

THE HARKANAAN GIFT

Written by

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Almost seven months. A lot of sleepless nights thinking about what would happen at the other end. He would lie awake under the soft, blue glow of the overhead light fixed to the corner of his bunk, lost to his questions.

He had heard stories about their kind, the Harkanaans. He expected that the worse ones were mostly just rumors, fabrications by the outer rim traders trying to protect their own interests. They seemed to be working. Scary stories, scared people. This left the rim planets clear of the less committed entrepreneurial types, allowing those with the burgeoning trade routes to corner the market. But was there any truth in the rumors? If there was, he wouldn't believe it. If there was, it wasn't going to stop him.

On Earth, he had a name. Joseph Wright. But as soon as he stepped onto the freighter, he felt the weight of that name, and everything attached to it, slowly start to melt away. He had stepped out of his element, traveling far from anyone who had ever heard of him; far from the discomfoting realities that he had left behind.

The ship. The *Preasumo*. Her seasoned crew members called her the 'Old Girl', with sincere affection.

Carlos Hector Ramirez, his cabin mate, was a wreck from day one. The first night after they launched, Carlos was on the videophone talking to friends, family, anybody who would listen. Joseph didn't much care who he talked to. It was the disruption of having to hear half of a conversation for hours on end that proved to be the annoyance. He knew right away that Carlos' resolve was about as solid as runny eggs. This trip was simply a cry for attention. For Joseph, it was all about the commitment. Succeed or fail, he would accept the consequences.

The food? Epic.

You could destroy whole armies with the rations that were constructed, branded, and sold to the crew as breakfast. The trip was long enough without being tortured each morning by an assault to the palate. If looks weren't enough, his tongue would confirm it with enthusiasm. The Cook was an oddly jovial guy. Perhaps he knew how legendarily bad the food was and lived each serving like he'd just pulled the ultimate prank. One morning, early on, Carlos confronted him.

"You gonna put a flavor other than horrible in this stuff at some point?"

"If I did that, you'd be inclined to eat more... and the 'Old Girl' carries a limited supply. Plus, didn't your mama ever tell you that 'good for you' and 'tasty' are at opposite ends of the Universe?" He smiled a toothy grin.

Joseph never complained. Not once. For all the good and the bad, he chose this.

This was a work ship, which meant work duties while onboard. Both of them worked as 'Scrubbers' in the Ion Drive crew. Good portions of their day were

spent scaling the walls of the pre-chamber, scanning for 'ionus phyillius' on the inner housing. These microbes, inaccurately called 'Ion Eaters' by the drive crews, worked their way into the compound metal hull of the pre-chamber, boring their way below the surface like termites into a fallen tree trunk. The microbes had destroyed more ships in the beginning of extended space missions than the insurance companies would like to admit. Now, every Ion Drive crew had Scrubbers armed with scanners and sterilizing equipment.

Due to the less than desirable working conditions, these jobs often went to those at the bottom of the chain of command. It was long shifts of manual labor in hot, airtight suits using products that were exceptionally corrosive when in contact with bare tissue. Despite it being a job of paramount importance, it was technically simple and with simple training pretty much any able bodied person could do it. But if there was a breach or an uncontainable event, the whole pre-chamber assembly would be cleared of personnel and jettisoned. Normally, the pay for this job would be pretty good. Joseph had no need for the money.

In the crew lounge, as he sat stargazing, he'd often overhear conversations in various native tongues. Some he understood, most he didn't. Usually, the topics revolved around women. The ones left behind, the ones of past conquest, the ones that would line up for a chance to help these spacefarers spend their regular and bonus pay once they returned to Earth. He heard stories from the hardened men who had spent most of their careers in deep space. Stories of how time spent in the black made men go mad; how each man must find it within himself to persevere, to find the strength to keep his mind and soul alive enough to make it home without losing the parts that make him whole. He wouldn't have that problem. He knew that it was his life planet-side that had done more damage to him than the biggest void, the most desolate expanse. He had been fractured. Space held nothing compared to what he had already gone through.

