

Integration

Part One

Integration. That was what they called it. Whenever a new species joined the United Treaty Organization – more of a union rather than an alliance at this point – there was a period of integration. Government funded programs were established to educate the masses about the new species they would be calling friend, and vice versa. It was normally just understanding cultural quirks of each other. Truth be told the species of this galaxy were not that different from one another. If one were to ignore the different cultures they were all fairly similar. More often than not they either had fur or scales, stood on two legs, had two arms, and tended to have muzzles with the usual nose. At most some species had wings. Many years ago, before a race ever made first contact, it would have been considered amazing to find another intelligent species that had a similar body shape as your own. Surely the odds of an alien evolving to look so similar to yourself would be near impossible?

Now it would be groundbreaking to find a species of floating tentacle monsters. The similar body types made integration a simple matter of cultural understanding. That was something a species would be familiar with for most of its history when it was by itself on its homeworld, with its own subcultures mingling. So it was only logical that this new race would be the same. They didn't have fur or scales, but soft skin, and nor did they have muzzles. But that was fine. They still stuck to the general pattern. Another fairly simple process of integration could be expected from this.

Except there was one massive problem with this new species. Sergeant Kirache Rottjir looked at her bare white furred paws. The blue eyes of the wolfess focused on the diminutive form below her. It was a small robot with a humanoid shape standing rigidly still. It didn't even reach her digitigrade ankles, and if she wanted to she could crush it like an insect. But that was the exact opposite of the intention of the training course she had to participate in today.

This tiny robot represented this new species that joined the UTO. They were the humans, and they all were about the size of this robot. That was the problem. If you looked at a picture of one by itself they would fit right in with the rest. But that picture would not reveal this truly alien difference. At least with the giant tentacle monster, Kira wouldn't be able to kill it simply by stepping on it by accident. It would be significantly less adorable though.

So now here they were. The UTO military couldn't block out an entire member species because of it being screwed over by nature. But they couldn't just throw them into units and expect it all to work itself out either. The mechs designed for human operators put them up to a proper scale, but they couldn't be expected to be in those machines for their entire service careers.

While they were outside their mech an inattentive trooper could easily step on them. Furthermore, when dealing with such a tremendous size difference, there would inevitably be a lot of touching and holding. An overeager person could accidentally break their little bones, hurt them through g-forces, or even drop them. But that was not the only problem. There was discontent among a few about even bringing the humans into the UTO at all. It was clear that some would have problems accepting that a small life was worth as much as their own. It was the

most glaring issue of specieism the UTO government ever had to deal with. With both of these factors in mind, every unit that was expected to receive a human had to go through human handling courses and sensitivity training was being implemented as standard protocol for every soldier in the military – including the humans.

Today was the first day of training. Kira looked around the room. It was full of troops from her battalion so the mood was rather light and friendly. Each one of them had a little human shaped drone at their feet. Most human soldiers would be among the newly christened 'mechanized combat medics' and 'mechanized heavy infantry.' The mechanized was referring to the mechs. New creations spawned from the fact that humans were small enough to operate actual mechs – something that had always been impossible due to the sheer scale and weight of the mechanical behemoths. Her battalion was lucky enough to be one of the first selected to receive some of these new troops.

Excepting twenty of them, none of which except her were present, most of her battalion was only here for handling and sensitivity training and later simulations to learn how to cooperate with mechs. Kira on the other hand had volunteered and was accepted to be a tiny mech pilot's guardian as well. She looked to the front of the room. There were two officers at the front speaking with one another. They were their instructors. One was a she wolf like herself, but gray, First Lieutenant Tahsah. The other officer, well, she couldn't read his rank and name by himself. But it was clearly emblazoned on his mech. He was a human, and Lieutenant Fletcher was standing on a table at hip height with the significantly larger wolf. His machine was standing in the corner of the room looking menacing despite being completely unarmed. Human mechs were basically power armor without the normal body inside. They essentially had the appearance of a very large and bulky human. The straight plantigrade legs made them look unique as everyone had digitigrade limbs. The head was slightly sunken into the torso with an armored collar surrounding its lower half. The entire vehicle was quite large, and dwarfed the wolf when they both walked into the room. Dark featureless eyes peered out of the head's bunkered down position. Armor attachments were painted with the universal camouflage while beneath that it was dark gray.

Kira looked away from the mech and returned her attention to the instructors. The two officers were a pair. The wolf was a guardian, and the human the charge. According to them, both were veterans of the battle for Earth against the Rynar. Their units cooperated extensively for the duration of the fighting, which was how the two met. Kira's acute canine smell could tell this human had no fear. Though the aliens may have had a totally different smell for fear. She could not be sure until she smelled a scared human. However, he appeared absolutely comfortable with his situation, a tiny creature in a world of giants.

