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It was the female, Rfinsa, who spoke to Jason the next day concerning the outcome of the council meeting. She was the same height as her colleague Rjebni, but that was where the similarity ended. Rfinsa possessed a self-confidence and haughtiness that Jason found both irritating and attractive. Dressed in a robe of shimmering green, the alien had fuller lips than her male counterpart and an even smaller nose. Her vivid red hair swept back from her forehead in a single copious wave. High cheekbones and rather beautiful large green eyes completed a formidable countenance.

As if to put Jason at ease, she offered the briefest of Gliezan smiles. “The council thanks you for your interest in our space station.”

Jason got straight to the point. “Are we the only aliens on it?”

“The council feels that we must stay with our original plans.”

Jason sighed. Communicating with these beings stretched his patience to infinity. They were, he suspected, inveterate politicians. “To return to Earth with the hybrids,” he summarised. “To communicate with world leaders. To propose joint exploration of the galaxies.”

“To offer technologies way beyond your current understanding. To guide and help you. To create a commune both strong and peaceful.” Her voice had an attractive lilt to it, which Jason suspected stemmed from her femininity.

“Can you tell me more about why the hybrids are necessary?” It was an important question. Probably *the most* important question.

They were alone in the lounge; the other humans were outside exercising, roaming, or looking for the end of the tube. She gestured to a seat, and they sat opposite each other.

“You are aware we do not travel well in deep space,” Rfinsa said. “Our bodies are attacked by the radiation and other cosmic forces. We are not robust. Quite simply, after a while, we prematurely stop. It is unfortunate that through time we have become this way.”

“Our bodies are affected by radiation too,” Jason responded. “We are not immune.”

“You are much better than us,” Rfinsa stated. “Much better. You still have strong physical bodies. You have not evolved beyond them—as yet.”

A look of puzzlement overcame Jason’s face, and he threw out the challenge he had been storing for some time now. “Rkaph came to Earth.”

Rfinsa nodded, a brief jerk of the head. “Over time the *RNasia* mined data from your planet, to and fro, from your moon to your world, to and fro. Never discovered. A successful mission.”

“Successful how?” Jason asked. “Gathering data to know whether we were suitable for hybridisation? Getting to know all about us: our biology, our history, our customs, our politics, our food, even our wars?”

Another brief jerk of the head. “But when the *RNasia* were disturbed on your moon, they took matters into their own hands. We had to resolve the situation. It was necessary for their master to intervene. Rkapth was their master on Earth.” Rfinsa gave a brief and rather strange alien smile. “By being so, Rkapth reduced his life.”

Jason’s throat was dry. He said nervously, “But he was there a long time?”

Rfinsa offered no answer. “To venture galactic distances, the *RNasia* will always need a master. Rkapth controlled the mothership, but his *RNasia* ran it.” She leant forward, eyes shining. “But Rkapth ran the *RNasia*, just as the hybrids will run the *RNasia* on extended voyages.”

Jason was awestruck. *Rkapth controlled that huge mothership on his own!* It seemed impossible. Yet the *RNasia* were completely sentient, and he knew it must have been so.

“So Rkapth would have died anyway,” Jason said, “during his return here or perhaps even on Earth. What was he? Some kind of martyr? A volunteer for the good of Gliezan galactic exploration?”

Rfinsa’s hands circled. “He was what he was. He is in another dimension now.”

“Ah yes,” Jason said. “Your proven afterlife.” A sudden thought struck him. “How did the mothership get back here from Earth? Rkapth could not have piloted it.” *Unless from beyond the grave*, he thought.

“The way to Earth and back to Glieze is known by the *RNasia*. The ship knows it, and the *RNasia* know it.” Rfinsa’s small mouth made a perfect circular shape. “There is always some risk. Thankfully the journey was untroubled.”

“Or we would not be here at all,” Jason said grimly.

Rfinsa did not comment. She turned her head away and looked out of the window. “Let me tell you some more,” she said eventually.

“Before you do,” Jason said, “if we are to join forces, we need to know more about you.” He shrugged. “You know all about us. You have studied us through the ages. We know *nothing* about you.”

Rfinsa cast her deep eyes up to his. “Some long time ago, our scientists made a monumental discovery. There appears to be a fifth-dimensional ordering that links all creation.” She gestured through the window. “Everything out there is connected, and not just by what you humans can see or feel or otherwise sense.”

Jason felt assailed by her stare. “Which means?”

“We think it means all life forms can interact—with some engineering, of course, some manipulations. Beings do not all have an identical biology.” She gestured at Jason and then at herself. “But *we* can be the best of both worlds.”

“So, there are other intelligent beings,” Jason postulated. “Other than our two races.”

