

Cellmate

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by Kyle Eggleston

A month had passed since the incident over the Dubor home world. O'Brien had spent that entire month alone in solitary confinement. He was given rations sparingly. A plant root and some water was all he had to eat. O'Brien was in a cold, damp, dark cell. There were no windows to see out of and the door never opened. Food was delivered to the cell via teleportation.

Jack wanted someone to talk to even if it was one of his captors. He was willing to talk to anyone. It had been a long thirty days. Almost too long. Jack wondered what was being done to the crew of the warship. He was concerned about all of them, especially Ambassador Norev.

Worry wasn't doing him any good. He couldn't do anything about it. It's just the way it was. No matter what Jack tried, he couldn't stop.

The cell door opened. A bright light came in through the doorway from the hall. Jack squinted his eyes to adjust to the light.

A female guard entered the cell, took one look at O'Brien and then did a double take. Her head ridges were not as prominent as the males of her race, but they were there.

"Oh sorry" she said. "Didn't know this cell was occupied." The guard turned to leave.

"Wait!" O'Brien called out to the guard as he stood up. "Please?"

The guard turned to face him.

"Huh?" She asked.

Here goes nothing. O'Brien thought. "You're the first person I've seen since being captured. It would be nice to have some company if you're willing."

The guard thought about the proposition for a moment. He was an alien, it was her job to watch him. What better way to watch her prisoner than to be with

him. It somewhat made sense to her. Grabbing a small stool from the hallway, she placed it inside the door and sat down.

O'Brien smiled. At least he wouldn't be alone. At least he wasn't in the dark anymore. If he played his cards right he might get some intel of what he was up against.

"So" Jack said. "What's your name?"

"Grilka." She responded.

Grilka, Jack thought, an unusual name for sure. But then again this was an alien he was talking to. There were sure to be strange things here and there.

"Jack" he said placing his hand on his chest. "It's nice to meet you." Jack dared not offer a hand. Who knew what she might do to it.

"Jack" Grilka repeated. "Such an odd name." She wondered why he couldn't have a more normal sounding name. "You look like a Dorf to me."

Jack chuckled at the thought. If she wanted to call him Dorf, he wasn't about to stop her if it helped him escape.

"Yes, I will call you Dorf." Grilka said.

Jack sighed. "Fair enough."

Jack wondered what kind of information he could gather from Grilka. He would have to go slow in order to gain her trust. This could take some time. As far as he could tell, Jack didn't have anywhere to go. He had the time.

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In another part of the prison, Obshi and Norev sat huddled together for warmth. There was some straw on the floor of their cell. It too was dark and damp.

"Prisoners prepare for rations." A female voice came from a loud speaker.

Before them a plant root and water materialized. Obshi picked up the root and broke it in half offering it to Norev. She accepted it and took a bite. It was rather dry. The water helped wash the nasty tasting root down. She didn't like the taste of it, but she needed to keep her strength up.

“How long have we been here?” She asked.

Obshi checked some chicken scratches on the wall he had been making. “I’d guess a little over a month.” He finally said after counting the indentations he had made.

“I hope they’re treating the rest of your crew with some hospitality.” Norev said hoping it to be the case. Deep down she knew otherwise. When you’re a prisoner your captors don’t care about your comfort, they only care about doing the minimal to keep you alive to be used as bargaining chips later on.

“They’re dead.” Obshi said. “If they followed their training, they’re dead by their own hands.”

Norev let go a small gasp. Suicide? Why would Obshi order his people to do such a thing if they were caught? It made no sense to her. The Shukan people always favored life above anything else. Suicide was unheard of.

“Why?” She asked.

Obshi nodded. He knew it was a bit on the extreme side. But he also knew what these Dubor were capable of. No one should have to suffer the things he had suffered at their hand. “It’s for their own best interest.” He simply said and let the matter drop.

Taking a bite of the root, he ground it up with his teeth and spread it over an open wound. It would help to stop the bleeding. However it did burn like no other. He wondered why the guards hadn’t seen to their wounds earlier. A dead prisoner wasn’t a good prisoner, at least not in his book of thinking.

“If they knew better they would have been in here over twenty days ago trying to interrogate us for information. Instead they let us rot here like animals waiting to be put down.” Obshi cursed. “Though that’s what I would have done. They obviously have a different plan in store for us.” He stood up and began pacing around the room. Trapped like a caged animal. This was not how he wanted to go out.

