

QARZAAK

by Tony Chandler

"It is written: 'We, Humans, are made in the image of God.'" Enon's body tensed as he finished speaking.

The Qarzaak's horny mandibles began to open and close. Dancing reflections from the artificial lights of the cavern ceiling played across the ridged scales of the Qarzaak's abdomen as its breathing increased sharply. The misshapen head swiveled lower and closer until Enon felt the hot breath sweep his face with an intense, musky stench.

"You have an ugly god," The Qarzaak hissed into Enon's ear.

Enon clenched his fists and bit back the curses that would mean his certain death. He breathed deeply, quickly -- trying to regain his composure.

The Qarzaak had insulted him in the Human language -- the only way Qarzaak condescended to speak to Humans. Even that was rare enough, though Enon was one of the few Humans that the Qarzaak bothered wasting words on.

Once again, Enon mentally reminded himself that he was more than the nothing-slave the Qarzaak believed him to be. He was more than a sub-species. He ... was a Human.

And he was a Healer.

"You want a breeding license. That's it. That's why you have said this bizarre thing." The Qarzaak's mighty laughter echoed in the large cavern.

Enon's thoughts dissolved instantly with the Qarzaak's harsh words, and now his frustration vectored in a single heartbeat to white-hot lust. Or was it love? The images in his mind were unclear -- for Enon had never actually seen a woman.

The Qarzaak controlled Humans better that way.

But rumors were whispered feverishly around the fires before exhaustion forced the aching bodies to sleep. The time when men, with a few moments to themselves, thought of things that were not, but they wished them to be.

Dreams.

Enon remembered the oft-told tales, and that the Qarzaak kept women separate on mother Earth. But his dreams of Earth had long since died.

"What I have said is true," Enon said, pushing away the unattainable dreams with a single mental blow.

The Qarzaak's laughter echoed louder.

"You are a self-centered race, little Human. To think the "Giver" would fashion himself into the image of a single race. And that of a 'sub-species'!" The Qarzaak emphasized the last word as the basest of obscenities.

Enon held his anger at bay.

"You are nothing but savages." The Qarzaak stood to its full height, twice that of the man before it. The huge mandibles opened wide.

"I would take your head for that gross lie. But, my mandibles are held. Still ..." The blue phlegm shot from the Qarzaak like a superheated geyser.

Enon clenched his eyes shut with the wet impact that enveloped his body. His body began to shake with an equal mixture of rage and utter revulsion. His skin crawled and screamed under the slime that covered him in its wet, filthy embrace. The horrible stench filled his clogged nostrils and he dared not open his eyes for fear the burning syrup would blind him as well.

"The CairE wants you." Enon barely made out the words through the thick fluid that filled his ears. "Do not forget, sub-species! That is the only reason I have wasted my breath with you."

And there was silence.

Enon waited a few moments more, to make sure the Qarzaak left, and then he wiped with urgent, rapid motions across his mouth and nose -- like a man drowning.

And he was.

Finally, mercifully, his frantic efforts cleared one nostril enough so he could fill his burning lungs with air. Still, it was mixed with the gut-wrenching stench of the blue saliva. Enon choked and gagged, bending over as his lungs again screamed with this new, blinding pain. His hands wiped faster.

With each pass, more of the syrupy saliva clung to his hands and not his face. But the heavy stench would irritate his nose for days to come, and his black hair would have a blue glaze -- iridescent blue highlights -- for days. But like all Humans, he would wear that dishonor with pride.

He took his clothes off carefully, rag by tattered rag. They were ruined, as was his sense of smell. But at least that would come back with time. Not so the clothes.

Naked, his ebony skin reflecting a bluish glaze from the overhead lights, he walked among the laborers, head proudly raised. But not a single eye of the hundreds around noticed him in the midst of their burning tiredness -- or cared.

This small planet at the edge of the God-forsaken galaxy was a living hell and everyone who lived here felt its cruel yoke. For untold years the Qarzaak had mined its deep interior, sending their slaves to dig inside the extensive network of tunnels for the rare crystalline minerals they used as the heart of the intelligent computers. Even the unfortunate Qarzaaks who were in charge suffered from the planet's isolation and harsh environment.

But worst were the mutating diseases that seemed to ravage the colony regularly, almost as if the planet itself were trying to fight back against its rape. A new strain had appeared within the last few weeks, and now Enon found himself to be the last living Healer among the Human slaves. The other Healers had died while trying to minister to the thousands of dead or dying. In fact, Enon was almost as exhausted from trying to help fight the epidemic these last weeks as he was from his long shifts in the mines.