The guardian and charge shared a knowing look and grins before turning to their students. Tahsah gathered their attention before speaking, "I apologize for the short delay." She looked around the room, specifically at the drones. "None of you have crushed your practice humans yet, so I would say this is a much better start than the last group." A few chuckles went through the room at that. The wolf continued, "Now, before we begin, I must address a concern that has been brought up every single time. That is, how could the humans ever possibly adapt to this when they are so tiny, and half of us are natural predators?" She looked to her little companion.

“Allow me to answer this through action.”

She approached the table and loomed menacingly over the human. He merely looked up at her, but didn't move. She slammed both of her hands onto the table on either side of him. The shaking knocked him onto his rump, and before he could stand up again her head shot down to mere arms reach for himself where she bared her teeth and growled angrily. Kira took a whiff, isolating his scent, but she didn't detect a change in his demeanor. Rather than scamper away in terror, he reached out and touched her on her giant black nose. The growling stopped immediately and was replaced with an affectionate nuzzle that knocked the man completely on his back.

Inevitably, someone was going to just say this was a rehearsed thing for them. She held up a hand to keep them silent and used the other to reach for the tiny alien. Fletcher, obviously used to being carried, lifted his arms as her fingers wrapped around him, allowing them free movement outside her grip. She then did something completely unexpected. She dangled the little guy over her head and opened her maw wide. Yet there was still no change in scent, and he wasn't even thrashing. At this point she was the one scared for him! Then she actually did it! She lowered the poor creature into her mouth, and when she pulled her hand out, he was no longer there!

There were gasps of shock among the soldiers, with one shouting in protest, “What in Tornick's name do you think you're doing?!” Several even moved from their positions over their practice drones to approach her and try to save the human, Kira among them. But in response the officer opened her muzzle and stuck out her tongue. Sitting right on top of the pink flesh was Fletcher grinning wildly as he waved at them.

Tahsah had made her point. The bond she and her charge shared was one of absolute trust. Fletcher, perhaps the ultimate prey, knew the giant predator would never harm him. He was so sure of this that he was perfectly willing to be placed into her maw. Kira felt slightly giddy at this. She sorely hoped her own charge would be open to such things. Harmless predator and prey games with someone so small would be exiting! She smiled at the thought as she returned to her position over the practice drone.

The human was gently plucked from Tahsah's mouth, now dripping with slobber. She placed him on the open chest plate of his mech, known as the deck, where he immediately began changing into a set of dry clothes he left inside the body. She could not help but note that these aliens loved their cloth. Without fur or the protection of scales, they probably felt secure with wrappings. They didn't even have pads on their feet, so they nearly always wore some kind of footwear. In contrast, average military general wear was a simple set of universal pattern camouflage shorts and short sleeved shirt. Both were tight but yielding and offered plenty of air flow. A normal person would balk at the thought of always wearing as much as a human, and especially having their digitigrade feet regularly trapped. However a normal person would also surely balk at the prospect of being in a giant's mouth, so apparently humans enjoyed following the opposite of the trend.

While Fletcher changed Tahsah carried on with the lesson. “It's a challenge to gain a human's trust. I have partaken in the simulations that show what is like for them, as will you all,” Kira caught a flash of fear coming from the officer. “Their anxiety around us is fully justified. But

they're brave. The very fact that they fought the Rynar with amazing zeal demonstrates this.” Kira was never deployed to Earth, but the fighting on that planet dominated the media for the entire duration. The worst ground fighting in history took place on its surface, with countless killed and incredible stories of sacrifice everywhere. Perhaps the most widely circulated picture ever came out of that fighting. It depicted a massive human army charging headlong into Rynar positions through a frozen wasteland as nuclear mushroom clouds dominated the background. The story of that battle was even more incredible than the image, and the release of a film commemorating it was not far off. “If you can look beyond their diminutive size, you can see the giant that is their spirit,” Tahsah finished as she glanced over at the human as he tied his boots. “Now, enough romanticizing the little morsels.” She licked her lips and the human simply waved her off. “Let us begin. Bear in mind these machines are very sensitive, far more than a human. The real flesh and blood kind can actually take a decent beating. But, if you can handle these drones without them buzzing at you, then you should be able to handle any normal human without incident. Now pick up your drones.”

