

Each attempt Apricot made to bring Jasmine out of her shell failed. Jasmine's morose demeanor just became deeper as time passed. Apricot had warned her supervisors that Jasmine didn't have what it takes to be a field agent. Now, when the junior agent had been captured, the weaknesses began to tell. Jasmine screamed a high-pitched, ear-splitting siren of a whine demanding that her captors release her. She banged her head against the habitat walls. Then after the first time their captors took her out of the habitat to run experiments she became sullen and suicidal. Apricot could not find any physical trauma on Jasmine's body.

Both agents had been captured under the ledge where they had been observing the Others. Once captured, they were placed in this habitat to be observed. The habitat was a minimalist recreation of their natural environment, spacious and close to normal. The area contained rocks, sand, and a light source that was turned off to simulate nighttime. The mixture of oxygen and nitrogen was just about correct.

The main problem was that their captors still hadn't provided a food supply. Apricot and Jasmine had their food sacs from the start of the mission, but that was three day-night cycles ago and their rations would not last forever. Apricot still hadn't seen Jasmine imbibe anything since they had been brought to this place. The other problem was the temperature of both the air and the water. They were far too warm. Jasmine, weakened by lack of nourishment, stayed as close as she could to the jet that forced in air. That was the coolest part of the cage.

Apricot and Jasmine had been ordered by the Executive Council to scout a nearby sector to verify rumors that beings had come to the planet. The Exo Files that the Mutual Defense and Safety Agency maintained had been dusted off and reviewed to provide the agents with a

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background summary. They contained enough material corroborating sightings to make too good of a case that beings had been visiting the planet sporadically for some time.

Apricot had been with the Agency long enough to have seen Exo Files summaries a couple or three times before. She could tell how the new sheet had been updated since her last mission. Jasmine, on the other hand, was so new she was shocked to see the sheet included a box displaying the number of agents sent on these missions and the number who had come back alive. She was so new it never occurred to her there was no box for the number of agents who returned injured.

Apricot had packed her gear and joined Jasmine in the lift lobby. Reaching the sector was quick. Once up, the two took cover and made their way to a kopje. The rocky outcropping provided just the right height to assess the situation provided they could remain hidden. An overhang gave the two agents just such an opportunity, except it required hanging on with all the strength they could find. And it turned out that wasn't enough. The Others spotted Jasmine's motion when she tried to adjust her position. Naturally, they were too busy safeguarding their tenuous purchase on the rock to have a weapon handy.

Apricot thought it was just her luck she would be captured. Not as one may think though. For so long she secretly hoped this would happen, always putting her name up for duty on these missions. A few others did the same for the same or different reasons. Other agents called them collectively the head cases. Some wanted the glory of dying on a mission after a life not worth living according to most standards. Others simply wanted the glory at any cost. Both sorts were the pessimists whose hubris depended upon transforming failure into heroic achievement.

Most though, the ones like Apricot, had no intention of getting some memorial set in the pavement at headquarters that everyone stepped on. Apricot and her ilk knew and sought the

opportunity to show their mettle if given the chance. She could prove to all society that she was worthy of fame and fortune. Apricot was one of the optimists, though, seeing survival as the real gauge of success.

Aside from the heat, the first artificial night cycle hadn't been too bad until harsh, horrid lights came on all around them. Jasmine freaked out a bit and started her high pitched whines. The captors must have heard the noise and soon dimmed the lights. On that second day, both Jasmine and Apricot were removed from the cage several times. Apricot, a well-trained agent, recorded all she could into memory.

The abductors were gargantuan. Apricot estimated they were nearly 100 times her size. Their living space was extremely hot. When Apricot was removed from the cool climate of the cage, the air around her nearly burned her skin. Every surface she was placed on that first day was searing hot. The abductors must have noticed the discomfort, because on the second day, the surfaces were artificially cooled.

Apricot concluded her abductors were scientists. They used various instruments to measure each limb and the circumference of every part of her body. They placed some type of conducting leads to her body, similar to those used for medical exams, perhaps for the same purposes. Apricot was amazed at how much trouble it was for these behemoths to manipulate the equipment needed to analyze her.

The abductors noticeably had a different number of arms and legs than she did. The arms ended in a splayed set of stubby-ended protrusions the same size as her. Apricot couldn't imagine how difficult it must have been to use them to manipulate objects, particularly fine ones like the prods and rules they had for their analysis.

The captors seemed to have just one head. However, with the protrusions constantly in the way and the angle looking up, she wasn't certain. Regardless, what she saw was immense, oddly shaped, and had some orifices she couldn't quite make out. Everything about the aliens was gigantic.