Norev stayed seated trying to get warm. In time their captors would make their demands known. It really was only a matter of waiting it out and seeing what would happen next. She tried to pass the time humming to herself. A lullaby her parents had taught her since she was small. It didn’t comfort her like it used to back in the day when she was afraid of monsters hiding under her bed or in

her closet. No, those days were long gone. She had seen how brutal life can be to a person. It was nothing like those childish dreams of yore.

The lullaby had the opposite effect on Obshi. It sounded in his ears like a loud annoying church bell. "Well you stop that noise please!" He called out in the dark.

Norev stopped humming. "My apologizes. I did not think it would bother you."

"Well it does." Obshi said. "I need time to think of a way to get out of this situation. Your humming isn't helping matters!" He was on edge. It was expected he would be on some sort of edge due to their current situation, but not as much as he was currently on.

Norev stood and walked towards Obshi. She held out a hand and touched his. "Are you alright Obshi?"

Obshi held her hand for a moment and squeezed it. He was not okay. The memories of being imprisoned those many years ago were haunting him to no end. He didn't want any part of it. He didn't want to be hunted down and shot like a rabid animal. If only there were some way he could find his way out of this place. Obshi needed to be able to think of his next move before making one. It was like a game of Chimada, comparable to the Earth game Chess.

"This is ridiculous!" Obshi said. "Even the Draka know how to take care of their prisoners."

Norev smirked at the thought. Draka were known as a peaceful race. No Draka had ever taken a prisoner to her knowledge. They abhor violence to the point of avoiding it at all costs. Perhaps Obshi was off in his statement? Perhaps he was going mad. She couldn't tell which was the case. Either way, it didn't matter. He was upset and it was her duty to help calm him down before he made some drastic choice that would cost them both their lives.

"So the food is bad." Norev admitted. "The living conditions are even worse, and don't get me started on the sleeping arrangement." She paused waiting for Obshi to lighten up a little, maybe even laugh at their misfortune. No, nothing of the sort was about to happen. "We have our health."

Obshi scoffed at the thought. What good was health when you were bound to be executed one of these days? What good was it to be able to breathe in the mold when all it would do was ensure a slow death? He continued to pace around

the room. Taking a bite of the plant root, he spit it out. Sure he needed to keep his strength up, but no plant was going to keep his stomach full. He needed something with more sustenance to it.

Pounding on the door, Obshi screamed. "Let us out of here! Let us out! We don't deserve this punishment! Let us out!"

No one would hear him of course. The doors were quite thick and it was a good number of clicks up to the surface. No, they were there for the long haul. He would have to get used to it. At any rate, they both did. There was nothing that could be done about it now.

"Come, sit down." Norev said. "Huddle with me for warmth. You're going to need it."

Obshi paced for a few more steps before sitting down next to Norev. They held each other to help preserve body heat.

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Doctor Matt Allen sat in the major's office on a couch. He was watching Lieutenant Commander Kate Monson walk back and forth. She held a clipboard in her hand. "More wounded doctor?" She asked looking at the clipboard. She had lost count of how many wounded had come to the station looking for refuge from the Dubor attacks on outlying worlds.

Matt nodded. "It's all in my report. The Dubor have been attacking colonies on this side of the Rim. Being the closest station with a fully operational Med Bay, they come here looking for help."

Kate sighed as she looked over the numbers. Casualty reports were never her strong suit. She didn't like filling them out to submit to the top brass, she hated reading over the number of people dead, wounded, or otherwise afflicted. It just wasn't something she had the stomach for. Sure, she was supposed to have this iron gut having been through the rungs of service, but there was something to it that she just couldn't grasp. If space was so big, why did there have to be so much needless bloodshed? It was a question she hadn't gotten an answer to yet and probably never would.

"Still can't bring yourself to sit down in his chair can you." Matt observed.

Kate looked to O'Brien's desk. It was true, the chair had remained empty since the day he left them. She fully expected to see the major walk in through that office door any day now and sit where he belonged. Until then, she was just keeping the office busy for him until he returned.

"I want to start making supply runs." Kate said. "Get those people the medical supplies they need."

Matt nodded. "Right." He said. "Let's hope they don't get picked off by scavengers."

Scavengers. What a simple word to describe those who plucked things from the dead or otherwise injured. If there was anything of value, scavengers were known to be lurking around the corner in order to swoop down and grab it by any means necessary.

Kate's comm unit beeped. "Lieutenant Commander, you have a Priority Alpha message coming in." It was an officer stationed at C&C contacting her.

Kate sighed. Now what. She looked at Matt. "We'll have to continue this another time."

Matt stood from the couch and headed towards the door. "Understood."