Kira looked down at her assigned robot. At some point the thing had lifted its arms and looked up at her like some pup expecting a lift from its mother. It was almost cute if not for the featureless metal face. Before she could reach for it, Tahsah spoke again, “I don't want to see slow, steady and careful movements here. I want you all to try a natural grab like you saw with Fletcher and I. The drone will inform you of what you damage.” As if there was anything natural about holding a tiny little sentient life in your hand, Kira thought. She crouched down and tried her best to pick it up as if she were recovering a dropped object. As soon as her hand wrapped around it, it vibrated and offered a quiet buzz. A little projection emitted from its face, as if it were an actual speech bubble, informing her that she had broken her human's ribs. Her ears folded back. She made sure not to squeeze!

A murmur of frustration came from the large male equine next to her. Corporal Larish Ni'ik looked at her with his drone in his hand. “It says I crushed ninety percent of its body.” He was frowning, but his voice betrayed how amusing he thought it was. Kira's sensitive hearing picked up the buzzes coming from numerous others in the room.

Tahsah had an amused smirk on her face at the sight of so many struggling not to maim their drones. “In an ideal situation you allow the human to climb into your hand. However that's not always the best course. Remember to slow your hand just before reaching them, and do not squeeze out of fear of letting them slip out of your grip.” The duration of the class was made up entirely of perfecting the art of grabbing the drones. Spines were snapped, internal hemorrhaging occurred, necks were broken, and g-forces made a few pass out. It wasn't a long lesson, and nor was it difficult. It was all merely a matter of being fully aware of how your hand would affect the human. Tahsah made sure to stress the fragility of the drones, lest they become afraid of touching humans. Odds were, that most of them were capable of picking up a human without injuring them even without this lesson. But by establishing a nice, wide safety net they minimize the risk of an accident involving a stronger grip than intended. Accidental murder had never been more easy.

When the session came to an end Tahsah dismissed the entire class, except for Kira. She beckoned the sergeant over and spoke approvingly, “I noticed you were among those that tried to

come and save my charge here.” The sergeant flicked her ear in acknowledgment. “I’m pleased you did. Protectiveness is an important part of being a guardian.” Kira stood straighter at the praise and her tail wagged slightly. “You’ll be getting your charge very soon. Before that happens I want you to know what it feels like.” The white wolf cocked her head at this, but said nothing. “I want you to pick up the lieutenant here. Simply allow him to climb into your hand.”

Kira’s eyes widened in surprise and eagerness. This was what she had been hoping for: to touch a real human! She turned to face the mech with the human standing on the lowered front panel. From there he was about neck height with her. She presented her palm for him to hop into. He looked at it, but seemed to hesitate. Her ears folded back at this. “You’re afraid.” She emphasized her observation with a sniff of her nose. Yep, definitely a slight change in scent at last.

Without removing his eyes from her hand, he responded, “I can’t help it with new people. I know you mean well, but instincts just scream otherwise.” He took in a deep breath, and dropped into her palm and sat down in the middle. Kira brought him closer to her eyes, and simply stared at him in amazement. That didn’t take long. She was already feeling it. Many who had held humans described this sensation.

As if she had read her thoughts the first lieutenant asked her, “What is it that you feel, sergeant? Be honest.”

“I…” She paused, unsure of what she should say. She knew exactly what she was feeling, but she was unsure how the other wolf would take it. Her request for honesty made her suspect she was well aware of how she felt about this, so she said it, “I feel powerful.”

This apparently satisfied the officer, who shifted her gaze to the human. “Tell her how you feel.”

The man continued gazing back at her as he stated simply, “Powerless.”

Kira’s ears once again folded at his response, but she did feel thrilled over this, which made her feel disturbed with herself. Tahsah took his answer in stride as she began to pursue her point, “There is nothing in this galaxy that represents absolute power more than holding a human in your hand. Nothing. You could hold the keys to the end of all civilization, and still not feel the same sensation. With a simple strong squeeze, you could instantly take a life. No weapons needed to complement your strength as alone you are countless times stronger than any human that will ever exist. It is quite simply, euphoric.” She paused to lift her friend from the white wolf’s hand, then placed him on the deck of his mech. She turned back to the sergeant and carried on, “It’s easy to be intoxicated by this power. There are some horrible people out there that will very rapidly want to abuse it. It has happened, sadly.” Kira’s mind danced with the stories involving violence against humans. There were so many brutal things you could do with a small creature like this. The fact that humans were intelligent would make the experience so much better for those cruel enough to do it. She cringed at the thoughts and shook her head to try to cast them away.

“I would never do anything to harm a human,” she deadpanned to her superior.

The officer chuckled lightly at that. “You never know. One day you may run into human slavers or some such. Then you could squash them.” Kira thought about that, and admitted to herself that that would be quite the experience. Absolute power over the scum of the universe would be amazing. Tahsah interrupted her reverie by continuing, “This power can go in a much better direction, however.” She paused to smile at the other wolf’s look of confusion. “There’s a special bond formed between two of such a size difference. The amount of trust they put into you is difficult to fathom. You cannot help but develop an immense appreciation for it. The result is a rather... unique relationship.”

