

LITTLE VOICES

They sat high on two stone perches with light all around them and darkness below.

“Observe,” the elder said and gestured, its movement sweeping and graceful.

The atmosphere vibrated with power, and the light was filled with the image of a blue and white planet suspended in space. Readings appeared with all necessary information, filling an entire quadrant with advanced and complicated symbols.

The younger one on the second stone perch puffed out its spines.

“Nitrogen?” it asked.

“Predominant,” the elder affirmed.

“Undesirable.”

“Incorrect. Gratifying.”

“Explain?” The younger one betrayed surprise before it could control itself.

“Plantings. Chlorophyll. Delicacy.”

“Ahhh.” The younger one’s biological levels returned to balance. “Understood. System?”

“89504. Planet three.”

“Concerns?”

“One.” The elder expanded and contracted again. “Dominant organism.”

“Intelligent? Aware?”

“Partially.”

“Contacted? Negotiations?”

“Negative. Unresponsive.”

“Pity.” The younger one was silent as it considered possibilities. “Decision?”

“Extermination.”

“Pity.”

“Necessary.” The elder’s vocalization rang with authority. “Chlorophyll! Delicacy!”

“Understood.” The younger one hastened to assure the other of its comprehension. One did not anger an elder if one wished to remain in the light. “Method?”

“Experimental. Testing.” The elder one gestured again, and the image before them altered to show a small, round object. “Observe.”

The younger one stared at this incomprehensible object with no little confusion. New readings appeared, but they only added to its bemusement. Apparently the dominant organism of the blue and white planet thought this was...food.

“Cream doughnut,” the elder said. “Weapon.”

The younger one did not reply as it alternately studied both the object and the readings, the stalks of its visual organs swinging back and forth like pendulums. From the information presented, it could not comprehend how this cream doughnut item would work.

“Weapon.” The elder's voice communicated annoyance when the younger's silence continued beyond the polite interval.

The younger one shifted. “Positive?”

“Insolence!” A flash of green power from one of the elder's distended spines knocked the younger one from its high perch and down to the dark, far below the reach of the light.

After regaining full awareness, the younger one returned to its proper physical orientation. High above, it saw the elder gesture with a long, slim spine. The image in the light wrapped overhead changed to display three strange creatures.

Straining its visual organs to maximum capacity, the younger read the symbols flowing below and around the image. These were members of the dominant organism of the blue and white planet. It puffed out its spines again when it saw that they were all females. Egg bearers. Horrible.

“Begin test.” The elder's long eyes looked down at the younger one. It gestured. “Observe.”

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Mary Barton tried to ignore the other admins, but since they all worked in an open floor plan without a hint of privacy, it was hard.

“God, I can't stand it.” Sara Stewart tossed back her thick, blonde hair and pushed away from her work station. “I swear those doughnuts are calling my name. I thought I'd be safe as long as they were in the kitchen. Who brought them in anyway?”

“Probably Aaron.” Linda Adams looked up from a pile of reports and took off her glasses. “I think I hear them calling me, too.”

“It's a good thing Aaron's cute. Otherwise I'd have to wring his neck. I freaking love doughnuts.” Sara stood. “Well, this is really going to screw up my diet, but I need to get one of those darned things. How about you, Linda?”

Linda got to her feet and grimaced. “You’re a size two. I’m the one who’s going to gain ten pounds.”

“Are you coming or not?” Sara demanded.

“Of course I’m coming.” Linda looked over at Mary. “How about you?”

“No thanks.”

“Fine. More for me. Come on, Sara, let's go.”

Mary watched the two women disappear around a file cabinet. As far as she was concerned, neither one of them had to worry about gaining weight. Sometimes she just wanted to grab them and stuff a sandwich into them.

Smiling at her own thoughts, she tried to focus on her spreadsheets. She could hear the doughnuts calling her too, but she’d be darned if she’d give in to them. This was the first time in her life that she’d actually managed to stick to a diet – no, a healthy food plan, she reminded herself. Not a diet, a lifestyle change.

Well, regardless, she wasn’t going to go off the wagon now when she was finally starting to see results. But it would be a heck of a lot easier if people stopped bringing in pastries every other day.

Sighing at the unfairness of it all, Mary got back to work.

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The elder gestured and the image in the light changed. The younger one, which had just managed to struggle back to its perch, tried to observe. It noted the egg-bearing females labeled as Sara and Linda entering a chamber identified as a “kitchen”. Sitting on a platform in the middle of the chamber was a large pile of the cream doughnut items.

The two stepped forward, but they came to an abrupt halt when the entire pile of doughnuts vibrated. Then the doughnuts leapt at them, dozens of the small, round objects launching through the air towards the egg-bearing females.

For one vital moment, the females seemed unable to move. Then the doughnuts reached them and attacked.

The doughnuts plastered themselves against the females' faces and stuffed themselves down their throats. The fluffy white substance known as “cream” lumped in their eyes, up their noses and all over their mouths as doughnuts forced themselves between their lips. The younger one could hear both of the female creatures making desperate choking noises.

They clawed at the doughnuts, tried to pull them away from their faces, but the cream oozed between their fingers and enveloped their mouths and noses in a solid white mask. They tried to escape the chamber, but appeared unable. And still the doughnuts attacked.

After several clicks, the females seemed to grow weaker, their struggles lessened. Finally they sank to the floor and were still. According to the readings, they had both been exterminated.

