

June 2, 2008

He slept more than he had to, really.

The thing is, to go without sleep, he had to burn power. The more power he used, the weirder and more inhuman he felt. Even the Harrakar slept – for them, it was another sign of their station, that despite their power they *could* sleep. For him, it was a habit he didn't want to break.

The thing that took him the longest to get used to was their day/night cycle. Harra Prime was what terrestrial astronomers would call a 'super Earth', a terrestrial planet with over four times the mass of the Earth itself. It was also larger, but nowhere near a jovian style gas giant, not even close to Uranus or Neptune. A human trying to get around on its surface would feel like he was constantly walking up a steep flight of stairs, and the atmosphere was surprisingly thin for such a massive world.

He dragged himself out of the floating silver pod he slept in. Next to him, lying asleep, was Sithikal, the head of his honor guard. Well, honor guard was one of their functions. Their official designation was *Nar'Allanex*, which translated roughly to 'The Bringers of Joy' – this was seen as a good name for both of their functions, as one couldn't have joy if one was dead, and also, Harrakin liked to fuck.

Sithikal was beautiful, of course. Most Harrakin were. It was one of the things they were bred for. They were bred to fit a particular aesthetic because they'd decided they should be. She had long, straight black hair and golden skin and a sleek,

athletic build, taut with muscle. A human who saw her wouldn't immediately know she wasn't human – they would probably assume she came from somewhere in Asia. He could wake her with a thought, but it had been a celebration and she could use her sleep too.

He floated through his chambers. He'd had them made as close to an apartment on Earth as his people could manage. They tried very hard. Some things didn't translate very well. Sleeping in his kitchen, in a huge red pool of light from the daytime star (its smaller companion orbited further away from the central star than Harra Prime itself did, almost as far away from it as Pluto was from Earth's sun) lay Atrathos, his cat.

His 1200 pound telepathic cat.

Atrathos was a hashtet carthal, a *snarling mindkiller* – he hated that ten years down the road, he still had to do the translation in his head to understand their words – essentially a descendant of terrestrial felines as they were some 500,000 years ago. He stopped to scratch behind her ears and she latched onto his arm with talons the size of steak knives. He didn't mind – she couldn't pierce his skin. She licked his arm several times, rolled over onto her back and he rubbed her under the chin.

"I have never seen a mindkiller so docile." He looked up. Sithikal had gotten out of bed. Her hair was trailing loose, not up in the elaborate arrangement she wore when she was guarding him. "Your cousin spoils them horribly."

"You should see her hunt. You wouldn't think she was spoiled then."

“Technically, great king, I am *supposed* to see her hunt, but somehow you always manage to evade me and slip into the wilds alone.” Harrakin facial expressions didn’t always match up to human ones – for one thing, they were almost all telepathic – but this particular one was very wry and made him ache with memories of home. “In fact, you’re not supposed to leave the capital without at least six Nar’Allanex.”

He shrugged. When they were alone, he allowed – in fact, craved – Sithikal’s informality with him. She walked into the room and he admired her. She really was lovely. She rested her arm on his shoulder.

“Are you discontented?”

“Not with you, no.” He kissed her. She always tasted faintly sweet – the Harrakin diet was based on a lot of yeast, since it grew well on Harra Prime. They had thousands upon thousands of worlds, many of which were far more Earthlike than the throneworld, but they were sticklers for their awful yeast diet, and as a result, a lot of spices and sweeteners ended up used.

“Does my king require me today?”

“I don’t think I have any audiences planned. If you wish to spend the day with your family...”

“I do.” She laughed. “My eldest child has chosen a gender. We wish to greet him into his new life. My mate and I were planning to take him to Harra’s Fall.”

“Yeah, no party like a ‘let’s go look at the place our ancestors got nuked’ party.” He kissed her again, gentle. He felt real affection for Sithikal, not so much love as respect and

fondness. She was an excellent head of his guard. “Tell Mathalan I wished her all joy in your son.”

“She will be honored the king addressed her directly.” Sithikal reached down and squeezed his ass gently. She was dominant when they were together, because after long days, weeks or more of rulership, the last thing Ky’Rian son of Kyrion wanted to do was lead. Or decide which name was his, the one he was born with, the one his adopted parents had given him, or the one the Harrakin called him by.

He made himself coffee. He had the embassy back on Earth make a trip to Sam’s Club and send him things in bulk once a year. It was hard to justify using the power necessary to bridge 700 light years more often just so he could have dark roast.

He waited for it to brew, watching the sun rise. The planet rotated once every 41 hours, but because there was a second star orbiting the red giant, it had three phases – true day, when the red sun was dominant, half night, with the distant dwarf star (a small orange dwarf) visible, and true night, when neither were in the sky. Because the orange dwarf also orbited the red giant, at a great distance, the duration of half night was variable. There were also two moons, but both were barely specks in the sky.

*Cousin?* Sharra’s thoughts brushed his. It was her version of a knock, requesting permission to link minds with him.

