I wasn't at all anticipating.

"I need to leave." Our friend announced urgently. "I need to go back, *now*."

"Why?" I shot back almost instinctively, before rushedly adding. "I'm just curious as to the cause for this sudden urgency." I paused, thinking back to her previous question, regarding just how much time had elapsed since she'd arrived. It was then that it dawned that there must exist some time sensitive matter she had to deal with on the planet. "Is there something on the planet that requires your urgent return?"

The alien paused, as if considering her next few words carefully. Her eyes betrayed a certain level of distrust that soon gave way to a tempered resolve. "Yes. And that is why I must leave, *now*." She announced once more, reasserting her point by getting up to her feet...

...only to stumble and fall almost immediately after. Thankfully, I reacted fast enough to prevent another nasty injury, as I held her aloft awkwardly, before gently setting her back on the medical platform.

"It is clear to me that you are in no condition to leave." Vir, surprisingly, finally interjected. Though he made sure to maintain a sort of *neutral* tone and cadence, not wishing to give up his nature as an AI just yet, clearly attempting to ease our newfound friend into the contemporary world. A world populated not just by aliens, but by sapient machines. This latter revelation was feared to be too much for the alien at the moment, especially when considering everything else she had to mentally parse through in such a short period of time. "The injuries you sustained were grievous and severe. Multiple of which were life threatening in and of themselves, but when factored together, would have resulted in a negligible chance of survival even at the height

of your planet's medical capabilities. Your survival was only facilitated by the technical capabilities of our medical center, and the expertise garnered and extrapolated upon by local medical texts. This does mean however that we were forced to utilize more conservative methods and means, remaining within the boundaries of acceptable risks so as to not potentially incur more harm than benefit. As a result, your recovery is aided only with passive assistance to your physiological processes, with no invasive biomedical assistance." Vir concluded.

"In short, we tried our best to not use anything we weren't certain would aid in your survival, as using anything else known to benefit our species-" I pointed to myself, feeling like a fraud having just stolen humanity's technological valor. "-might prove to be at odds with your physiology as we currently know it."

The alien went completely silent upon the revelation, as she sat there, her eyes running over the various pieces of monitoring equipment currently attached to her form. Her right hand however never once relented from that vice grip on her weapon, as if she found some form of solace just by holding it.

"You said I was injured previously, but you didn't specify how." The alien shot back, prompting Vir to produce a holographic screen that listed her various injuries. Thankfully, he didn't go into details that were too gruesome, having just listed the dry medical terms that was far more palatable to anyone outside the medical profession. "Thank you." She responded, going through each one as her eyes went wide at one in particular, the TBI, or Traumatic Brain Injury.

A brief sigh emerged from the alien, as the medical bed she was sitting on automatically preempted her lean, causing a certain level of confusion to manifest on her face. She leaned back anyways after that small shock, as she regarded the both of us with a look of complete and utter exhaustion. "I didn't realize it was *that* bad." She admitted. "So... thank you, for all your help." She expressed candidly, using a single hand to poke and prod at the bandages on her scalp, prompting one of the automatic medical bots to gently remind her *not* to poke at the site of injury. "And I guess that means I get where you're coming from as well, I understand these injuries are severe. Heck, I know medical protocol. Stuff like this usually takes a good week before you're able to get back on your feet. I must be quick on mine because I was still running on adrenaline or something." She admitted sheepishly, though I knew there was more to that statement if her tone was any indication. "So I get your concern, and I get you to abide by protocol." She admitted once more, before trailing off with a despondent, but resolute sigh. "But I can't stay here. Not when I still have someone on the planet that needs me. Listen, I don't know how you guys handle empathy, but where I come from, we put family first above all else." The alien's eyes met with my own, and strangely... managed to evoke a sort of emotional response from the way she dilated her large pupils. "And that means I can't abandon them. Not when they're probably worried sick about me."

I turned towards Vir with a look of concern, the AI however maintained that neutral nonplussed expression that he'd nominally been using throughout most of these interactions so far.

We exchanged a few words, and eventually, I agreed on a compromise.

“I stand by my earlier words.” I began, prompting the alien to not so subtly grip her weapon tighter. “Your presence here hinges on your voluntary admission. Thus, if you truly do wish to leave, I will not stop you.”