“Unique?” She looked at the human, who was now sealed inside his mech, with the machine towering about a head taller than the pair of wolves. “Half the time the humans are running around in power armor that could tear a person in half, and you play predator games with your charge.”

The human decided to speak up through the speaker on his machine. “Like she said, there’s a lot of trust between guardian and charge. Things like what she demonstrated lose the fear factor after a certain point of trust building,” he stopped, and she was not sure if he would continue, as the featureless mechanical nature of the vehicle didn’t provide any hints. Kira was about to speak herself when he suddenly cut back on, “Besides. It’s actually nice and warm in there, if a little humid. You people like your bases cold. You should see what we do when there isn’t a room full of soldiers watching.”

“Andrew!” The higher ranking officer barked out at the human and glared up at the machine’s head, where the primary optics were.

“What?! She’ll probably do the same to her charge! Females love doing that stuff!” The mech didn’t move whatsoever, despite the amusement in the voice.

“What sorts of stuff?” Kira’s curiosity had been piqued now. She wanted to know more about these relationships.

“Well.” An awkward look spread over Tahsah’s face and she rubbed her neck. “If you’re anything like me, you may have a hard time holding back your maternal instincts with your charge.”

“What, like cuddling? You two cuddle?” Kira asked, surprised. The other wolf flicked her ear in confirmation. Kira couldn’t help but release a canine squeal at this. She hoped her human would like to cuddle!

“Yep!” the voice from the mech sounded again. “Then those maternal instincts merge with the predator kind and you end up with that crazy stunt we pulled at the beginning. I would never trust anyone else to do that. Christ, I know damn well how crazy it is. But it makes her happy, and honestly there is some thrill to it. Just, careful with the teeth.” Kira swore she could see the mech actually shudder. “At the beginning they’re absolutely terrifying.”

Private First Class Dylan Maddock had seen some scary things today. Giant aliens were absolutely everywhere, many of which had scythe like claws and furthermore half were predators. Then there were these awesome but terrifying mechs. At least he knew those had humans in them. Not that that really helped any, he was practically afraid of his own fellow man. There were twenty of them here lined up in a nice formation that looked just ripe for a stomping. Of those twenty they were made up of a hodgepodge of nationalities and services. Some US Marines and Rangers, a French commando, a couple Russian Spetsnaz, a few German soldiers, some Chinese troops, several Canadian soldiers, and to top it all off a British Special Air Service commando was here. All of them were among the best soldiers on Earth with countless hours of combat experience against the Rynar. Then there was him: US Army Maryland National Guard. How the hell did he end up with this crowd?!

This was a volunteer program with only a very few amount of candidates being chosen. Of course he put forth his application. That way he could say he didn't pass on the chance to see space and meet cool aliens. But apparently someone thought, 'We have all these badass, stone cold veterans, lets spice it up with some private from a militia.' And now he was here, so far out of his league he was terrified he would look like a total joke in front of these aliens! Well, more of a joke than this already looked like. Excluding him, these may be some of the best soldiers on Earth. Some were even commandos. Yet they were as tall as the aliens' ankles! As amazing and skilled as these guys were, some UTO recruit fresh out of basic could just step on them and all the special forces training in the world wouldn't do a damned thing to stop you from becoming paste on the bottom of a foot.

At least if he didn't get laughed out of here there was a mech waiting for him at the end of it all. He would say riding in a real interstellar space ship and landing on an alien planet made the whole thing worth it, but accommodations for folks of their stature were not quite implemented. They basically were stuffed into a fancy pet carrier until they made it to this compound. Not exactly a place you wanted to be when seeing space. One day, if he made it through this, he would get to see space for real, and even stand taller than the aliens! But until then he was probably going to have to deal with terror after terror. And the terror of the moment was the god dammed man sized teeth of the giant tiger crouched down and inspecting them.

“Holy shit...” He couldn't help but mutter as he saw the giant's amber eyes look them over. He may have not seen much combat during the invasion, but damned if he saw some horrible things committed by giants. Then those eyes focused on him, and his legs started shaking. Don't predators smell fear? He was making a lovely first impression.

“This one reeks with fear.” The tiger grumbled and bared his teeth at him. Yes, of course he smelled his unrestrained horror. Dylan saw his vision darken, but thankfully he didn't keel over right there.

“Is that a guardsman?!” The US Army Ranger that was this tiger's charge, who was standing at the guardian's feet shouted when he fully recognized Dylan's uniform. The master sergeant came trudging up to him with, surprisingly, a sympathetic look and asked, “Jesus, son, how the hell did you end up here?”