Again, Rfinsa did not reply at once, but then simply said, “We must concern ourselves with our two kinds. We must stay with the plan.”

Your plan, Jason thought, *not ours*. “The other spheres. What’s inside them?”

“They are Gliezan and do not concern you. You have my word on that. That is all I can say. You cannot visit.”

“Are you dealing with other life forms?”

“That cannot concern you.” Rfinsa held her arms to her chest. “Please, persuade your colleagues to cooperate. It is really in their best interests.”

Her words felt like a threat. “Please ask the council to reconsider,” he said. “That would be best for all of us.” It was as far as he dared go.

Rfinsa rose. “I will convey the essence of our conversation to the council.”

* * *

The artificial sun was directly overhead when Laura had her second visit from the mysterious *RNasia*. She was at the wall, not far from where she had come across Simon Cordell. Descending swiftly from the sky, the robot landed just two metres away.

This time she held her ground. The creature stared at her from large, dark eyes and pointed to the sky with one membranous wing. It touched the wall with the other arm, three fingers somehow making scratches on the dark surface of the barrier. It scratched again, a total of seven more times. Twenty-four scratches in all. It took a last look into her eyes and soared from her vision within a matter of seconds.

Laura’s heart was pounding. Something was happening that she did not understand, something out of the ordinary. She touched the wall, felt the scratches, and tried to make marks of her own, but found she couldn’t. *Eight by three. Twenty-four marks. Meaning what?*

* * *

Susan Carmody had been keeping an eye on Helena Belmonte, not to monitor her malady but to check on her liaisons with Simon Cordell. This lunchtime she found Helena sitting alone on a small grassy hummock around three hundred metres from the communal building. She approached slowly, gave the young officer a smile, and flopped down next to her. She liked Helena; she had been one of her brightest recruits and was certainly too young for any kind of motherhood, let alone an alien one.

“Did you check your child today, Helena?” Susan asked.

Helena answered, “As always. Though she is no longer a child. None of them are, are they?”

There were fourteen children in the growth tanks, seven male, seven female. Susan wondered how that had been arranged.

“By my dubious reckoning, in eighteen days they will be the equivalent of eighteen Earth years,” Susan said.

Helena looked at her with wide eyes, the sun’s rays bouncing off her golden hair. “Is that significant?”

“Adulthood on Earth, but perhaps it may mean something here, too,” Susan replied.

“You mean they could be released.” The prospect obviously frightened Helena. She was only nineteen herself. She didn’t want a daughter one year younger. She didn’t want any daughter.

Susan measured her words carefully. “I mention this because you may have a role to play in your daughter’s education, in her training for the Gliezan task ahead. The mission back on Earth, if that is to be the outcome of all this.” She still wasn’t convinced, but it suited her current

ploy to believe what Jason had told them.

Helena shook her head. "I can't do that. How can I do that?"

Susan said quietly, "Helena, some of us have noticed you have been spending time alone with Simon Cordell." She didn't actually know whether others had noticed, but the statement carried more weight if there were other witnesses.

Helena took a deep breath. "We just talk a lot."

"He's not rational. He has been through a lot. Please don't take anything he says seriously."

"You sound like my mother," Helena said, a tear springing to her eye.

"Are you sleeping with him?" It was an old-fashioned expression, but the occasion warranted it.

Helena didn't answer. Susan took it as a *yes*.

"The hybrids were taken from us at a very early stage," Susan continued, "painlessly and swiftly, effectively while we slept. None of us laboured. If you become pregnant with Cordell's child, you will certainly labour and for the full nine months. We have no medications of any kind here. Nothing to help you. Nothing to prevent fertilisation. Nothing to assist if there are complications."

"Just twice," Helena said, eyes cast to the ground.

Two times too many, Susan thought. She grabbed Helena's arm. "Promise me you won't do it again." She tightened her grip until Helena looked her square in the face. "If he asks you, say no. If he persists, come to me or Tala. We'll make sure he doesn't bother you again."

Helena looked sad. "I don't think I'm pregnant. Just depressed. I hate it here. I don't feel anything for that girl in the tank."

Susan nodded in sympathy. "I know. It's hard for all of us. You are not on your own, Helena. And you certainly don't need Cordell fawning all over you. That can only lead to disaster." She took the bull by the horns. "He's not forcing you, is he? There's no rape, no violence?"

Helena shook her head. "He's just persistent. And I'm tired and weak."

"I can talk to him if you'd like," Susan said. "I've known a few like him, believe me. Although none as mentally challenged as he is."

Helena stared into the distance. "If you think it will help. I really don't want him around me anymore." Her voice seemed hollow. An empty shell baked by the noontime sun.

