

Wrong Number

by strannikov

“There it is again!”

Monroe stepped over to peer over Alice's shoulder at the data monitor. There it was again!

Mount Musk Radio Observatory Operations Officer Monroe Norris put his call through to NASA JPL. “We have a repeat signal from Proxima Centauri, same wavelength, same frequency, same rate of signal sustain as last week's,” he dutifully reported.

In Pasadena, JPL Tech-5 Controller Ambrose Frobisher stepped across the hall to the office of the SLED Mission Manager to report the news. “Intriguing!” the Mission Manager replied.

The Saturn Life Explorer-Detector probe had been closing in on Enceladus for its orbital profile for weeks when the latest series of radio signals from Proxima Centauri resumed—or began. The signals that had raised ET hopes back in 2020 and 2021 had disappeared back in their day beneath the tons of data that had been collected in their initial aftermath with the inconclusive results that had to be reported: those signals had never recurred and their source was never conclusively determined.

Radio signals unambiguously from Proxima Centauri had suddenly begun—or resumed—almost twelve years later, not long after the SLED probe had crossed the orbit of Jupiter. The signals had continued to recur with intermittent frequency ever since. Now as the probe approached Enceladus, the radio signals were repeating with a frequency of occurrence of about every thirty-three hours, which astronomers and astrophysicists could not help but notice matched the orbital period of Enceladus around Saturn. This could be no simple cosmic coincidence.

The wild idea that this could be only a cosmic coincidence was challenged by data analysts keen to discern that the Centaurans must be transmitting radio signals in anticipation of the SLED probe's arrival in the Saturn system.

Hours after the SLED orbital survey profile around Enceladus was flawlessly attained, a junior JPL data analyst was examining the radio transmissions from Proxima Centauri being relayed directly from Mount Musk. He tilted his head at his monitor and exhaled "No." Minutes later, he tilted his head the other way and more sharply exclaimed "No!" Then he began over the next quarter hour simply to stare at the data stream before him, which left him speechless. He could no longer recall the name or title of his supervisor, he was utterly oblivious to JPL reporting relationships altogether. His gast was completely flabbered by what his monitor displayed.

Oh yes, the data stream did signal a radio transmission from the Proxima Centauri system, wholly unambiguously. And even though the signal was timed to coincide with the orbit of Enceladus around Saturn, it had no bearing on the SLED probe itself, which was not equipped with any detector aimed at Proxima Centauri capable of digesting the signal from that star system: so the signal from Proxima Centauri was presumably not being aimed at the SLED probe, no Centauran could possibly be aware that the probe was en route to Enceladus, surely. Surely. Certainly. Right?

Right, which is exactly what the data stream before the junior JPL data analyst was now plainly showing. The radio transmission from Proxima Centauri was in no way being directed at the SLED probe for any purpose whatsoever. But what the data stream on the JPL monitor had begun telling the JPL data analyst was that the radio signals from Proxima Centauri were not being aimed at Earth for terrestrial consumption or analysis, either: the signals were being aimed specifically at Enceladus itself.

—and just as the SLED Mission Manager began receiving reports on the stability of the SLED probe's orbital profile, another JPL data analyst working directly with the SLED team reported an anomalous echo of radio signals that seemed to come off of Enceladus itself, a wholly unanticipated and surprising phenomenon.

The SLED Mission Manager urged the analyst to recalibrate the data for a second analysis, which the analyst immediately commenced.

Meanwhile, the junior JPL data analyst who'd been monitoring the data feed from Mount Musk had wandered, apparently completely aimlessly, down two long hallways and a flight of stairs and then down another long hallway and one-third of a shorter hallway to visit the JPL SLED Mission data analyst: they'd both been hired at about the same time and had both earned their Caltech M. S. physics degrees in the same class. After conferring for almost half an hour, they both left together bound for the office of a third JPL data analyst who, though neither one's immediate supervisor, did possess slight vertical seniority in the JPL hierarchy. The pair then launched a discussion which lasted for another forty minutes while the slightly senior data analyst examined the data that the two junior analysts were reporting.

Meanwhile, all hell had broken loose within the SLED Mission offices: all transmissions to and from the SLED probe were being disrupted by radio blasts of unknown origin. Mission officers of every grade were scrambling to regain contact with the distant probe when the three JPL data analysts arrived at the office of the SLED Mission Manager, who shouted for them to keep out of sight for the next hour.

Mission officers were still trying to regain contact with the SLED probe when the three were finally admitted to the Mission Manager's office. "Well?"

The senior of the three spoke for the trio. "I don't think you'll be regaining contact with the SLED probe, sir, it has been disabled, I think I'm safe in saying."

"By what?" the Mission Manager demanded.

"Well, sir . . . by radio transmissions from the Enceladan-Titan Alliance, apparently. By virtue of their long-standing contacts with the Centauran Empire, they have disabled the SLED probe and are presently leading a Centauran military fleet already well within the orbit of Jupiter and apparently bound for . . . ummm, uhhh . . ."

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