The laboratory boggled Apricot's mind. She had never seen such large spaces constructed; the rooms were bigger than any whole building Apricot knew of. The Others seemed to use sound waves principally to communicate. Although the wave length was within the agent's hearing range, the decibel levels were off the scale and most definitely damaging under prolonged exposure. Determining if they also used kinetic, tactile, or olfactory communication methods was unlikely given the intruders' size and remoteness. Apricot had tried to communicate with her captors using sound, smell, sight and touch, but to no avail. Somehow, she needed to let these beasts know she was a sentient being so negotiations could begin between the two species.

After the third day-night cycle, after countless, useless attempts at establishing communications, Apricot was returned to the habitat. She dreaded returning knowing that she had left Jasmine in terrible shape, possibly unable to last through the night. This last session with the aliens had taken more time than the others. Apricot both wanted and didn't want to know whether Jasmine's life had ended.

As soon as she was freed from the padded tongs used to place her back in the environment, an unexpected sight caused Apricot surprise.

“Howdy, sister. What's cookin'?”

Apricot's surprise turned to leery apprehension of this new, male specimen added to the Others' collection.

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“My name is Apricot. I don’t know you. What is your name and what town do you come from?”

“My name is Dirk. I’m not a townie. I’m wild and free!”

Well, that explained a lot. Apricot looked over Dirk with disdain. He definitely showed signs of being uncivilized, principally in the scars along his arms and legs and the horizontal gash on his forehead.

The newcomer pointed toward Jasmine, “What’s up with that blob?”

“Her name is Jasmine. She’s very sick.”

“Doesn’t she have a food sac? I mean you two must have been hiking or exploring.” Dirk began to check around Jasmine’s recumbent body. “I doubt these monsters found you in town or else there probably wouldn’t be any town left to speak of.”

Apricot jumped into Dirk’s path. “Leave her alone! This is your only warning. Do not overstep your bounds. I will not tolerate interference with our mission.”

“I knew it.” Dirk appraised Apricot. “You were sent by one of the Councils, probably to initiate first contact or at least provide one more bureaucratic report. Well, screw them. What do I care? I left civilization of my own will and could not care less what happens to your fancy, benevolent society!”

Typical bluster, Apricot thought to herself. Out loud she stated “You have your warning. As for leaving civilization, bully for you. Apparently that hasn’t taught you to be self-reliant since you clearly don’t have any supplies. I can share some of my food.”

Dirk grunted what was likely assent.

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Having laid things out, Apricot reached into her food sac and shared what little she had left. Once the meal was complete, she asked “So, Dirk, what drove you to the wilderness? You have the contempt for society but not the paranoid anger of other runaways I’ve met.”

A little smile appeared on Dirk’s face. Knowing Apricot had been in contact with society’s forgotten told Dirk more than she would have admitted. She wasn’t just any old diplomat or runner. She was with the Agency. “I was a part of your precious society. Then my father was charged with conspiracy against the government. I had no choice, flee or get charged myself. I haven’t seen or contacted anyone for over a year.”

Apricot’s eyes lit up with bemusement and derision. “Dirk, you’re a fool. Flee or get charged means you had a choice. And you chose poorly. There was only one conspiracy charge brought last year, so it must have been the case against your father. He was picked up but soon cleared of all the charges. The investigation proved that he was being set up by a former commercial partner jealous of your father’s success. Your family name was cleared almost before it had a chance to be stained. Maybe if you didn’t run away from problems you wouldn’t land in situations that are far worse, like this one.”

After careful, quiet thought, Dirk looked up into Apricot’s eyes to thank her for the information. However, before he could speak the ceiling of the habitat opened and Dirk was grabbed by the tongs.

Apricot realized she hadn’t checked on Jasmine. The poor thing’s respiration was very shallow. Her eyes were going dark. “Jasmine? Can you hear me? You have to eat something and drink some water.”

Apricot took some water into her hand and cooled it near the air jet’s onrush of air. She placed her hand against Jasmine’s lips. “Here. Drink some water. Drink this.”

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Jasmine was conscious just enough to accept the water offering. “Apricot, what’s going to happen to us?”

“Don’t worry about that now. You have to get healthy in case we have to fight. Show me some of that fighting spirit from your training! Do you think you can eat some food?”

“I can try. Make sure you take it from my sac. Don’t want you to go without. Maybe cut it.”

Apricot did as her patient asked. She cut the food into small pieces and placed a few in Jasmine’s hand. But she couldn’t swallow. Her throat had closed up. The food wouldn’t go down. She choked and coughed. Apricot hurriedly grabbed the water, poured another handful, and let Jasmine drink the tepid liquid from her hand.

“Apricot, will you help me with the ceremony?”

The senior agent looked down at her comrade. This wasn’t the first time Apricot had been asked to perform the death ceremony with a colleague. Still, it was by far the most tragic. There was no sense in what had happened here. Being picked up by these aliens was not necessary. The two agents should be home, enjoying some cool drinks in the shade, not caged and exposed like this, with Jasmine dying.

“Of course I will help, Jas.”

“I have enjoyed our friendship. Thanks for being here for me.”