But, Carlos. Carlos on the other hand began to show the signs. Within a few months, he had become increasingly irritable at work. That led to confused emotions in his off hours, when talking to those that he had left behind. One moment, he would be laughing with the person on the other end of space; the next would find him raving, screaming in anger over the smallest thing. Joseph did as his contract demanded. He told his superiors at the first sign of the psychological stress and the possible onset of Desolation Sickness. Carlos was less than thrilled. He blamed Joseph, his coworker and bunkmate for betraying him. Carlos was remanded to an hour session each day with the onboard psychologist, Dr. Miranda Caraway. He was given medication, which he said had a positive side effect: the food didn't taste like anything at all.

A few weeks later, another crewmember found Carlos hanging from a copper wire in the locker room. He was dead. The Marshall on board did a full search of their quarters and found 15 doses of his medication stashed in his shaving kit. His death was listed as a suicide due to Desolation Sickness.

The limited crew numbers meant that no replacements for Carlos were available. Joseph would be the sole Scrubber for his shift, which would be lengthened to accommodate the increased workload. The longer hours left on his own positioned him as the next potential candidate for Desolation Sickness. The psychologist requested that he voluntarily stop by the office at the end of each shift for a brief session. He agreed and soon he'd actually come to enjoy their chats over a game of chess or a simple piece of chocolate that Ms. Caraway had brought amongst her personal effects. But he knew what this trip was about for him. He did his best to steer clear of that fact when speaking to her. He did his best to contain his secrets.

Only one of the other crewmembers, Shoma, had met a Harkanaan. Through his broken English he told the story of one trip where he was called to the bridge by the Captain. He would take the place of the injured shuttle pilot and ferry the Captain and Load Officer to the surface to meet with the Harkanaan Shipping Council, the governmental ruling body of all Interstellar Trade ventures. He described the Harkanaans as shrewd, graceful and respectful. Based on their greeting, he suspected that the Captain was friends with one in particular. Shoma was greeted warmly, but he felt out of place. Their world felt alien, yet somehow familiar. Joseph fought the urge to ask every question that he could imagine. He didn't want the stories to undermine his own first impressions. He wanted to experience it for himself.

The rest of the crew had only known the Harkanaan people by third hand information, having never set foot on the planet surface. Joseph didn't tell Shoma that soon he would also become one of those very few humans who had firsthand knowledge of the people.

The Ion Eaters were evolving, adapting. Their method of sterilizing the pre-chamber was becoming less and less effective. Joseph tracked the growth of the microbes and issued a special report for the Chief Engineer, the Chief Science Officer, and the Captain. He sent a fourth copy to the corporation. His report called for the Scrubbing process to evolve and adapt to match. Joseph suggested a means of using a specific resonance within the chamber to bring the microbes to the surface. Since they were targeting the Barium Titanate within the composite metal, he and the CSO tested the concept using various frequencies. At peak resonance, it proved just enough to send the microbes scurrying for the surface of the metal, making them much more vulnerable to the increased dosage of sterilizers that Joseph was now being forced to use. If put into practice, the Chief Engineer predicted that this method could increase the lifespan of a new pre-chamber by two medium range missions. The corporate head office was so happy that they gave both the CSO and Joseph a substantial financial bonus for when they returned to Earth.

Joseph had a quiet chuckle at the politics of it all. Corporate head office knew that Joseph would never be back to spend that money. They could have given him every share on the stock market and it still wouldn't change the fact that he was on this ship, heading to this specific planet, for very specific reasons. The CEO of the corporation and Captain Alder knew that

Joseph had given the entirety of his considerable wealth to charity prior to leaving for the Harkanaan home world. The offer of a bonus was simply a pale carrot dangling from a limp stick. Joseph was not interested.

Like clockwork, they entered Harkanaan space 6 months, 3 weeks, 2 days and 9 hours into their journey. They were met by a pair of escort ships. Harkanaan's were not a warring people, but that didn't mean they had never gone to war. As with Earth, the Harkanaan's told of dark times in their history, one in particular. It was a time when their belief in peace though non-aggression left them defenseless against an off-world race that never once announced themselves. The slaughter of nearly half of their total population took mere months. It was an attempted genocide without so much as a word of distain spoken between the two races. Then, just as it began, the bombardments ended - with no dialogue or diplomacy. Since that time, many years ago, the Harkanaan's have developed a very respectable fighting force.