*I’m awake.*

*Aunt Malan is here.*

*What, personally? Why would she... did something happen?*

*Yes. And if I tell you myself instead of letting her tell you, she'll feel slighted, since she traveled all this way to tell you personally.* He groaned. Harrakin protocol was such a bizarre mix of the practical and the primitive. Their empire spanned thousands of worlds, one of the largest in known space, and yet they still held such strict notions of rank and its privileges. Malan, as a daughter of the previous Dytariex, was in line for succession until Eric produced an heir, just as her sister Rythe and brother Arktiesh were. Her youngest brother had dodged that bullet when Ky'Rian, the man's son, had ascended.

*How formal do I have to be here? I let Sithikal go visit her family.*

*You don't need a full complement of Nar'Allanex to meet with our aunt. You should wear your full armor, though. She needs a reminder that you're the Dytariex, not her.*

*She's being imperious with you?*

*Her nose is out of joint, and as Seneschal I have to tolerate it. As her niece I feel less charitable.* He smiled, felt his face where his beard had been until recently. He felt naked without it.

*Inform our aunt I'll be available shortly. In the throne room. She can bring any of her escort that are blood relatives. No Trellinth.* That was well within his right as Dytariex – the Trellinth were a very distant line that Malan had married into in order to cement peace within the ten thousand. As a result, the Trellinth had gotten ambitious. Malan had three children with Nalastath Krellin'Ka Trellinth. They could come in – but their various fawning cousins and hangers on could not.

He waited for his coffee, sipped it casually. He didn't mind letting his aunt wait.

After he drank it, he gestured, and Atrathos floated up off of the floor and took a position at his right. Few Dytariexen had ever had a Carthal as large as Atrathos, nor one so gifted – she could battle a member of the Tsilath and come out on top. Her presence was a veiled reminder of who he was, and what he could do. He then concentrated on the small disc of green and gold metal on his hip.

A tracery of what looked vaguely like runes or writing of some kind appeared, glowing, and then it was as if flowing green and gold metal oozed over him, hardening into an ornate and rather vicious looking suit of armor in the same green and gold colors. Green or gold were colors reserved for the royal line. Even his grandfather, Hallatiris, had only used *one* of them, green, along with black.

He floated off of the floor and Atrathos followed, and several Nar'Allanex were waiting for him outside his chambers. Their blue armor indicated their rank. Everything was color coded on Marhasvarak. They were a riotous polychromatic race, they loved bright colors as much as they loved vivid flavors, music, and the tactile sensation of naked flesh against naked flesh. When he'd still been Eric Anderson, and the Harrakin fleet had arrived in the sky, like most humans he'd thought it a terrifying display of military power. It had been a pageant. *Look how bright we are, look how we shine! Are we not beautiful?*

He snickered to himself. The dread Tsilath de Harrakar, the ten thousand, legendary conquerors of all who ever dared raise

a force against them, and they'd come to Earth like a peacock courting a peahen. *Admire our plumage, cousins, are we not splendid? Let us sport.* And oh, Earth hadn't disappointed, had it? Thousands of languages, skin tones, foods, music – few humans understood how desperately in love with them the Harrakin were.

If not for the word of the Dytariex, himself born on Earth, the Harrakin would never have left. They still longed to return, to see the world and its people. To fight and to fuck. Eat the food, listen to the music, explore the history and religions.

As he drifted, surrounded by his escort and followed by Atrathos, he wondered if that was why Malan was there. Her satrapy held worlds that were the closest to Earth.

The throne room was full of beings, as it always was. One of the paradoxes of Harrakin culture was this – they were aggressive, brutal, the acknowledged dominant military power in the galaxy. There were stellar nations more vast, ones with more resources, a few with technology more advanced. The Harrakin maintained their edge with their psionic powers, their loyal and disciplined soldiers, their vast fleets, and sheer ruthlessness. Even those Harrakin who had no powers were costly in battle. There were certain rules they held to when fighting among themselves, which is how Eric had become Ky'Rian and Dytariex, but when invaded or attacked there were no rules.

But because of this, Marhasvarak saw more alien traffic than many far friendlier worlds, and the reason was simple – the Harrakin played favorites with no one. They didn't do much trading (that was the Lokar), they weren't interested in

expanding now that they had a large empire, they had no alliances to pull them in any particular direction, and they as a people enjoyed new experiences. You could find beings made of math inside robotic drones, gigantic reptile-people, sentient rocks, clouds of steam, and many, many other races all rubbing shoulders (if they had them) on Marhasvarak. In his time as Dytariex, Ky'Rian had mediated trade disputes, stopped civil wars, helped the formation of two political alliances. His judgements were trusted because his people had nothing to lose *or* gain in almost all cases.

The room fell silent (and not just sound – various electromagnetic emissions, bursts of radiation and other means of communicating also ceased) as he entered. As he floated to the Shivering Throne, he was glad for once that he was in full armor and didn't have to sit on the damn thing naked. It was like perching on a gigantic stainless steel ribcage in your birthday suit.

He wasn't announced. He didn't have to be. Atrathos lay herself across his feet, curled up so that her head faced Malan and her entourage.