"I've been asking that myself, sarge," he muttered as his eyes only glanced at him briefly, enough time to catch his name tag, Mitchell. Most of his attention was focused on this gigantic feline which was apparently getting a kick out of his terror. For Christ's sake, are giants all the same? Why do they enjoy terrifying people so much?

Mitchell looked up at the tiger, and guffawed at the predatory grin on his face, "Alright Ufurin, that's enough. You're going to give the kid a heart attack." At this the big tiger only loomed closer, placing his head directly over his charge. Oh no, at this rate Dylan was going to lose control of his bladder. The sergeant responded by jumping up and swatting Ufurin on the underside of his muzzle. The tiger didn't seem effected by it, but he did thankfully pull away. Mitchell shook his head with a lopsided smirk on his face. "That's something you're gonna have to get used to." A subtle scowl crossed Dylan's face, that's not something he would ever get used to, since he saw exactly those sorts of things in his nightmares. The sergeant looked at the rest of the men, "All of you will get used to it. Ufurin here would not hurt any of you, but he and many others get a kick out of 'making the little rodents squirm.'"

"Rodents?" The Englishman spoke up, insulted, "is that what they think of us?"

Ufurin answered, "It is not meant to be an insult. You are not actually rodents, obviously, but you do round out the scales nicely, like a rodent would."

"Do not fucking call us rodents," the SAS commando responded, glaring up at the giant predator. He said that, to *that*? Yes, Dylan was very much outclassed here.

He was expecting the alien to snap angrily at the commando, to inform him of his place, while the human would stand their stoically and respond with a threat involving explosives and digestive tracts. But it was not be, as surprisingly to Dylan, the tiger bowed his head low, a sign of submission for them, and said, "I apologize. I meant no offense."

When the British soldier accepted the apology, Mitchell took it as the opportunity to return to the matter at hand and looked at the guardsman, "Maddock, I'm not sure how we'll get you out of here, but I will do my best to find a way out, if you wish."

"We should see how it goes, but... thank you." The guardsman looked at his feet, feeling both relief and shame. He put in the application, and he already wanted to leave before anything happened. "I apologize for being a waste of resources."

The sergeant held up a hand and shook his head, "There's a reason we're training commandos and veteran soldiers, they can handle this madness better. But you must have been picked for a reason, so maybe you have what it takes." He paused as he looked at the patch on his arm. "You were with the Maryland Guard? Oh, shit." Realization dawned on the sergeant.

"Yes." He didn't want to say more than that. What he went through during the war was arguably far worse than the military action the rest of these guys saw. The destruction of the US capital and surrounding areas was one of the greatest tragedies of the battle for Earth. The UTO failed to prevent a part of the Rynar fleet from setting up for bombardment. This lead to the entire

destruction of Washington D.C., then the liberal striking of the entire region, including the capitals of Maryland and Virginia, and then anything else with human military forces or large gatherings of people. The result was the densest body count of the whole campaign. Dylan's unit was on its way to reinforce D.C. when it was hit, so he dodged death that way. Then before they could even turn back, impact detonations lit up the horizon while they sat helplessly on the capital beltway. Many guardsmen lost their entire families that day, himself included. They stopped pretending to be a viable fighting force after that. Many left to seek out friendly forces that were still capable of carrying on. Others like himself formed a disaster relief effort and spent the rest of the fighting seeking out survivors and aiding them while doing their best to avoid the Rynar.

“I'm sorry, son.” The ranger had a sad look in his eyes. A lot of horror stories came out of the bombardment zone, and oh could he confirm them. The Rynar turned the zone into a staging point and basically had free reign to do whatever they wanted, and whatever they wanted typically included some truly horrific things. It wasn't easy acclimatizing to these UTO species after seeing what other giants easily and happily did to helpless people. The sergeant took a step back and placed himself back in front of the collection of humans before him. “You have all been selected for service in the UTO military as combat medical personnel and heavy infantry. I can tell you now, that piloting a mech is going to be some of the most fun you will ever have.” He gestured to his own mech standing behind Ufurin. The big metal behemoth even made the tiger look small. “But until then, you will all have to adapt to life without one. You will learn to be at peace in the presence of giants, you will come to understand their quirks, you will adapt to being held by them, you will discover how to treat their wounds, and soon you will fight alongside them as equals.”