Luckily, humanity's first contact with the Harkanaan's was at a human outpost. They had been watching the inhabitants for a long time, studying them, learning their habits and traits, trying to find out if we - as a people - would pose a threat or not. Based on their observations of that outpost, the Harkanaan Shipping Council requested that their government's military wing make first contact. It remains to be seen whether this was a wise decision. The early trading days were a combination of strong alliances and the odd 'Wild West' approach where everyone dies, except for one man. That loner then makes off with all the goods and the cash. Most of the time, he'd end up losing everything or worse. Things have gotten much better in recent years, but restrictions on travel and interaction between both peoples still exist.

The last days of the trip were spent alongside their Harkanaan escort vessels, guiding it to their home.

The CEO of the corporation had a long standing relationship with the Harkanaan Shipping Council. Joseph would undergo a battery of tests on Earth to determine his compatibility. Successful tests lead to his visit being approved through unofficial channels, as a personal favor between the head of the company and the leader of the Shipping Council. Within a week, his journey had begun.

The orbital sunrise over the Harkanaan homeworld was so bright, so vibrant that he had to dial down the view screen filter. It was incredible; unlike anything on Earth, or Mars or even Io or Europa during the colder months. The *Preasumo* settled into geosynchronous orbit, high above the capital city.

There was a knock at his cabin door. A guard had come to collect him for a meeting with the Captain. Joseph grabbed his backpack; all of his possessions. He looked around the cabin. It was as sterile and cold as when he had first arrived onboard. It was almost as if he hadn't just spent 7 months living out of the tiny space; as if he hadn't been there at all.

The guard ushered him through the maze of corridors in the ship, up through the restricted levels, and through the bridge to the Captain's ready room. His escort knocked on the Captain's door. A voice from within, firm, deep, offered them entrance.

As he entered the room Joseph was struck by the size of the window and the high-orbit view of the Harkanaan homeworld. The Captain, a monster of a man, sat behind an equally monstrous antique wooden desk that faced away from the incredible imagery.

The guard spoke. "Sir, Mr. Wright, as requested."

Captain Alder looks up from his work, addressing his guard straight in the eyes. A sign of respect.

"Thank you Mr. Martin." The guard salutes his Captain and heads for the door.

"Steven," He stops as the Captain continues, "I meant to ask you... did you get through to your wife?"

"I did, sir," the man smiles proudly, "She's doing well... it was a 7.5lb boy."

The Captain stands. Removing his hat and he approaches his subordinate. With sincerity, he shakes the new father's hand.

"Congratulations... to all three of you. I'll have my wife swing by and check on them once they're settled in."

"Thank you sir. I'm sure Nicole would appreciate the visit." With that, the guard leaves the Captain and Joseph to their business.

"Joseph, please. Have a seat." The Captain points to the sofa as he makes his way to the cabinet in the base of the bookshelf running the full length of the left wall. He opens the bottom door and produces a bottle of 12 year old, single malt scotch. Two crystal glasses follow. "Normally, I don't allow drink during a mission, but this is not a normal day now is it?"

He pours two glasses, handing one to Joseph.

"No, sir. I suppose it isn't."

"You might have come aboard my ship as a 'greenhorn', but you've managed to prove yourself a valuable member of my crew."

"I appreciate that sir."

"I guess it wouldn't help if I came right out and asked you to stay with us." The Captain already knows the answer. He sniffs the scotch in his glass.

"I really do appreciate the offer sir, but no. It wouldn't."

Captain Alder empties his glass with a toss of his head. He stares into the bottom of his empty glass.

"No, I didn't expect it would. When a determined man makes up his mind, ain't nothin' gonna change it. And I can tell that you are a determined man."

Joseph sips his drink.

"That I am, sir."

"Alright then," the Captain stands, resigned. "Shall we?"

Joseph finishes his scotch, leaving the glass on the coffee table. He stands, slings his backpack over his shoulder and follows the Captain back onto the bridge.

"Lieutenant Hadley, would you mind taking us for a ride?"

"Sir," the Lieutenant leaves his post as the ship's pilot, joining the two men.

"Ex-O, the ship is yours."

The Executive Officer nods. "Aye Captain."

The trio steps into the elevator. Lt. Hadley pushes the button and the car heads down the shaft.

The Captain makes introductions, "Lt. Mark Hadley, meet Mr. Joseph Wright."

"I've seen you in the mess hall a couple of times," Joseph shakes the man's hand, "A pleasure to meet you."