Even the Qarzaak had suffered terribly during this last outbreak, as their immune systems sometimes were also sensitive to the virus. Enon had seen many collapse while standing guard -- some had died before the Qarzaak Healers could get to them.

This latest outbreak was quick and efficient in its deadliness, but now it seemed the scourge was finally winding down. At least that's what everyone hoped.

Enon found the community's pile of discarded clothes. They were in the usual place. The Qarzaak always stripped the dead Humans before they threw them away -- after they had popped their heads off with sinister delight.

He smiled as he dressed himself in his hand-picked rags -- for Enon knew he was one of the few Humans any Qarzaak would condescend to speak with.

And though the long workday was almost finished, and his stomach screamed for that one decent meal which was now only minutes away, he obeyed the CairE's request.

To disobey was a far, far worse pain.

Picking his way back through the seemingly endless caverns, Enon found the place where he kept his medicine bags -- bags full of plants, roots, and dried leaves. Enon chose carefully, remembering the words of Joktan, the Qarzaak Healer, and partly guessing from the vague message the Qarzaak Guard had given him that some of these medicinal herbs would be needed. Placing the leather straps over his shoulders, he began his journey.

He forced his drained body to move among the sweaty figures of his fellow laborers as they worked into the late afternoon. Through the narrow confines of the dimly lit underworld he wove his way until finally he had passed the twin Qarzaak warriors who guarded the Gate that led to the outside world beneath a real sky.

But once past them, as his eyes began to adjust to the light of the setting second sun and the still-rising distant third sun, he paused. It would give his numbed and tired mind time to rest. Rest ...

"Over here."

Enon turned to the whispered words. A grimy, dirt-streaked face came out of the shadows of the boulders. Enon recognized the Asiatic features framed by the greasy black hair.

"Have you been called by the CairE?" He asked.

Enon nodded wearily. It was only Merk.

"Then I must come with you." Merk's nose wrinkled in disgust. "You have been dishonored today. Good. Your heart will be with us as I strike a blow for Humanity."

Enon shook his head. "Leave me alone."

Merk's dirt-smeared smile widened.

"I have made myself a living bomb."

Enon grew very still, and Merk opened his shirt to reveal the cloth belts strapped tightly around his body -- each filled with explosive powder.

"The haughty Qarzaak will never suspect anything this primitive."

"You're crazy!" Enon whispered.

"Aren't we all." Merk closed his shirt. "Aren't we all."

Enon watched carefully as Merk's eyes widened, and then Merk's countenance became transfixed as though a vision had suddenly, invisibly, come to him.

Enon tried to step away until Merk's hand reached out, grabbed him roughly and pulled him close to his strange, far-off eyes. Enon struggled.

"We strike a blow for Humanity. Together."

"And we both die," Enon growled.

Merk's transfixed gaze broke into a wild-eyed smile.

"That's the plan," Merk laughed.

The lumbering form of a Qarzaak guard came into view.

"Let's go." Pushing Enon before him, Merk forced both of them forward.

The evening air swept his face and body with as much cool refreshment as he had ever known in this life. Enon breathed deeply, appreciatively, wondering how many more breaths he had left.

"What will I tell the CairE?" Enon looked intensely at Merk. "About you."

"Tell him that I, too, am a Healer. A Healer in training! Hey, I carry my own medicine bags!" Merk began laughing again as the second sun disappeared below the horizon.

Enon pulled tight the straps that hung over his shoulders as they walked into the false night under the lonely and small third sun.

"They even picked a planet that doesn't have a true night. To torment us," Merk said with bitterness.

"And far away from any kind of civilization. Even Qarzaak civilization," Enon said.

"How do you know that?"

Enon glanced at his old friend. "Because they have not replaced Joktan, the Qarzaak Healer, after all these long weeks. There is much sickness with this new outbreak of the virus, even among them."

"That is good. That is very good," Merk said.

"No, it isn't." Enon stopped. "Joktan was the only Qarzaak ..." Enon's eyes looked far off.

"He was the only one of them that 'really' talked to me."

Merk waved his hands with disbelief. "That was wrong, man, they're the enemy. We can't fraternize with them." Merk shook his head. "And you learned some of their language, didn't you? That's crazy! That's the original sin!" Merk stared at Enon, waiting for a response that didn't come. "He even allowed you to use his Med-Tools, didn't he? A Human, using Qarzaak technology!" Merk muttered a curse under his breath, and that half-audible curse prompted Enon to answer.

"Joktan did more than that -- he taught me, really taught me. Until you killed him."

Merk laughed again. "I didn't kill him."

"No, not you personally. But your precious Resistance did."

Merk caught up with his rapid strides and matched them.