Dylan read a fair bit about this program. There was practically nothing humans could do in the military, so the UTO had to create roles for them, and those roles involved giant robots. Technically, the mechs were superior to a power armored UTO trooper. The lack of a large body inside meant there was so much room for redundant systems. So you could blow the head clean off of a mech, and it would still function, just with inferior visual equipment and an offset perspective. Take the head off of someone in power armor and they were obviously a goner. Even a hole through the chest could still not guarantee a mech to go down if it missed the pilot's compartment. Then, coupled with the total machine nature of the things, they were stronger than power armor. Mechs were not adequately battle tested yet, but there were already plenty of predictions that mechanized humans would replace power armored troops.

As medics they could easily move wounded to secure locations, and by nature they had room within their mechanical bodies to store a bounty of sensitive medical equipment behind the thick armor. To top it all off they had the combat capacity to defend the wounded much more successfully than a regular medic. Then there was the capabilities of the human operator alone. With a set of human sized power armor, the pilot could exit the mech to perform surgery to the point of even going inside of a wounded person to clamp a severed artery. At the start of the Earth invasion, Dylan was qualified at an EMT level. After the madness in the zone, he ended up with a crash course on field surgery. He could certainly appreciate how simple it would be to operate on someone so large. Unfortunately, convenience of mending their wounds still didn't make them any less terrifying.

“However,” Mitchell continued, “You are not expected to be left to your own devices and lock yourselves in human safe zones when not training. As such, the first thing we do is couple you with your guardians.” All twenty humans stood a little straighter at this. This was easily the defining part of the integration program, your giant companion. Dylan sorely hoped he was paired with something nice, like a horse.

Ufurin ordered the guardians into the room to meet their charges. A door opened and in filed twenty giant aliens, and over half were predators. Wouldn't it be logical to make guardians non-predators? They stopped and stood in a formation mirroring that of the humans. It looked significantly less ridiculous when they did it. The tiger picked up his charge and deposited him with his mech before returning to the side of the two groups, holding a data pad. He looked between both gatherings as he spoke, “I shall call the names of the guardian and the charge. Both are to approach each other, and the human is to climb into the hand of his guardian.” Oh he knew this was coming. Dylan was fairly sure his attempts to mentally prepare for this only made things worse. The horrors he saw in the zone didn't go away just because these giants were a different species. He felt his legs begin to tremble again.

Names started being called. A human would take a walk out into the middle, while an alien would take a couple steps to clear the same distance. Each human appeared apprehensive about this, but only briefly hesitated to climb onto the waiting hands. He was upset to see the only horse in the group take up the French commando. Two of the aliens were dragons. They were clearly different from the Rynar, but Dylan was not sure he would be able to cope with one. He imagined he would just turn on his heel and walk away if he was paired with one of those.

Another pair of names were called, and one of the dragons stepped forward to collect the SAS commando. His guardian was most certainly female, based on the figure. Why the hell did a scaled creature have breasts? But before he could think about that, his name came up.

“Sergeant Kirache Rottjir and Private First Class Dylan Maddock.” The tiger bellowed, and Dylan watched a female white wolf step forward. He paled at this. Wonderful, a predator. The only thing worse would have been a scaled predator. He hesitated to move, but before it could become awkward the Spetsnaz soldier next to him put a hand on his back and pressed him onward, setting the guardsman into motion.

In a clearer mindset, Dylan probably would have recognized the glee of a dog on this Kirache. But to him it just looked like she wanted to literally eat him up. He noticed his vision darken again as he approached her. Christ, he knew absolutely otherwise, but only the worst came to the front of his mind. He was going to actually walk into the clutches of a sixty foot tall predator.

As he neared, she crouched down and laid out a hand for him. He stopped next to it, and just looked at it with a dumb expression, then up at her blue eyes. Her ears folded back slightly like a saddened dog as she sniffed the air, she could probably smell nothing of him but terror. Then she cooed to him, “Come on little one, you will be safe with me.”

He knew she meant it, but it just sounded more like some crazy witch trying to trick children into

her gingerbread house to eat them. Oh God he was such a coward. Now it became an awkward pause as he just stood there, unwilling to move.

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One couldn't literally smell fear, as it was an emotion, but most creatures released certain odors that those with a sensitive sense of smell like herself could pick up on. This one was most certainly smelling like Fletcher did, just many times more potent. But she wouldn't even need a nose to tell Dylan was feeling absolute terror. He was visibly pale, which she knew was never good for a human and his legs were quite clearly shaking. The poor little thing was absolutely petrified of her. She knew her human would be afraid, but not like this! Her ears folded back as she gently tried to calm him.

A voice came on through her ear piece from Sergeant Mitchell, "That kid is a survivor of the bombardment zone. You know the stories from that place." Her ears flattened against her skull completely at this. She most certainly did. It was big news when word got out about what was happening in what became known simply as the zone. Humans being devoured, their limbs torn from their bodies, flayed via claws, and all sorts of sadistic, twisted things. When the UTO finally made it there, they were engaged by the remnants of a severely under armed militia that threw itself at them in a desperate bid to save the many civilians they had hidden away.