Jasmine pulled her body up the best she could and recited, “I ask all of our Fathers to pardon my sins. I ask all of our Mothers to purify my spirit.”

“Hear us and make ready.”

“I ask Apricot my friend to direct my soul.”

“Dear friend Jasmine, I direct your soul to the place where it must go.”

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“The time comes. All that remains is the path.”

“Heed me and go. Advance to the gates opening for you. Enter the Promised Kingdom.

Take with you nothing. Leave behind only the good works you have done. Elders of the

Promised Kingdom in the World Hereafter, please accept the soul of Jasmine my friend.”

The ceremony finished, Jasmine laid her head back, a smile on her lips. “Thank you! I think I need to sleep now.”

A short time later, Dirk was brought back to the cage. He was in agonizing pain. Apricot could see that one of his legs had been removed. “What happened?”

“What do ya think happened? The bastards mutilated me. Who the hell are they? What do they want from us?”

“Please, Dirk. Tell me what happened?”

“When they started to examine me, I pulled away. The damn instrument they were using was hot. Fuck! This hurts! When I pulled away my leg broke. They broke my leg off! Then they returned me here.”

“Dirk, I don’t have anything that can ease the pain. I need to stop the bleeding. I’ll get you water in a second. First, close your eyes.”

As Dirk closed his eyes, Apricot ran to the corner of the cage farthest from where the air was coming in and found a suitable rock. She carefully picked it up and carried it over to Dirk. She placed it against the raw wound. Pain soared through Dirk’s body, but soon the hot stone stopped the bleeding. Apricot helped prop him against the wall near Jasmine for him to feel more comfortable from the cooler air jetting out. Then she gave him the food she had cut for Jasmine and gave him some handfuls of cooled water. Dirk fell asleep.

Sometime in the night, Jasmine drifted quietly and painlessly, her last conscious thoughts her contented acceptance into the Promised Kingdom. Dirk woke a few times, sometimes howling, sometimes shaking. Apricot only had what meager water, food, and hope that remained to give him, pathetically insufficient palliative care for someone in shock.

The next day, the aliens peremptorily removed Jasmine's body. A short time later, they came for Apricot. She didn't struggle when they picked her up, even more fearful now of what could happen after Dirk's experience.

Two beings were conducting the examinations. The agent could barely distinguish one from the other, any distinctive features being so far from her vantage point. Their immensity continued to make it impossible to size them up.

Apricot concentrated on every possible means of communication and gave each great effort to be recognized. Initially, she attempted to modulate sounds the aliens could perceive as greetings. Then, she spoke word after word in varying patterns, any one of which might be recognized as speech. She made coordinated arm gestures in attempt to at least let them know she was trying to interact with the monsters. Nothing seemed to be getting through.

From what she could tell, the creatures watched. She repeated a series in which she stood still, moved her arms to indicate she was harmless and wanted peace, and stepped back to bow as low as she could. All the time, she used conciliatory words and begged that she not be harmed. Why weren't they listening?

One of the creatures walked away. Apricot decided to rest. The other alien turned away. The decibel level of the sounds they made when they apparently communicated with one another made Apricot's head ache. The sounds stopped. After a few minutes later, both aliens returned. Apricot stood up. The alien on her left leaned over and placed the wounded Dirk on the metal

floor next to her. He was in a great deal of pain but was wriggling to get away. Loud booming sounds came from above indicating more speech communication. Apricot didn't know what to do or say given the noise, Dirk's desperation, and her own growing fears.

Dirk managed to get to the edge of the metal floor. Just as Dirk was going to throw himself over the edge, an alien grabbed at Dirk with the unwieldy protrusions at the end of one limb. The creature could not moderate its grasp as well as it could manipulate the tongs. A small yelp of final pain came from Dirk as his crushed body fell limp onto the warm surface. Apricot ran over to him.

The researcher looked at his colleague forlornly, "Damn, I didn't mean to do that. I saw the creatures recognized each other and I wanted to see if they would interact. We'll have to get some more specimens."

The other scientist commented, "Notice how the bigger one is trying to comfort the one that's dead? That might be significant. Mark it in your journal."

As the one who had killed Dirk walked away, Apricot yelled up to the other using probably the loudest voice ever used by her kind, "We are sentient beings, you assholes! We are sentient beings!"

The scientist observed his specimen opening and closing an orifice in what looked like taking deep breaths. The thing, barely five centimeters tall and weighing no more than 18 grams continued to breath like this for seven minutes, the four crystal-like eyes near the crown of its

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head rotating independently to assess its environment. It then retracted its front two legs and then back two legs, bending its head down with the arm-like feelers crossing above the eyes.

The scientist momentarily imagined the pose looked like a human surrendering by kneeling, arms on head. The thought passed when he realized he had better get a move on to analyze the dead Martian bug he had named Dirk in his journals. The critters decayed quickly.