"Men were born to be free -- not what we are. Not a sub-species." Merk stared straight ahead, his face hard and sure. "We have to fight. Until we're all free again."

"Or we're all dead." Enon whispered.

They walked in silence, each deep in his own thoughts -- troubled thoughts filled with the curse of being born Human. Enon's personal thoughts drifted back to the beginning of the Qarzaak curse -- and the original sin of Mankind.

Everything was a test to the Qarzaak -- every action, every word, every deed. And the Qarzaak were judge, jury, and executioner.

* * *

"First Contact" had quickly turned into a nightmare when Mankind met the Qarzaak. It had begun as everyone had always dreamed "First Contact" would begin -- with breathless excitement and mind-boggling visions of new life forms and an exotic alien world.

The Qarzaak were light-years more advanced than Humanity in their science, technology, and overall knowledge. And unlike the popular science-fiction shows of the past, there was no "universal translator." Within the first hours it became painfully obvious that the Qarzaak were trying to communicate with this newest species -- Humans. But their speech was so complex and the words spoken lightning-fast -- at first it seemed as though they were simply humming -- that the first Humans were at a total loss and had no idea how to respond.

But within hours, after the Qarzaak had studied the speech patterns of the new species, they began to communicate in the language of the Humans -- with ease and full control of the "primitive" language.

Humans had failed the first test -- they couldn't comprehend a "normal" language -- Qarzaak.

"First Contact" continued for several days on that first Qarzaak world. But as the Humans were introduced to more and more of their advanced knowledge and technology it became obvious to the Qarzaak that most of it was incomprehensible. It was like trying to teach a

baby Einstein's General Theory of Relativity -- before it had learned basic math skills, or had even learned to talk.

The Qarzaak quickly realized that the Humans' primitive language, especially its limited vocabulary, prohibited them from teaching this new species more than just the basics of their advanced knowledge. But Humans seemed incapable of learning the Qarzaak language.

Again, Humans had failed. Now they were perceived not only as a primitive species, but also a backward one as well, which in the Qarzaaks' view was the ultimate sin.

And then came the accident.

The Human starship crashed on the surface of the Qarzaak world -- partly an accident, partly negligence on the part of the crew. The nuclear reactions that powered the ship's mighty engines set off a chain reaction that destroyed not only the Qarzaak capital city, but worse, the deadly residue severely damaged the eco-system of that world -- for hundreds of years to come.

The Qarzaak were shocked that the Humans were stupid enough to power their ships with such a dangerous and unstable technology. After they had questioned the survivors, they were shocked that the Humans had not been able to prevent the disaster in the first place. The Qarzaak also were angry that they had made the mistake of trusting the Humans -- a mistake that they vowed wouldn't be repeated.

Contacting the worlds of Humanity, the Qarzaak questioned them more. And the Qarzaak anger grew as they learned of the checkered history of Mankind.

The Qarzaak were dumbfounded to discover how many times Humans had almost made themselves extinct, how many times they had almost destroyed their fabled homeworld -- Earth. And most of it due to negligence, greed, or just plain ignorance.

To the Qarzaak, Humans were worse than stupid.

To be precise, Humans were dangerous and inferior. More than that, they were incapable of learning, incapable of becoming Qarzaak. Certainly incapable of joining the Qarzaak Empire.

The Qarzaak then judged the entire Human race. And it was not good.

Humans rebelled at the Judgment: being labeled "subservient third-class citizens," relegated to menial labor and other "safe and simple" work positions throughout the worlds of Qarzaak.

And so the first Qarzaak-Human War began. It proved to be nearly suicidal for Humanity -- like fighting an armored tank with bows and arrows. The war was over in days.

After that, Humans had been further reduced in status by the ruthless Judgment of Qarzaak -- they were now simply "slaves" and expendable, ranking slightly above mere animal life.

Humanity had failed every Qarzaak test with flying colors. And once a judgment had been passed, few were changed.

Hundreds of years had passed since that time, and still ...

* * *

"Are you a coward? Is that why you don't join us?" Merk asked.

Enon looked away as he kept up his quick pace. "No, I'm not a coward," Enon replied, as his thoughts returned to the present.

Merk eyed him carefully a moment before he spoke again. "No one is our friend in this universe, Enon. Nobody cares about Humans." Merk's voice had grown low, full of emotion. "We have to look after ourselves. Nobody else will."

Merk shook his head slowly as he paused -- a great sadness across his features. "They drove us away like animals at 'The Exodus.'"

The Exodus of Tears, Enon thought bitterly.

All Humans knew that story by heart -- a tale seared and scarred into every Human memory.