She saw the footage on the news from their helmet cams. It was humbling to see these beat down and ruined soldiers fire tiny little assault rifles at them while they physically placed themselves between the UTO troops and the civilians. The weapons were totally harmless against a trooper in full armor, so they simply stood there and waited for the humans to realize that they were not here to harm them. That was the idea until a worn out tank rolled out and shot someone. Thankfully it was a non-fatal wound. But that prompted them to move in and physically wrestle with the thing. It would sound amazing if the tank were not only shin high.

She could understand this human, but she didn't know how to comfort him. He was clearly terrified of giants based on what he had seen. So how did he even end up here? Why did he sign up for this? How was she, a giant predator that he probably is connecting to the Rynar at this moment, going to be capable of a relationship with someone that was so obviously traumatized?

The pause in anything happening was starting to get uncomfortable for her. She didn't want to just grab him, that would make things worse. As she looked at his still form, she started to feel some anger coming on. Again, how could this fool even think of volunteering for this? And who was the idiot that accepted a militiaman into this program?

Before she could do anything, one of the humans in the formation stepped out and approached the terror stricken one. He grabbed his shoulder and spun him around. He then immediately broke into a tirade, "Soldier, you volunteered for this shit! And now you gotta follow the orders given to you!" Dylan looked like he wanted to say something, but the other continued, "It does not fucking matter the shit you have seen! You are still a god damned soldier, and you follow orders! This is not an order to kill yourself, so step into her hand, so we can get this shit over with!" Well, he's a foul mouthed one. He then grabbed Dylan's shoulder again, and spun him

back around, but he didn't throw him onto her hand. Instead, he simply waited behind him.

Dylan stood straight as he approached her hand. He took one worried look up at her just before he climbed up onto her palm. The other human immediately walked away as she slowly raised her hand to her stomach and stood, with the other ready to catch him in the not too unlikely event he decided to throw himself off to get away from her. The human sat in the center of her palm with his knees bent and his arms resting on them. The large backpack he brought was laying behind him. He seemed too afraid to look at her as she stood back in formation with the others.

For the rest of the assembly, the human didn't move or even glance at her. She tried to pet him with a finger, but he flinched away from her touch, so she let him be. Once this was over, they would have time alone, and then she could talk to him and ease his fears. She sorely hoped this wasn't one of those cases of extreme trauma. The psychiatrists on this base would probably only serve to worsen this one's problems. She didn't fault him for his fear, but it did frustrate her. She was hoping for a human that would be more open to her attempts at friendliness. A little nuzzle would probably give this one a heart attack.

When all twenty pairs had been made, the guardians and their charges were dismissed and relieved of duty for the remainder of the day so that they may interact with one another. She heard Master Sergeant Mitchell through her earpiece again, "Do not take him to the barracks or leave him in the human quarters. Find somewhere that you can both be alone, you are going to need to get him out of that daze as soon as possible." She signaled her earpiece twice to confirm she heard him. The other sergeant was right. She wanted to take him to her bunk and simply speak with him there, but a place without other non-humans where they could be alone would likely be better for him.

So she made her way through the hallways until she reached an exit, the pair still silent. When she walked out of the building, warm sunlight washed over them both. She noted happily that he perked up with this and actually looked around. It was a green planet like his own, and the homeworld of the Neishor, the equines of the UTO. They were in a large military base and training center, so there were numerous buildings but they were all spread out, to minimize damage in an attack. She had just left the assembly center, which was one of the largest structures on site as it was where new recruits or cycling soldiers were dropped off by transport and processed. The rest of the guardians were filing out of the structure and headed off to wherever with their charges.

It was an extremely easy posting. Her battalion was stationed here to not only receive their mechanized humans, but to help train the new recruits in the meantime. It was so much easier and relaxing than assaulting pirate bases or defending against Rynar raiders. Unless you're a recruit, it was indeed a peaceful posting and certainly an ideal environment to forge the bonds between guardians and charges. It also helped that it was a beautiful planet not unlike Earth.

She made her way over to a statue commemorating one of the founding officers of the base with four benches around it. Thankfully, nobody occupied them. She took a seat and laid her palm in her lap and looked down at Dylan, and at last she decided to break the silence, "So. We're finally alone. Let us talk." He didn't respond, so she continued, "You know, I am your guardian. You

know what that means right? Hurting you is the exact opposite of what I'm supposed to do.”

“I'm sorry.” His voice was barely above a whisper as it transmitted through her translator.

“Sorry?” She smiled when he did not shy completely away from a stroke from her thumb. “I'm the one scaring you here.”