Turning her attention to the bank of wall monitors, Kate responded to the comm unit. "Patch me through." She said. The monitors switched from that of a star field to the face of a general. He didn't look pleased to see her, he didn't look not pleased to see her either. Kate couldn't tell what kind of face he was making to be honest.

"Lieutenant Commander Monson, this is General McGreggor of the Earth Force Alliance. I'll cut to the chase. You're being given a field promotion to full commander with all rights and privileges of that rank. I am also placing you in temporary command of Crimson Gamma until a replacement can be found for Major O'Brien." He said. "We don't have the manpower to find a replacement yet, but we are looking into it."

Kate was puzzled. There usually was a hand picked commanding officer ready to take over at a moments notice. She didn't understand why she would be in command of the station until such time dictated otherwise. Whatever the case, she was up to the challenge.

"Aye sir." She replied.

"It is a shame Major O'Brien disobeyed orders and went after that warship to see what was happening on Dubor. I'll give you the same orders that were given him. You are not to incite any kind of war against the Dubor or any other race. Is that clear?"

Kate nodded. "Yes sir. Crystal."

"Good. McGreggor out." The monitors went blank.

Kate stared at O'Brien's chair again. "That bastard." She said under her breath. O'Brien knew she didn't want command and now she was facing it head on. Walking over to the chair, she pushed it sending it rolling across the floor gently hitting the couch. "You would do this to me." She could only imagine what kind of paperwork she would have to deal with in this new position. It was something to cover for someone, it was something entirely different to take over for them; even if it was temporary.

Looking at the desk, it was covered with papers that needed her attention. A bottle of scotch sat on the edge of the desk. Doctor Allen's way of telling her to relax a bit. Doctor's orders as it were. Pouring a shot, she drank a some of the scotch. It was very smooth. Just what she needed for a split second before continuing on with her work.

Looking down at the desk, a certain paper stood out to her. It was a rescue plan to search for the major and the crew of the Shukan warship. If she could pull it off, she could bring Major O'Brien home. Kate had a feeling he was still alive. She couldn't say why she felt that way, just that she did.

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Grilka stared at Jack like he was mad. "And you hit the ball with this... stick? Not other players?"

Jack smiled at the innocence she had within her. "Yes, that's right. It's an Earth sport called Baseball."

Grilka thought about the sport for a moment and then laughed. "We have something similar, except we attack the one with the ball until they give it up. It is very popular among our people."

"I guess every world has their own version of the sport." Jack replied. He had heard of other alien races having similar sports on their planets as well. It wasn't anything new.

"Oh Dorf, you tell the most intriguing tales. It will be a shame to hang you." Grilka said. "But we won't dwell on that now will we."

Jack felt a lump form in his throat. Hang? He was going to be hanged? Execution had gone the way of the dinosaur on Earth for more humane practices. Mainly the Mind Frag. But to be facing the death penalty on an alien world? Oh that was something he just couldn't face. Death was never something Jack wanted to think about especially when it came to his own death. But here he was thinking about it now.

"Will you look at the time." Jack said. "I've taken up all of your guard duty. You must have other prisoners to keep track of. I can't be the only one."

Grilka shrugged her shoulders. "Oh I think there's a couple six cells down, but they came in when you did. They haven't made a peep. The teleporter takes care of their basic needs as it does you. They're fine."

Jack wondered who these other two prisoners were. If they came in at the same time he did, he wondered if they were survivors from the warship. It couldn't be a coincidence, could it? He figured it would have to be someone from the warship as there weren't any other ships in the region when the attack happened.

"These two prisoners, tell me about them." Jack said, hoping he wasn't moving too quickly for Grilka. She was still rather wary of him and what information she was to tell him.

Grilka hesitated for a moment. She hemmed and hawed at the thought of telling Jack about her other prisoners. It was true they hadn't made much noise since they were brought in. In fact they had been quite model prisoners.

"They are Shukan filth." Grilka said spitting on the floor. "They are not like you Dorf. You are different, you are human. They are cattle." She smiled. "I like you more than them."

Cattle. Jack thought. The Dubor really saw themselves as a higher being than the Shuka race. It was an interesting thought process to be sure. He wondered if he could convince Grilka that the Shuka survivors were *his* cattle. That they belonged to him. It was worth a shot.

"These cattle." Jack said. "I was wondering if I could speak with them. You see, I have lost some cattle of my own. I was searching after them when your ship locked onto me and pulled me in." His voice trailed off. Jack wasn't sure how much was too much for Grilka to handle at the given moment.

She looked puzzled and then the light came on. "They are your cattle?" She finally asked connecting the dots.

