

**FAR BENEATH THE
DISTANT STARS**

BRON JAMES

*This is a preview for Far Beneath the Distant Stars
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The monsters are real, though.

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Prologue

23rd January 2163

This will be the starship Endeavour's last communiqué with mission control back on Earth. The final status report from the mission to Lyrae 438b. Nobody is left on board now aside from me. I'm on my own, so many light years away from home on this desolate moon. The rest of the crew are dead, and soon I will be joining them. God save their souls, and mine.

I request that this message, and the entries that follow hereafter, be forwarded to my wife, Emilia, and our children, Christian and Rose. I love you all, and I pray that you can find it in your hearts to forgive me.

I include the rest of my logs from the mission with this, my final entry, in the hope that it will prevent anyone from ever making the same mistakes again. I urge whoever receives this to take note of my experiences, of the fate that befell the Endeavour and all who served aboard her, and to take heed so that the same doesn't happen again. May no-one else be forced to suffer the same fate.

Do not return to Lyrae 438b.

Chapter I

25th December 2162

I awoke from cryosleep at the start of the morning cycle. This was my first experience of being held in stasis, and my first deep space mission, so I didn't know what to expect... Take it from a first-timer: no amount of training can prepare you for the sensation of essentially being brought back to life from a near-death state! The minute I got up, my head was pounding, my limbs felt like rubber and crumpled beneath me as I tried to stand, and my stomach was queasy. When I eventually regained my balance and found my "space-legs" (and vomited nothing but frothy bile) I made my way to the mess hall. The most important thing after awaking from cryosleep is making sure your body is properly replenished and returns to normal as soon as possible. Travelling nearly 500 light-years across the void of space can work up quite an appetite.

The Endeavour is not a large vessel by any means; it's big enough to ferry us safely to Lyrae 438b and back, but the crew compliment is kept to a bare minimum. I hear the Corporation invested a lot of money into this mission, but even their resources aren't limitless (despite the rumours). There are maybe twenty of us on board in total – all specialists in our fields – so the mess hall and recreation areas are relatively small compared to some other long-haul vessels. Nevertheless, by the time I'd reached the crew deck, most of the ship had been decorated festively in honour of the holiday season back on Earth. Christmas coincides with being exactly a week away from our destination, so we all arranged to be automatically awoken for Christmas day, giving us a week to recuperate and enjoy the holiday spirit, even almost 500 light years from home.

It's good to see, after being held in suspended animation for half a decade, that the rest of the crew were up and about and in high spirits. The crew members from the Church of the Cosmic Christ had awoken earlier than the rest of us to set up for the Christmas celebrations. Our favourite meals had been programmed and prepared in the food dispensers, and presents from our loved ones back home were laid out beneath a plastic Christmas tree. It felt like a true Christmas morning. I had an old classic for breakfast, a Full English, which was ideal after waking from cryosleep. Before the advent of

synthohol, this meal was considered a cure for a “hang-over”. The breakfast was nice, but the eggs were somewhat rubbery. It was not as tasty as the way my mother made it when I used to visit her in her country house in the Cotswolds.

The Cotswolds. 470 light years away. I still can't quite get my head around that distance. It's too big to even think about.

After breakfast, we all sat around and watched vids sent from home. Friends and family and loved ones, all wishing us a successful mission, telling us how much they miss us, and how they can't wait to hear about our adventures when we return. There was not a dry eye on board the Endeavour by the end of the viewing. Seeing the recording of Emilia, my wife, and our children Christian and Rose, made me well-up. I can't bear to think how long we're going to be apart, being this far away from the ones I love breaks my heart. I shall cherish the vid of them all, and watch it every so often to feel that little bit closer to them. It'll help keep me going on this long voyage, knowing that when we're finished on Lyrae 438b they'll be waiting for me with open arms and broad smiles.

After lunch (a traditional Christmas dinner with all of the trimmings), we opened our presents. I got a novelty woollen jumper with an astronaut on the front of it from my children, who had written a note saying "to keep you warm in the cold of space." Not quite as effective as an EVA suit, but I suppose it's the thought that counts! I also got a framed picture from Em, of herself and the children. It may not seem like much, but out here, so far away from Earth, it's nice to have a little bit of home, a reminder of what matters most to you, with you. I shed a tear as I stared at the picture of their beautiful, beaming faces. I already miss them so much. By the time I return, so many years from now, my children will be leaving University. Christ...

We played party games and ate and drank all throughout the day. We watched Christmas films and simulations in the holosuite. Although it was far from perfect, it gave us all a little piece of normality out here in the depths of space. Out here, nothing feels normal.

26th December 2162

I met with Scott Harrison over breakfast this morning. Scott and I go way back to the academy, and are now heading up the geological survey team together for the Endeavour expedition. We last properly spoke before we set off on the mission, and although being in cryosleep makes it seem like only the other day, it still somehow feels like we haven't spoken in ages.