“I-it's not that,” he paused, but it appeared he was preparing to continue, “I'm unresponsive, not blind,” he reached over a shaking hand to stroke the fur on her thumb. Even through her fur, she could feel his trembles. “I know you're upset about getting stuck with a nervous wreck.”

“Upset?” She had to think about that, and flicked her ear in acknowledgment, “Yes. I am a little upset about that. You are so afraid, why did you even sign up for this?”

It took him a few moments to respond as he mulled over his answer. Finally, to her surprise, he laughed, “You just don't pass up the chance to go into space when the option to volunteer is available. Meet cool aliens and all that. It was just so I could tell myself that I tried. How my application was accepted is beyond me.”

It made sense, she supposed. Going into space had always been an aspect of her life. It was always there within reach. But for someone stuck on one planet their entire life, seeing another planet would be quite the adventure. “Cool aliens, huh? How is that working out?” she asked, teasingly. Obviously the aliens part was ruining his space exploration.

“I-, well. A-actually quite well. You are all scary as hell, but still pretty damn cool. You're a giant wolf! You're amazing! I just wish you were not so big.” As if that were a reminder that she were many times his size, he caught himself from rambling and looked back down. Her tail gently thumped against the bench at being called amazing. That was something else that only someone stuck on their homeworld could feel. The thrill of meeting aliens for the first time. For her, others were not even aliens. They were just people. Although, admittedly the human was certainly sufficiently alien to her as well.

“Well, we cannot do anything about the size without a simulator,” she said as she lifted him up to her face and looked at him down her muzzle, “But you can still talk to the cool alien.” Oh, how she wanted to nuzzle him, to cuddle him, and tell him he was safe with her, that nobody was going to hurt him. Everything that would calm a scared pup, but likely have the opposite effect on him. The physical parts, at least. He may just not believe the latter.

He leaned away from her muzzle and frowned as he muttered back, “I've seen a Rynar talk to a human in a friendly way, like this.”

“Really?” She asked, genuinely surprised. The Rynar by nature were extremely hateful and violent. Odds were that few would ever hold a shred of respect towards a human.

“Yeah.” He looked at his boots, “I don't know why. Afterwards he tore her clothes off, broke her arms and legs and left her on top of an eight story building to fry in the summer sun.” Her eyes

widened at that, she was actually hoping for something rather lovely that she could work with.

“Fry? You mean overheat?” She questioned, and then mentally kicked herself. She should have immediately changed the subject. But, she was curious. Surely without all that fur humans would never overheat?

“Fry,” he confirmed and glanced up at the sun with squinted eyes before looking back at her. “Without fur, ultra violet radiation from a star burns our skin if exposed too long.” That accounts for the constant clothing even in warm weather, she thought. He decided to continue on, “I climbed that building and carried that poor girl out of there. God, she must not have been more than thirteen. Sick fucking animals. She made it, though.” She could tell he was happy about that, at least. Then he frowned again. “Well, that was the first time I saw a giant talk to a human. Not a very good precedent.”

She squealed as she imagined breaking his little bones as he screamed. She could easily do it, and he would be absolutely helpless. But that thought only made her feel ill. She once again decided to stroke him with a finger as she responded, “But not the trend. You're too adorable to break.”

He didn't react to her caress as he asked, “Adorable? And if I was not adorable?”

“Well, then I would just have to take you back and ask for a new human,” she joked and was pleased to hear him laugh.

His laughter trailed off as a serious look crossed his face. “That is far from the worst I saw in the zone,” he whispered sadly and brought his knees closer to himself. “I was in the D.C. bombardment zone for the entire war. You probably heard about, hell maybe even seen the videos, of the nightmares in that place. These memories just aren't going to go away because you say a few kind words.” His face scrunched up and he stared at his boots again. “I know you're different from the Rynar. I just can't look at a giant and not see these memories. It's one thing to hide from it all, but, you know... I had an obligation to go out there to help. I had to watch people get torn limb from limb and there was not a damn thing I could do about it. We're so small.” He placed his tiny hand on top of the pad of her palm to emphasize his point. “It all just goes to show how helpless we are compared to you people. It's so terrifying.” He sighed heavily and looked back up at her. “I don't like talking about the zone. But, if we're going to be spending a lot of time together, I just want you to know this isn't going to be easy.”

“I understand,” she said softly and lowered him back down to her lap, as her arm was getting tired of holding there. She was really hoping for someone more receptive, but she could work with this. “So, it was Dylan, right?”

“That's right,” he confirmed and started to pet the fur on her hand again, “Dylan Maddock.”

He seemed to enjoy touching her fur, she noted. “Kirache Rottjir. You can call me Kira.”