"Mark here is the finest pilot I've had the honor of working with."

With a telltale *ding*, the doors open to the small hanger deck. In the centre of the hanger, the general personnel transport and the Captain's shuttle wait; above and to the right, a row of six robotic grapples, zero-gravity cargo movers, hang in their stowed position. On the left, a row of series 47 power suits, each with their cockpits opened, undergo diagnostics. The hanger crew checks and rechecks the suits so that they'll be ready for unloading and loading when the Captain and Lt. Hadley return.

The Lieutenant steps into the shuttle cockpit and starts his preflight systems checks. Within moments, the men are leaving the *Preasumo*. Lt. Hadley expertly pilots the small craft along the hull, down the full length at close range. The Captain stares at the hull of his ship out the port window of the shuttle.

"She is a beauty, ain't she?"

As they cleared the hull and forward antennae array, the Harkanaan homeworld came into full view. The orb, its green swathes broken up by red tinged land masses. Even its oceans hold a deep rust red hue. Joseph stared at the planet hanging there against the blackness of space, suddenly noticing the two Harkanaan fighters escorting them toward their world.

"Sir," Lt. Hadley calls over his shoulder, "If you and Mr. Wright wouldn't mind locking in, we're about to breach the atmosphere."

The two men find their seats and buckle in for the turbulent ride ahead. As soon as Joseph manages to lock himself into his seat, the shuttle began to buffet. Violently. He tries to focus on the planet's horizon through the small port side window, but the plasma burn licks up the side of the craft, obscuring his view.

Joseph tightens his grip on the backpack in his lap.

Quick as it began, the turbulence end and the shuttle seems to float down into the reddish sky of the Hakanian morning sunrise. The capital city comes into view. It was bigger than he imagined. He scolded himself for his assumption. *Why wouldn't it be big? Why wouldn't it have all of the new and ancient architecture and culture and trappings of a modern human city? Their history was as long if not longer than our own.*

Lt. Hadley aims the shuttle toward the Harkanaan Shipping Council's building. It wasn't difficult to find amongst the rest of the city. It was by far the tallest, most ornately detailed, right from its base to the landing platforms circling its pinnacle.

"Wow." Joseph is impressed.

Captain Alder chuckles. "That's what they want you to feel. It's huge and beautiful so that you, as a potential trader feel small and ugly. It's an ancient trader's tactic, put to practice on a grand scale. The more amazed you are with them, the more you'll reduce your prices during negotiations. It's a subconscious thing that has served them well. But I don't let it get to me. I think that's why they like me so much."

But it was getting to Joseph. Indeed, he felt small.

Landing on the west pad of the tower was customary in the morning. It was another effort by the Harkanaan's to further amaze those who had the privilege of seeing their sunrise from the tower.

Lt. Hadley proves his worth and his Captain's praise with a touchdown so light that Joseph thought the craft was still airborne. The hatch opens to find three Harkanaan's standing to greet them. The Captain and pilot step onto the landing pad. Joseph follows. The air hits him. It is warm, humid. The light breeze smells with a hint of sweetness.

The Harkanaan in the centre wears a long red robe with gold leaf down his full length lapels. On his chest rests a small, glowing orb. The man, a portly, cordial individual, launches into the traditional Harkanaan greeting.

"Bey tawk, meesh watuzi."

He smiles, shaking the Captain's hand.

"Welcome, long traveling friends. Be our guests, all of you." To Joseph's surprise, he speaks English very well.

"You must be Joseph Wright. I know why you have come, and I am grateful and honored to play a small part in your journey." Joseph shakes the Harkanaan's hand.

"Thank you, sincerely, thank you for allowing me this." He replies.

"I am Cretas, Ambassador for the Harkanaan Trade Office. This is our Deputy Ambassador, Lear Vin and our Liaison Officer, Treya. She will be your guide, Mr. Wright."

Captain Alder introduces his pilot, "This is Lt. Hadley."

The Ambassador nods his acknowledgment of the man.

"You must be anxious to get started after such a long voyage. Treya has located some *srin* in a market not too far from here. If you are prepared, she can take you there now." Cretas offers Joseph.

"That would be fantastic. Again, I thank you and your people." He replies.

"It is our pleasure."

Treya smiled at Joseph.