We reminisced about our old days back at the academy, when we once dreamed of going out among the stars, exploring new worlds and studying new and interesting planets with entirely alien geological formations. Now here we are, only six days away from setting foot on virgin soil. An uncharted world.

We're like a pair of excitable teenagers.

(Embarrassingly, Scott reminded me of our old catch-phrase in college: “geology rocks.” We were a couple of nerds... Still are!)

29th December 2162

The anticipation is tangible on the Endeavour. We've dropped out of warp and shut-down the Alcubierre drive, and are now cruising at sub-light speeds as we're entering the outer-reaches of the system. For the first time since we awoke from cryosleep, Lyrae 438b is visible. It still only looks like a small shimmer of light from our position, but we can finally see the planet itself. Everyone's now raring to go.

The botanical and geological teams have been briefed on the primary mission objectives. The

astrophysics department is excitedly analysing the sun of Lyrae 438b with great excitement, and stellar cartography are mapping and cataloguing the stars in the local cluster with zeal; some have even started naming some of the stars in the local clusters. There's already a ballot box in the science lab to vote on a new name for Lyrae 438b. So far, Hades and Elysium are the favourites.

The Endeavour's security personnel are still stoic and unexcited about our approach of the planet. I'm not sure why we need a security detail on a research expedition, but I suppose it's better to be safe than sorry.

31st December 2162

It's New Year's Eve. Well, it would be back on Earth anyway. We touch down on Lyrae 438b tomorrow, so maybe we can consider this to be the eve of a new year on this planet too.

Since Christmas, the crew have been undergoing last minute checks and preparations for our arrival, attending mission briefings and detailed plans and objectives for our time on this planet. As a geologist, I don't have to be subjected to much specialist training; obviously we've all been briefed on protocols and standard procedures for exploring a new world, and I know how to adjust to atmospheric variations or different gravitational forces (these were all part of basic training for the Endeavour mission). From preliminary readings, it appears that the planet has roughly three-quarters of the gravitational pull of Earth, so we'll feel lighter than usual, but it shouldn't be too difficult to adjust to the lower gravity.

My objective, along with the other members of the geological team, is to assess the surface structure of Lyrae 438b, study mineral contents of the soil, and acquire samples for further research and analysis. If the planetary composition is within certain parameters, it will be considered a viable world for potential future terraforming by the Corporation. Maybe a human colony will one day settle here? After all, the Mars colony has been going from strength to strength since they started establishing bio-domes for localised terraforming and long-term human habitation.

Tomorrow we first set foot on Lyrae 438b. A new day, a new year, a new world.

1st January 2163

Today marks a new year and a new era of exploration, as the Endeavour first makes contact with the surface of Lyrae 438b. We are the first people to set foot on the soil of this as-yet uncharted world, and I can't help but feel that this moment sets a new milestone in the history of astronomy, and for mankind. I'm honoured to be a part of this moment.

The landing gear first touched down at 0629, and within the hour we were geared up and preparing to venture out onto the surface of the planet. Atmospheric readings show 74% inert nitrogen, 18% oxygen and 4% free CO₂, with traces of other gases. The excited/nervous energy of the crew was palpable as we donned our EVA suits to step out into the planet's atmosphere. The doors slowly began to slide open. My heart was pounding erratically, and skipped several beats when I first laid eyes on the world beyond the doors. The view was breathtaking. Not even the HUD on the inside of my helmet's visor could detract from the beauty of it.

The skies were a dusty magenta, with streaks of vibrant red and orange. The combination of Lyrae 438b's red-dwarf sun and its atmosphere contributed to this impressive and colourful sight. Silhouetted against the fiery sky rose black, rocky, mountainous structures. We'd landed in a relatively flat area, but in the distance the jagged edges of mountain ranges stretched upwards, as black as the depths of space, and almost looked like holes ripped in the sky.

The expedition didn't venture far today, we simply made first contact with the planet's surface and scouted out the local area, and the security teams established a perimeter around the Endeavour. I took some rudimentary soil samples for further study: preliminary analysis shows that the surface is largely composed of igneous rock.

I'm looking forward to conducting further analysis on the samples.

2nd January 2163

Initial analysis of the soil samples of Lyrae 438b show that the planet is primarily composed of igneous rock and other volcanic substances. Surface structure is mostly basalt, with traces of obsidian and rhyolite. Probable lava overlays. There's also a substantial amount of quartz. I even spotted a few outcroppings of large quartzite formations jutting out of small mounds in the ground some yards from the Endeavour.

At the beginning of next week I'll be using the Endeavour's scanning array to further examine the planet's crust. I'm expecting to see residue from millions of years of now-dormant volcanic activity.

While I've been in the lab studying rocks, members of the security team have been dispatched to conduct reconnaissance and map out the surrounding area. There have been no reports of any interesting new discoveries, however I remain hopeful that we may soon be venturing as far as the nearest mountain for further exploration and research. I wish to see more of this new world.

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