* * *

Laura took Jason to the wall just before dinner and recounted the second appearance of her secretive visitor. A fresh breeze was stirring the grass, and dark clouds were filling the sky. Maybe there was going to be one of the rainstorms that the Gliezan station orchestrated now and again. She was sure she was at the right spot, but the scratches were gone.

"Read the message, memorise, and swallow the paper," Jason said.

"What?"

"An old espionage method. Read the message and destroy the message. Covert operations."

“Are you saying the robot is some kind of spy?”

Jason shrugged. “How long was it with you?”

“Seconds,” Laura replied. “A minute at the most, both times.”

In the near distance, they could see what must have been one of the *RNasia* from the garden hovering just above the ground. Jason grabbed his mother’s arm and walked away. The robot flitted closer. *Is it listening?*

“It wasn’t that one,” Laura said. “Or any of the others. It was different somehow.”

“How different?”

Laura frowned, deep in thought. “I wish I could recall. There was something.”

“Size, fingers, head, colour, what?”

Laura shook her head. “What does twenty-four marks mean?”

“What does *twenty-four* mean?” Jason echoed. “I can only associate it with hours in an Earth day. What else?”

“Don’t know,” Laura said, frowning. “It pointed at the sky, then possibly marked an Earth day.” She clutched Jason’s arm. “It can’t mean we’re leaving in a day’s time. Returning to Earth.”

Jason shook his head. “Surely not. Rjebni would have told us that, or Rfinsa. And the hybrids are still in the tanks.” He stroked the wall. “This approach seems more furtive and very, very brief. There must be a reason for that.”

“Somebody’s spy?” Laura said again, repeating the previous thought. “A transient messenger.”

“We can only be here at the same time you were tomorrow,” Jason suggested. “See whether it returns.”

Laura shook her head. “Not you, Jason. It’s picking me out. And, if anything weird happens, you are needed here with the women. In any case, you are trying to get to another sphere.”

Jason grimaced. “That’s already been squashed by Rfinsa. There’s something they don’t want us to see. She essentially threatened us if we don’t cooperate in their original scheme.”

“All the same, better if you don’t come,” Laura said. “I’ll ask Tala Hughes. She’s longing for a bit of excitement.”

* * *

Susan Carmody collared the miner after dinner. He was perched in his usual spot at the lounge window.

“A word, Simon,” she said, grabbing his arm and marching him unceremoniously outside—a textbook Special Forces move. The sky was growing prematurely dark, threatening a downpour, and a pale moon rode the horizon. A whisper of wind stirred the bushes. *Not Earth, though*, Carmody mused as she guided Cordell away from the building.

“Feel free to take me on if you like, Simon,” Susan said, “but remember what I am.”

Cordell just stood there, dithering, perhaps deciding whether to run. *He knows what this is*

about, Susan reckoned. He's wondering whether to deny it all.

"I believe," Susan added, "that you and one of my girls, namely Officer Belmonte, have been behaving inappropriately. That is, you have been having unprotected sex."

Simon lifted his eyes to the sky. "We are attracted to each other. We are mutually compatible."

"You're compatibly scared," Susan responded. "You're lost with nowhere to go." She stepped towards Cordell and rapped him on the chest. "And you, sir, are taking advantage of her."

Cordell started to raise his hand but thought better of it. "It was mutual."

"Mutually self-destructive. A liaison destined for hell."

It was then that Simon made his mistake. Carmody's words riled him, and he lunged at her. He was met by a savage heel to the ribs that floored him, left him gasping for air, and sent agonizing shockwaves into his brain.

"Nothing broken, Simon," Carmody said. "I'm only at fifty percent." She bent down and stared straight into his eyes. "Nothing like the pain of childbirth."

She walked away as Cordell knelt and struggled to gain his feet, then turned to face him again. "Here's a scenario for you. Helena gets pregnant. Our alien friends find out. They don't want an Earth child, so they terminate it. Helena goes through it all again. She's tired, distraught, and useless to them. What do they do? What does she do—live happily ever after?"

Simon's eyes widened, white in the moonlight. He raised one hand feebly and let out a whimper of pain.

"You won't go near her again, will you, Simon?" Carmody said. "Remember you have arms and legs, too. You don't want another accident. Just leave her alone."

"I'm in pain here!" Cordell cried, now standing but bent over, hands on knees.

"Don't be fractious, Simon," Carmody said. "I'm sure the Gliezans will heal you. They might want to know what happened, though. And I'd be delighted to tell them."

Susan glanced at the moon and made her way back inside. *If I wasn't watching him before, she thought, I sure as hell better do so now.*