"Captain, I can't thank you enough for indulging me." He shakes his Captain's hand, then turns to Lt. Hadley. "Lieutenant."

With his farewells out of the way, Treya guides Joseph to a door at the side of the platform. Treya ushers him inside and waving her bracelet across a small screen, a menu illuminates. She presses a symbol and the elevator doors close; they descend to the street.

"We'll take a *deepa* to the market." Again, Joseph is impressed by the Harkanaan's grasp of English.

She sees that he is confused by the word.

"The *deepa*'s are great creatures. It is the fastest way to get through the city. Don't worry, you will ride with me." She smiles at him.

Their descent stops and the doors open. The street outside is a flurry of activity. The regal and pedestrian alike mixed; all go about their business under the red hue of the morning sun.

"There." Treya points to a *deepa* at the street. It was large. Powerful looking limbs supported its slender body. Despite its size, it stays in place; its lead in the hands of a Harkanaan man. The creature legs were tattooed with the same pattern worn on Cretas' embroidered lapels and Treya's collar.

She approaches the animal, patting its flank before placing a foot in the stirrup and lifting herself to the saddle. She holds a hand down to Joseph, helping him to his place behind her. The man hands Treya the reins.

Joseph settles himself. She takes his hands and places them on her waist. With that, she spurs the *deepa* forward. Joseph is thrown back, and for a moment he thought he would almost fall off. The creature's mighty claws grip at the stone of the road. He squeezes Treya's waist harder and she spurs on faster, guiding the beast in and around the other traffic.

An abrupt turn.

The *deepa* lets out a guttural bay and a high-pitched squeal.

"Hang on!" Treya yells over her shoulder as she turns the animal toward a large wooden cart. With an explosive leap, the *deepa* launches into the air. It clears the wagon with room to spare. On the other side, she slows the creature to a trot, then a walk. She feels Joseph relax his grip.

He begins to notice the city. The modern architecture giving way to older, lower buildings as the streets begin to narrow.

Treya turns the *deepa* into an alley. Lines of brightly colored linens hang above them, strung up between the neighboring buildings; some so low that the pair ducks their heads to pass beneath.

Finally, she whistles and the *deepa* comes to a halt with a low moan. She slides from the saddle, tenderly stroking the creature's side. "Good girl."

"This is as far as we can take her. The market is around the corner down there. The shade slats above the market are too low for her to get under." Tying the reins to a post, she turns and helps Joseph down.

She pauses. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure." Joseph replies.

"You know what the *srin* will do to you and yet you still seek it." Tentatively, she continues. "If it is not an offense to ask, I wish to know why."

"It's a fair question." Joseph ponders for a moment. "Can I ask you a question?"

Treya nods.

"Do you have children Treya?" The question catches her off guard. She looks away from him.

"No. I have not been chosen yet." She answers.

"In time, I am sure you will. I had two boys... a wife, all of whom I loved dearly."

"Of course."

The pair makes their way into the alleys of the market. He continues.

"Three years ago, there was a fire a few houses down the road from ours. It was very late at night, we were all asleep." He pauses, trying to keep his composure. "My boys... the fire jumped from house to house. Many people... my boys, my wife... died that night. I shouldn't have survived. I tried to save them... I couldn't save them."

He looks to the ground. His words like daggers digging deep into his heart.

"I survived."

Treya puts her hand on his shoulder to steady him.

"I was lost. With my family gone, I had nobody, no life beyond myself. Everything that I had done... the money that I had made, the business that I had created... it all seemed so pointless." He firmed his frame. "So I wandered. Aimlessly. Looking for peace. I looked to our leaders for some sign of hope, of meaning. I visited our religious leaders, spent time with their disciples. Nothing filled the void."

They turn the corner and pass the first of the market's vendor stalls. Joseph pays no attention to them, as they stare at the alien among them.

"One night, I found myself in a bar, trying to drown myself... my memories. I saw a report on the news about a batch of *srin* that had found its way to Earth... smuggled into the black market by some trade fleet crew members. The report said that the spice put people into a temporary state of euphoria. The men spoke of seeing family members that had long passed... vivid and real, as you and I standing right here, right now... living, breathing." Joseph became more animated.