*You may speak, sister of my father, treasured blood of Harra.* The crowd murmured at his having directly addressed Malan instead of talking through Sharra. His cousin shot him a grateful look. Malan could get angry at *him* for a while, if she wanted.

*Great king.* Malan dropped to both knees. That was *very* unusual. Usually she simply took one knee, the minimum amount of respect owed, toeing right up to the line of

disrespect but not crossing over. *I must report, the interdiction of the Homeworld system has failed.*

He restrained the urge to get angry. By Harrakin standards, her coming here personally to deliver the news was an act of deep respect.

*Open to me.* He wasn't really asking, but he waited a moment for Malan to choose to obey before attempting to push through her shields. She did, her eyes widening only slightly as he went in. For the non-Harrakin watching, this was all another incomprehensible Harrakin ceremony, the black and gold armored woman kneeling before the gold and green figure on the gigantic, terrifyingly skeletal throne. The colors made it incongruously festive.

Malan's mind was orderly, with a few unexpected flashes – a strong, suppressed affection for her younger brothers, who she had seen grow from infancy, a frustration with her mate and her mate's family, all too grasping and greedy and unruly with their egos – and he quickly found what he sought. Space is vast – and since most spacecraft that can traverse its distances do so via methods that bypass the physical universe and its laws, trying to blockade a star system is very, very difficult. Eric knew this, but he'd ordered it anyway. He'd hoped just knowing that the Harrakin didn't want people in the system would be enough. And for most, it *was* enough.

But Malan had cut corners. She'd assigned the smallest vessel available, a *Tovaran* less than a thousand meters long with a crew of a few hundred, and only *two* of the blood, both fractious Trellinth who thought themselves too important for the job. And so, when they detected vessels coming out of

Otherspace, they'd been too far away – out past the orbit of Jupiter – to stop either of them.

They'd achieved Earth.

They were somewhere *on* Earth.

He stood. He left Malan's mind without the usual dismissal. Gestured to Sharra, an unmistakable *follow me* and turned, leaving the throne room with haste completely unlike his entrance. Once he was out of sight of the court and the many, many aliens that packed the throne room at his every appearance, he collapsed the armor back to the disc at his hip and made his way to his private apartment as fast as he could fly.

He could fly *very fast*. There were sonic booms in the vast hallways.

By the time Sharra arrived at his chambers, he had dressed himself in his terran clothes. He'd brought them from Earth, stored them – he only rarely got to *wear* clothing.

“Ky'Rian...”

“Two ships. Two ships that traveled through *Otherspace*.” He pulled on a garment Sharra didn't understand, some kind of super-shirt made of dead animal hide, with a metal device for sealing it in the front. She had no idea what it was for. His foot coverings were also of this animal hide. Terran clothing seemed primarily made of dead animals and plants. “Which means it was either us, or it was...”

“Lokari'va.” Sharra nodded. “No one would defy you here.”

“Here, maybe. Out on the fringes? Where I’m just a name, someone they’ve never seen and barely heard of?” He was agitated. “Either way, they could wreak *havoc* on Earth.”

“The humans have their own protectors. They fought us during the Mistake.”

“Yeah, and people *died*.” Sharra looked at her cousin’s face. He looked so much like his father, and yet, in the set of his eyes, the way he held his face when he wasn’t being guarded, there was the humans who raised him, who birthed him. It made him fascinatingly exotic to the Harrakin. “I’m not arguing this with you. I’m *going*.”

“You have an entire empire at your command...”

“And that’s why, when I say I’m going, that’s what happens.” He set his face, turned to her. *As Dytariex, this I command.*

She acquiesced. What could she do? He so rarely ignored her advice, treated her with respect despite her father’s crimes against him and his people. Even if he were not Dytariex, which he was, he was family to her.

“Very well. What do you wish me to say?”

“Tell them I’m investigating the incident. Have Malan speak to Arktiesh. Get any further details you can out of her. She’s got a soft spot for her brothers.” This was news to Sharra, but she nodded anyway.

In his clothing, he felt very much like a human again.

“How long will you be?”

“Until I find them.” He thought, and the wall opened. “Call Kkyree. Tell her I need her here, to watch Atrathos and assist you. As soon as I know more I’ll call you with it.”

He turned and kissed her on the cheek. It was such a human gesture that it surprised her – Harrakin usually only kissed mouth on mouth, as part of sex. She smiled at the meaning of the gesture and watched him step out the hole in the wall, take to the air and soar.

Once he was far enough away from Harra Prime, away from its gravity well, he concentrated. Harrakin used this technique in concert, many minds working together. It was unheard of to use it by yourself – it drew on vast amounts of psionic power. He knew he could have called a vessel, ordered it to open the way for him, but he didn't. Instead, he visualized Otherspace, the backstage to reality, where all ideas and concepts intermingled. The realm of the mind, where distance was as easily breached as simply thinking of where you were, and where you wanted to go.

A glowing blue portal erupted in space as he breached it. It was visible from Marhasvarak, and Sharra stared upward with her eyes, so much stronger than any human, and saw her cousin, king, and yes, friend step through the seething hole in the sky.

And then he was gone.