Jack nodded. "Yes, I believe they are my cattle. They escaped their pens and managed to get away from me. It would greatly benefit me if you could get me in touch with them to make sure they are okay."

Grilka shook her head. "No, they are scheduled to be executed tomorrow in favor of a great feast. I don't think I can let you see them before that."

A feast. A freaking feast? Jack tried to remain calm. They were planning on eating the Shukan survivors? What the hell was wrong with this race of people? He didn't understand their motives or actions behind any of it.

"Dorf wouldn't be planning on doing anything against us, would you?" Grilka asked. She raised a hand, in it was a small device. "I have a shock collar on you. If you misbehave in anyway, you will be punished. I am sorry but I must demonstrate its power." She pressed the button.

Pain shrieked through Jack's body. He collapsed to the floor writhing in pain. Jack screamed out as loud as he could. "Arrgh!" It was unlike anything he had ever felt before. After a moment, Grilka released the button. The pain subsided.

"What was that for?" Jack asked.

"Dorf needs to understand what we do to our cattle. Now you understand what will be done to you if you disobey me." Grilka explained. "If you do disobey, I will be forced to switch to level two. It is more painful than the first setting." She stood from the stool and exited the cell.

Jack laid on the floor of the cell and tried to breathe. It took a half hour for him to regain the use of his limbs. Sitting up, he took in two deep breaths. Maybe he wasn't getting to Grilka like he had hoped. Perhaps more time was needed in order for him to gain her trust. Whatever the case, he needed to get that damn shock zapper away from her and destroy it.

Grilka wouldn't come to Jack's cell for two more days. She was either fed up with him, or busy with other things. Either way, he sat alone in the dark

wondering how their next encounter would go. Hopefully something good would come of it and it wouldn't ball bad. He had to wait to see what would happen.

Finally the cell door opened. Grilka stood there with the pain giver in one hand, and Ambassador Norev by the throat in her other hand. "Dorf. Human. Here is one of your cattle. Eat." She threw Norev down to the ground.

Norev looked like hell. She had bruising up and down her throat down to her arm. She had clearly given up a fight before giving into the pain giver Grilka had used on her.

As the door closed behind Grilka, Jack rushed to Norev's side. He cupped some water up in his hand and gave it to her. Her lips were cracked and bleeding.

The water felt good against her chaffed tongue. Norev drank slowly and deliberately. It had been a few days since she had been given water to drink, or any fluid for that matter. Her captors had cut off rations a few days ago. She was starving and thirsty. Norev didn't know what happened to Obshi, they had been separated.

"Norev" Jack said. "Norev, are you okay?"

Norev gasped for air as she drank. "Major."

"Jack" O'Brien said. "Call me Jack. There's no point for pomp and circumstance here. We have a common goal."

Norev nodded. "Yes, to get out of here." She paused. "We need to find Obshi, he will know what to do."

Jack sighed. A hundred old war veteran knew better than he did? Hardly. But who was he to argue with a member of the religious government of Shuka. Fair enough, he would play by her rules to get out of there.

"That woman called me cattle." Norev said.

Jack nodded. "Yes, the Dubor see your race as cattle. Nothing more. They see you as pieces of meat."

"She called you... Dorf?" Norev asked.

Jack chuckled. "Yes, it's a nickname she gave me when we first met. She didn't like my name."

“On Shuka, Dorf means stupid one.” Norev said. “I wonder if it has the same connotation on their world.”

If that were the case, Jack thought, then maybe he wasn't getting anywhere with Grilka as he once thought. Yet she had brought him what she considered food higher than the plant root he had been eating. So maybe there was something there after all. He wasn't sure.

“What are we going to do?” Norev asked.

Jack stood from the floor and walked back and forth as he thought. “Do you know how far away your cell is from here? Where they're keeping Obshi?”

Norev thought about it for a moment. She had been dragged for a little bit before reaching this cell. She didn't know if she had been conscious the entire time she was being brought to Jack or not. There was no way of telling.

“I think we're close by. But I'm not certain.” Norev finally said.

Jack nodded. “Alright, we'll have to take that chance. Lay on the ground, I'll see if I can get her attention. Then we'll spring into action. Get ready.”

Norev did as instructed. Laying on the ground, she pretended to be unconscious.

“Guard! Grilka!” Jack yelled as he rapped on the cell door as loud as he could. “I need you!”

Grilka turned towards the cell door and opened it. “Yes Dorf? What is the matter.”

Jack pointed to Norev on the floor. “I think there is something wrong with this cattle you gave me.” He said. “She barely moves or speaks.”