"But the *srin*... it killed them. It killed them all." He paused. "When we heard that your Emperor was ill, our scientists immediately started exploring options to cure his ailment... trying to find anything that would help. That's when they found me... willing to help your Emperor in exchange for time with my

family again. If my death let's your Emperor live, then my life has purpose... meaning again. If it means that I am reunited with my sons, my wife, even if just for a splinter of time... it is a gift."

"You are a brave man."

"I am a broken man Treya. One who has found a purpose greater than himself. What you call bravery, I call relief... peace."

Treya grabs his arm, stopping him. "Here." She points to a small adobe hut. Seeing Treya's embroidered collar and the human beside her, the vendor immediately bows.

"Meesh watuzi."

"Meesh watuzi," Treya replied. "This is the spice that you are looking for," pointing to the sacs of *srin*.

"Wasseeb mata *srin* chu zupa?" the vendor asks Treya. She translated for Joseph, "He's asking if I want to buy some *srin*."

"Mee choepa souet, meesh Joseph," She replies to the vendor.

The man takes a step back in protest, agitated. He raises his voice, "Nook taala spret sunat! Sunat!"

Treya put her hands up, speaking softly in an attempt to calm the man. She points at Joseph.

"Zeb nat. San serpa tar arat benata. Meesh guin Ezrati."

The vendor immediately changes his demeanor. "Meesh guin Ezrati? Joseph?" The man is pensive.

Treya nods affirmative.

"He says he's heard what *srin* does to humans. He doesn't want to be known as the man who kills the aliens. He doesn't want your death on his conscience. I told him that you know the consequences and are here to offer your essence to the Emperor, as a friend."

Joseph nods that he understands. He smiles at the vendor, putting his hand on his chest. "Meesh Ezrati."

The vender closes his eyes and nods, humbled.

"He'll help us." Treya is pleased, but saddened. "It is tradition for those who participate in this ceremony to choose their own *srin*. The Harkanaan's believe it to be a sacred connection to this exact spice from seedling though processing, to the purchase and finally the dream state. I'll be inside, waiting for you." She leaves him to his choice.

Joseph looks over the sacs before him. Each has a slightly different hue. Though he knows nothing of the spice itself, he makes his choice. The vendor smiles, and scoops some of the powder into a small carved container. He holds it out for Joseph and points to the small adobe hut. Placing his hands on his chest, he speaks to Joseph.

"Goot tien, meesh Ezrati."

Joseph nods, stepping into the darkness of the hut. His eyes begin to adjust as he looks around. The smoke from the fire dances its way through a thin shaft of light crossing through the space of the hut. He looks at the walls; how the uneven texture meets the dirt of the floor; the sky, up through the open chimney, still reddened by the morning sun. Directly in front of him, Treya sits on a small stool, stoking the fire beneath a cast metal basin. The intricately woven strands of precious metal embedded into the thick area rug shimmered in the firelight.

Treya takes the bowl of *srin* from Joseph. She examines it. A smile crosses her face.

"You've chosen the 'one of many'... the blended mixture of each type of *srin* from each continent. How fitting that you would give your essence to an Emperor who will watch over each of these domains."

He slides his backpack off of his shoulders. Treya motions for him to remove his shirt as well. She watches as each button opens to reveal more of the scars on his chest. Slipping out of his shirt, she can see the full physical damage of the fire that took his family and left him broken. She lets out a sigh of sadness for him. She stands, placing her hand on his scarred chest. Her eyes well up, yet she forces a smile.

"It's okay." He says softly. "Here?" pointing to the stool before him.

She nods and he sits on the squat stool. Treya removes her collar and unravels it to its full length. The highest station of their culture repeated in its embroidery along its full length. She drapes it over his shoulders.

She hands him the bowl of *srin*.

"The ceremony must be done alone. Pour the spice into the basin, breathe over it... take in the fumes. You should lie down soon after that." She places her palm on her chest.

"Goot tien, meesh Ezrati. Goot tien meesh Treya."

"Goot tien, meesh Joseph."

Treya stands, her hand on his shoulder for a moment before she leaves.

Alone, he sits, staring at the red sky above. He holds the bowl over the basin, the fire. Outside, Treya's eyes begin to tear. She leans against the mud wall of the ceremonial hut.

She hears the spice start to sizzle in the basin. Treya hangs her head. Her Emperor will survive.