The younger one observed with some surprise that a large pile of the cream doughnut items were once again on the platform in the chamber. It decided the doughnuts were self-regenerating. The trap reset itself.

“Ingenious,” it exclaimed.

“Nothing.” The elder expanded modestly, but it appeared well-pleased.

“Problem,” the younger one felt obliged to point out.

“What?”

“Resisted. One.” The younger braced itself to feel the elder's wrath again and was surprised when it did not come.

“Admitted,” the elder said. “Willpower. Unexpected.”

“Conventional forces?” the younger one suggested after a slight hesitation.

“Unapproved. ‘Expensive. Inappropriate. Nonmilitary. Business’.” The elder mocked the mental tone of the Wise One. “Tunnel vision.” It puffed out all spines.

“Wise One aware of plan?” the younger one asked, its growing alarm prompting it to a discourse much longer than was customary.

“Basically.”

“Specifically?”

“No,” the elder admitted

“What!”

The younger one had once more crossed the line of tolerance, and for the second time it was knocked off its perch with a flash of green power.

“Plantings! Chlorophyll! Delicacy!” the elder's tone thundered around the younger. There was a slight pause. “Profit.”

“Understood. Understood.” If the younger one could have sighed, it would have. Once more, it began the long climb back up to its stone perch. “Next?”

“Overcome.”

“How?”

“Increase signal,” the elder one directed to the light.

As the younger one climbed, it observed the image of the “kitchen” chamber. More and more members of the dominant organism, both male and female, were attracted to the doughnuts

and overcome by them. Soon there were fifteen creatures lying on the floor, all terminated. It seemed this species had no free will when the cream doughnut items called, no choice but to respond to their signal.

Despite its misgivings about proceeding without the Wise One's approval, the younger one was impressed.

“Admirable,” it commented, finally regaining its perch. The elder ignored it and gestured again, a little impatiently.

“Switch scene.”

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“Where is everyone?” Mary wondered as she went from empty office to empty office looking for someone to sign off on an invoice. She finally had to give up and go back to her desk.

What was going on? She'd seen lots of people heading to the kitchen; hadn't anyone come back? She'd just be they were all standing around eating and having a good time while she was sitting alone working and suffering. She should go check...

No, she wasn't going anywhere near that kitchen. Her stomach was rumbling constantly now, her mouth was watering, and the call of the doughnuts screamed through her mind. She didn't know how she was resisting the little voices whispering to her, but she refused to give in.

Cursing under her breath, Mary pushed away the temptation and tried to focus on an email.

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“Resisting.” The younger one's visual organs flicked back and forth between the readings and the image.

“Increase signal,” the elder snarled. “One hundred percent.”

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The call of the doughnuts grew louder and louder. Mary thought she might be going insane. She couldn't think. She couldn't work. She wanted a doughnut so badly that she actually felt faint. Her stomach was one big cramp. She was afraid she might even be drooling.

“God *damn* it!” She was not going to give in. She was *not*.

Mary gripped her computer monitor like it was a lifeline and breathed deeply as images of doughnuts danced through her mind. Barely aware of what she was doing, she closed her eyes and pressed her forehead against the screen.

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“Increase signal! Increase signal!” the elder one screamed.

“Danger,” the younger one cautioned, observing the readings as they flashed past.

“Increase!” the elder gestured. The image split, with the female on one side and the “kitchen” chamber on the other. As the younger one watched, the pile of cream doughnut items began to quiver violently.

“Increase!”

Gases began to pour from the doughnuts, and their vibrations increased. Even then the woman did not move, although she appeared to be in intense pain.

“Increase!” the elder screamed. “Increase!” It rose to its full impressive height, all of its spines extended.

Suddenly the cream doughnut items exploded, engulfing the “kitchen” chamber in a wave of brown and white. The image broke off abruptly, and everything around the elder and the younger went shockingly dark as a surge of energy rippled through the power transmitters on their own world.

After a moment normal balances were restored. The darkness receded again before the blessed light.

“Failure?” the younger one asked timidly.

“Never.”

“Explanation!” A mental tone came suddenly from out of the light. It was a tone that made the younger one cower on its perch. It attempted to roll itself up into a ball which was as small and insignificant as possible. The Wise One had come.

“Experiment,” the elder replied sullenly. The younger one could not believe its boldness.

“No approval.” The Wise One's tone rolled through space and time, threatening and commanding. “Insubordination.”

“Apology,” the elder offered hastily, spines puffed with fear. “Miscalculation.”

“Unacceptable.”

As the younger one watched with horror, there was a flash of blinding green light more powerful than any it had ever seen. At the same time, the elder vanished, its large gelatinous mass instantly turning into a small puddle of oil.

Shaking with terror, the younger one tried to make itself even smaller. However, the Wise One did not speak again, and eventually the younger realized it was alone. It had been spared.

It hesitated, then straightened and gestured awkwardly with a long, thin spine. The light blinked, then an image appeared. It was that of the Mary female.

How amazing that one so small and insignificant could hide such strength. It was incomprehensible that she had caused the downfall of the strongest and wisest elder in the entire planetary system. The younger one observed her with a sense of awe and admiration. It did not even find the fact that she was an egg-bearer to be offensive any more.

“Impressive.” The younger one was silent for a moment longer while its mind stored the lessons it had learned on this day of schooling.

“Touché,” it whispered at last.

The image of Mary Barton smiled.

THE END