

Neighbor Bees and Slaver Ants

To begin with: neither species is sapient. At least, that's the conclusion that three generations of xeno-biologists have come to. Both species seem to operate on an instinctual level; neither shows any indication of having language, history, culture, or self-awareness. This makes them extremely frustrating to xeno-biologists, because the whole issue of Neighbor Bees and Slaver Ants could be more easily settled if only either species was intelligent.

Neighbor Bees resemble Terran honeybees, only they're somewhat larger, lack stingers, and have green and purple coloration. They naturally gather in communal 'cities' centered around a local tree, where they secrete attractive and ornate 'buildings' and passageways in which they live and travel. Neighbor Bees reproduce sexually, but cooperate with others of their species to raise their pupae communally. The honey that the Bees secrete is neither poisonous nor appealing to humans, but their building secretions make for an excellent weatherproofer and insulator. Spacemen in particular prize the species; Neighbor Bees can be easily encouraged to patch breaks in insulation or wiring, and their larger 'buildings' are an excellent sealant against microleaks. Plus, they're

attractive, consume various substances that can be difficult to filter out in closed life support systems, and even have a lovely hum. Even humans that fear stinging insects swiftly become fond of Neighbor Bees.

Slaver Ants, on the other hand? Well, they'd be poisonous if their mandibles could penetrate human skin, they're ugly (imagine a puke-yellow ant with oozing antennae), they smell bad, they transfer that bad smell to any kind of organic matter in their presence, and they take over Neighbor Bee cities (and then end up wrecking them anyway) by swarming into the Bees' communal nurseries and tormenting the pupae until the Neighbor Bees start showing their submission reflex. Said tormenting is generally done with their poison-flecked mandibles, but a few Slaver Ants will use small twigs, instead. The xeno-biologists worked for years to prove that this was directed tool use, but it just seems to be a reflex found among Slaver Ants whose mandibles aren't long enough to support poison sacs. Slaver Ants otherwise have no effect on their native ecosystem; nothing likes to eat them, and only their short lifespan and low birth rate keeps them from being an ecological menace.

As you might imagine, the first colonists to the planet of the Neighbor Bees and the Slaver Ants quickly intervened

in the conflict between the two species; and you can just **guess** which side they took. There is one small continent on the planetary surface where Slaver Ants were entirely eliminated fifty years ago, and as near as anybody can tell, there were no adverse effects at all from the elimination. Without Slaver Ant attacks, Neighbor Bees just built a few more cities and peacefully lived in them. The area smells better. Pupae are not tortured. Extinction seems ideal, honestly -- at least to scientific laymen.

That Slaver Ants have not yet been wiped out is a testament to Terran respect for the scientific discipline of xeno-biology; a respect that has been fully earned, given that xeno-biology has kept human colonies alive for centuries. The consensus against deliberate extinction in this case is shaky, however. Xeno-biologists are used to having to justify why one or another alien species should be preserved, even when the species in question seems to have leapt out of a human nightmare -- but they're having real problems with this situation, to be honest. Slaver Ants are very awful, and Neighbor Bees are very nice, and anthropomorphizing these two species is apparently high-inevitable.

They're going to have a panel on this at the next big xeno-biology conference, by the way. Naturally, the issue

is contentious. Just as naturally, it's become a proxy fight between a major spaceship construction company (who want to incorporate Neighbor Bees cities in all their new ships) and its rival (who don't care about the Slaver Ants, but do care about letting the first company have an edge). And that's why your team is going to the conference! Don't feel bad if you don't understand a word of it. You're not going to learn anything; you're just there to keep people from doing stupid things. It's amazing how often smart people end up having to be protected from that.

- © Moe Lane. All rights reserved.
- <http://www.moelane.com>
- <https://www.patreon.com/MoeLane?ty=h>