This, once again, seemed to cause some degree of shock to manifest on the alien’s face. As if she once again truly was not expecting me to acquiesce to her demands.

The fact of the matter was however, that first contact was a delicate and tentative affair. Trust was difficult to gain, and easy to lose. So I had to extend common courtesy wherever and whenever I could.

It was, after all, the right thing to do at the end of the day.

“Is there a catch to this?” Our guest shot back.

“No catch. I simply request that you acknowledge the risks associated with leaving postoperative treatment early. I will also supply you with the appropriate post-op medication should you wish for it.” I acknowledged, before quickly changing course. “I do, however, wish to bring up another matter. Mind you, this matter is outside the scope of your return. I merely wish to address it now before we return you home. With that being said, I wish to request for your assistance in the following few weeks.”

The alien cocked her head, as if expecting a trap to be sprung.

“As I explained earlier, our purpose here is to locate a certain... point of interest. Considering you were in the same forests as we were, I assume you must have some local knowledge on the area, and on certain *structures* which exist within.”

This seemed to spark something inside of the alien as her eyes grew wide, before shifting to a more questioning glare.

“So you want my help in finding a certain structure?” She shot back, which prompted a single nod of acknowledgement from me. “And if you do find this structure do you... intend on going inside of it?” She continued, as if *excited* by the prospect of a fact we hadn’t yet informed her of.

“Yes.” I admitted bluntly, not wishing to skirt around the issue, not wishing to dance around a topic like the interlopers would’ve done.

It’s a manner of frankness that I believe the humans would’ve appreciated.

A moment of silence descended on us, before the alien finally nodded. “I accept-” Before raising a single finger up. “-but under several conditions.”

I should've been taken by surprise by this, but given everything thus far, this just felt like a natural extension of the smarts that I should've expected from a survivor. "I promise I will at least consider them." I replied non-committedly, entering the 'game' as it were, as it was clear the alien in question appreciated that I still had my negotiating smarts about.

"One, I want to be there with you when you open it." The alien began, prompting a curious perk of a brow from me as I pondered that question for a moment.

Perhaps our alien friend had more to do with the mysterious signal station after all... which meant their aid and insight would prove invaluable.

"Agreed." I nodded promptly.

"Two, I want first pick of the salvage there."

"Agreed, so long as it is not pertinent to our mission." I clarified, which prompted a look of suspicion from the alien, who shrugged it off and went on regardless.

"Three, because *whatever is pertinent to the mission* is vague and leaves a lot of room for interpretation, I want material reimbursement for my services." The alien grinned back. "I want to be paid in tech, materials, resources, food, supplies-"

"-so long as they're deemed to be at or below the height of your civilization's technological capabilities, then yes." I quickly curtailed the alien's rambles before she could go on.

"Weapons are okay?" She clarified.

"Yes. We can even print you more ammunition for that chemically-propelled kinetic accelerator if need be." I pointed at the alien's gun, as she grinned back with fangs bared.

That deep seated fear reared back its ugly head, but only for a split second as I forced it back down quickly.

"And fourth, and most important of all... I want to make use of your medical center." The alien's tone deepened at that point, as it was clear we were reaching a point of negotiation that she'd been building up to all this time.

"For yourself? I assure you, that matter is already-"

"No." She interrupted. "There's... someone else who needs help." The alien admitted, trailing off for a moment as if doubting her course of action, before finally, committing fully to it with a nervous sigh. "I want you to help a friend. A friend who is suffering from something that I can't pin down." She locked eyes with me, at this point, I could *feel* both the hope and desperation

that lay behind those pupils. “You demonstrated that your medical center can work miracles. You were able to save me from injuries that would’ve killed me in any other setting. So I *know* you can help him.”

A wave of feelings washed over me, as I was now faced with a decision that I had only a single answer for. A pause punctuated that request, but only for barely a second as I nodded confidently in reply, and smiled reassuringly in response. “Will that be all?”

The alien’s mouth hung agape, her eye contact never once faltering. “Yes. Yes, that will be all.” She acknowledged, her look of shock quickly shifting to an expression that I hoped to spark more of across the galaxy...

Hope.