

The Rarest Puffball in the Universe

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One

Paradise for Alien Pets



Riley was on the way to change the water for the Martian sandworm when her floating display popped up and told her it was feeding time for the Jarken bat. Min was hurrying past with a basket of squeaky toys, and she grabbed his arm. “You want to help me feed the Jarken bat?”

Min frowned, took a banana out of his pocket and had a bite. “Jarken bat? Which one’s that?”

“It’s in B Block. It’s shaped like a kite with little pointy ears, remember? From Milgon 4.”

“Oh, *that* Jarken bat. Nice and colourful.”

Min stopped chewing his banana.

“Wait – what does it eat?” he asked. “Nothing Min-shaped, I hope.”

“Jarken bats only eat Jarken flowers,” Riley said. Since it was Min’s first day helping her, she had to explain a lot to him. “But they eat lots of them, and they need six meals a day.”

“That’s a lot of Jarken flowers.”

“And that’s why Mum has gone to pick up our daily Jarken flower shipment from the spaceport.”

Riley liked helping at Universal Pet Resort, her mother’s business, even though it was a lot of work. She was glad her best friend Min had asked if he could come along, too. He was learning fast. He had to, really, because when you take care of alien pets there’s a lot to learn. So many different aliens, so many different pets!

Riley had just turned twelve. She was determined to show her mother how responsible she was because her mother was working very hard to make Universal Pet Resort a success. And more responsibility would surely lead to a nice raise in Riley’s pocket money! Anyway, how hard could it be? Almost all the systems were automated, there were plenty of robots to help out and everything was working nicely. Taking care of a few alien pets? No problem!

Universal Pet Resort was right next to the busiest spaceport on Earth. It got a lot of business from alien

workers who needed to travel to other worlds and wanted a safe place to leave their pets while they were away.

The trouble with alien pets was that they needed special accommodation. Big alien pets needed accommodation that was spacious. Tiny alien pets needed snug accommodation. Crawling alien pets, flying alien pets, swimming alien pets and dangerous alien pets all needed their own special type of temporary home.

On top of that, they all had their own special requirements. They needed special food. They needed special liquids. They needed special sleeping quarters, lighting and habitats. Some of them even needed special atmospheres. So each area of the resort was really a unique facility of its own. Universal Pet Resort was a big, complicated business, and Riley loved it.

She loved all the different pets and all their different needs. She loved feeding them, exercising them and making sure they were well and happy. She loved the silky fur of the gossamer snakes from Loj. She loved the rough-and-tumble play of the sun hounds from Mellibeian. She loved the silvery song of the tiny sheembles from Eskeroovian.

When she grew up, Riley wanted to be an alien zoologist and travel across the galaxy to see these creatures in their home worlds. Her dream was to visit strange new planets and explore polar ice caps, searing hot deserts and mountains so jagged they seemed to pierce the sky. She would observe rare animals in their natural habitats and learn about how they lived. The galaxy was full of life, and she wanted to see it all. But for now, rather than Riley going to the animals, the animals were coming to her.

At Universal Pet Resort Riley had seen how concerned customers could be when they left their pets in her mother's care. Part of her mother's job – and now Riley's as well – was to convince these clients that Universal Pet Resort was the safest, cleanest and most luxurious accommodation for their special buddy, whether it had wings, scales and enormous teeth or was a shapeless blob of jelly.

Two Min the Curious



Any passenger on a spaceship landing at the spaceport could see that Universal Pet Resort was in the shape of a large semicircle with six interconnected buildings. At the centre was Main Block, which housed the customer service counter, the staffroom and Riley's mum's office. The other five buildings – A, B, C, D and E – radiated out from Main Block like the rays of a rising sun, each one connected to its neighbour by a corridor at the extreme end. Each block contained special enclosures for the pets.

In the large, leafy Jarken bat enclosure in B Block, a red and blue creature flitted from branch to branch. It came to rest above Riley and Min's head.

Riley settled her basket of Jarken flowers on the mossy ground, next to Min's.

"Easy now," she said softly to Min as she backed toward the gate. "Jarken bats hate loud noises. And whatever we do, we don't want to make a Jarken bat angry."

"I won't," Min said. "I'm Quiet Min, Min the Soothing, Min the Non-Threatening. See how serene I am?"

"I get it," Riley said. "I just hope the Jarken bat does, too."

"Why?"

"Because when Jarken bats get angry, they roll up into a ball and start to smell."

"Smell? Smell like what?"

"Believe me, you don't want to know."

"Hey, I'm Curious Min as well as Quiet Min. I have to know!"

Riley put her hands on her hips and lowered her voice. "Think of the worst, most horrible-smelling thing you know. Then imagine it gets buried underground for 100 years, then soaked in a vat of chemical waste for 100 years, and then left in a school bag for 100 years. That smell would be like a tiny whiff of angry Jarken bat."

Min bowed. "You know so much, oh wise one. Be kind and teach me."

Riley threw a Jarken flower at him. It stuck to his ear.

After they had closed the sliding door behind them, the screen on the outside showed the Jarken bat diving toward the basket of flowers, which disappeared in a whirl of blue and red.

"It has a good appetite," Min said, peering at the screen outside the enclosure.

"That's an excellent sign," Riley said. "When an animal won't touch its food, it's always time to worry."

"Speaking of food," Min said, "isn't it lunchtime?"

"It's only ten o'clock!"

"Snack time, then. I need another banana."

They made their way past enclosures containing nollisterns, screeching gorx and a pair of blue xanthans, which were staring at each other with strange, almost human faces. Once outside B Block, they made their way to Main Block.

The staffroom was plain: two refrigerators, a sink, a table with mismatched chairs and a vending machine full of munchies. Min sat on a steel mesh chair and peeled another banana. He flipped through his floating display, humming happily and sharing little info nuggets with Riley.