Grilka looked at Norev's lifeless body. “Strange, she put up quite a fight before when I was gathering her for you.” Walking over to Norev's body, she kicked it. Norev didn't flinch, she just accepted the pain of the kick. Grilka frowned. “I see what you mean. I will bring you fresh meat.” She turned to leave.

Jack sprang into action. He jumped on Grilka's back and forced the pain giver away from her hand. Putting her in a choke hold, she fell to the ground limp.

Norev stood up and looked to Jack. “We must go.”

They ran out of the cell down the long hallway. Once they reached the end of the hallway, Jack stopped short. He simply stared. In front of him was a window that looked out into space. They were in space. They weren't underground but on a ship of some sort. Perhaps a space station.

"Where the hell are we." Jack whispered.

Norev looked out the window. She couldn't see any planet below. Wherever they were, they weren't orbiting Dubor or any other known planet in the Comeki Star System.

An alert sounded. Jack grabbed Norev's arm "Run!" He said as they fled down the corridor. He didn't know where they were headed, but they couldn't stay there, not for long.

Turning a corner, they came upon a small cell. It was smaller than the other cells on the block. It had an opening, small enough for a hand to slip through the bars.

"Help me." A voice said from within the cell.

Norev looked to Jack. "Obshi?" She asked. She unlocked the cell door with the pain giver they had taken from Grilka. Obshi fell out of the small room into the corridor. "Oh thank the gods." He said. "You found me."

"Dorf!" Grilka's voice could be heard from down the corridor. "Dorf you disappoint me!" She came running after the trio as fast as her feet could carry her. "You can't escape! No one escapes! Come back with those cattle and I can forgive you."

Jack kept running with Norev and Obshi following close behind. It wasn't long before they ran into another bulkhead, another window looking out into a sea of stars.

"Trapped." Jack said. "This place is like a maze, there's no escape."

Obshi hobbled on one leg. "Please, we must keep going."

They continued running until they found a third bulkhead with the same view as the other two. A fourth wall later and they concluded they were running around in circles. It didn't take long for Grilka to catch up to them. They were out of breath and tired from running. Obshi could barely keep up. Yet he was determined to fight off his captor as best he could. Taking up a fighting stance, he braced himself.

“Dorf, why must you run?” Grilka asked. “Don’t you see it in your best interest to just eat what is given you? These cattle are food. They are for you to ingest.”

Jack shook his head. “No Grilka, these are not cattle. These are my friends. I do not eat my friends.”

Grilka was confused at the concept of a friend. She had never heard the term before. People were either cattle or feeders. Nothing else. Whatever this word friend meant, it was neither a cattle or a feeder. It was something new.

“I do not understand Dorf.” She said to Jack. “Why do you call them friends and not food as they are intended?” She pursued the question further. “They are cattle. Nothing more.”

Jack shook his head. “No, they are not cattle. They too are feeders. They eat meat, they eat other species to gain strength and sustenance.” He explained. “You cannot eat them.”

Grilka stuck her tongue out. “I would not eat them, they stink. I only eat the purest of meats given to us by the provider.” She said. “Only he is who I trust.”

“If you don’t want to eat them,” Jack continued. “Then why not let us go? We mean you no harm. You can go with us if you’d like. We have a nice space station. Lots of space, better than your conditions watching cells day in and day out.”

Grilka thought it over. The offer was very enticing. She hadn’t seen another Dubor guard in what seemed like ages let alone had a conversation with one. She only had the cattle to look after. It was her lot in life.

“Okay” Grilka finally agreed. “I will go with you to your space station. Maybe you will have need of me there.”

Jack smiled. “Great, where is the closest ship?” He asked hoping to get away from the hell hole they had been locked up in for the past month and change.

“This way.” Grilka said as she led them down one of the corridors. Upon reaching a bulkhead, she keyed in a sequence of numbers. A combination of sorts. The wall shifted to reveal a large landing bay. If you didn’t know what you were looking for you would have easily missed it like Jack and the others had.

“Come.” Grilka said as she led them to a small shuttle pod. “I will take you back to your station. You will be safe from here.” She said.

Jack put a hand on Grilka’s shoulder. “Thank you.” He said.

Grilka smiled at Jack. “You are my friend, not cattle.” She said.

As they boarded the ship and took off, they left the prison behind. Obshi mourned over those lives lost under his command. Norev did as well. Jack didn’t understand why they had to die at their own hand, but knew Obshi understood and that was good enough.

Grilka was just happy to be out of the prison to sights unseen. She wondered what adventure lay in store for her next.

The End