Enon heard the cries again in his mind, the screams, as the entire population of Earth was herded into the Qarzaak ships. Men separated from women -- packed like so much disposable freight and shipped out to distant, unknown places.

Tears burned in Enon's eyes. "There has been much suffering," he whispered.

"Nobody loves a Human!" Merk said as he bit his lip.

They both trudged through the shallow valley in silence. All around them, as far as the eye could see, the tiny flowers of the alien heather formed a sea of red that moved in flowing waves with the gentle breeze as false night continued to fall. This heather -- the Qarzaak called it frathizzea -- was the only form of life that seemed to thrive on this forlorn world.

"Even if we are right, we can't defeat them in war," Enon whispered.

"We kill them. We kill a few more every time. You must join me, or at least allow me to kill the CairE this night." Merk turned and stared at him.

Their eyes met -- each a fierce challenge. But only the silence returned.

Enon's thoughts were a vortex of emotions.

He knew what would happen if the CairE -- the Qarzaak leader of this planet -- was actually assassinated. It would mean death for tens of thousands of Humans back at the work camp. And how many more Human deaths on other planets? And women? Would they kill some of the women, too?

But dare he fight his own kind? His own friend? Surely, if Enon revealed Merk to the Qarzaak, Merk's head would be taken without a second thought.

Could Enon choose between Merk and the CairE? And the death of untold thousands?

Would he allow the death of his friend, or the death of the CairE?

Enon continued with his shoulders bowed under a greater weight than his medicine bags.

He breathed deeply, trying vainly to chase the thoughts away. His eyes turned upward at the burnt-orange sky, the only sky he had ever known.

For the thousandth time, Enon tried to image a blue sky instead.

But he could never see it -- though the storytellers said it was true. Sometimes late at night, during the mild winter, when the Qarzaak allowed them to camp above ground in the cool, crisp air, the old men would point to a small yellow star. They had called that lone star "Sun."

Then the stories would be told of long ago, when men were free to travel among the stars. And even more astounding, when Humans had been masters of technology, both as designers and as users.

Like the Qarzaak.

Enon shook his head. He found it difficult to imagine such a thing.

* * *

The groans came to their ears long before they saw him.

The man was dying. The rattling, labored breathing told Enon of the fluid that was slowly filling his lungs. That is what would kill him. That is how "The Virus" killed in its most lethal form. You drowned as your lungs filled with it -- a slow, suffocating death.

Unless the Qarzaak found him hiding here first -- a sick slave, one who could not work, was useless to them.

Enon knelt beside the trembling form.

The man's eyes opened and he began to struggle violently.

"Hold still. I am a friend. I am Human."

Dilated pupils tried to focus, but could not.

Enon fumbled with his right hand in his bag while he pulled the sick man up with his other. Merk watched from a distance, knowing Enon's efforts were in vain.

Enon's fingers felt first one object, and then another, searching for the right container. The container.

"What's your name?"

The man coughed, trying to answer. Drool, a mixture of crimson and yellow phlegm, flowed over his chin.

"Jaa ... Jaymz."

"I'm going to give you something, Jaymz. It will ease your pain."

Coughing answered.

Enon found the all-too-familiar pouch near the bottom.

The man struggled again, and opened his mouth.

"I ... was dreamin' ... I seen it ..." The dying man suddenly went into spasms, his body racked by coughing fits. Finally, painfully, it passed. "I was there. Really there. On Earth!"

Enon felt the callused hands grip him, and he looked into the worn and haggard face. A face wrinkled, thin, and drawn from a lifetime of hard labor.

He guessed the man's age to be thirty-one.

Enon rolled the brittle leaves into a tight ball and inserted it into the man's wet mouth.

"Remember the stories again, Jaymz. Dream again. You will go to Earth, your dream will come true."

The man chewed instinctively, and his unfocused eyes peered with a sudden intensity.

Enon lay him down, trying to make him as comfortable as possible. The hallucinogenic herb would ease the man in his final hours before he succumbed.

And he would believe, he would dream, he was back on Earth.

The death of this one man did not dampen Enon's spirits; he saw death every day. He began his trek again, as if nothing had happened.

And then something crystallized in his mind, something that had been lurking in his thoughts a long time now.

Enon no longer believed.

His heart and soul wrenched with this most intimate revelation of his being. A secret he dared not share.

He was a Believer who did not believe.

No, he would never see the fabled homeworld of Humanity -- Earth. Not because he would never travel there, but because there was really no such planet.

Earth was only a myth.

Earth was a fable of a long-enslaved race who yearned for a home, a world of its own. Who yearned to be free to walk the under the sapphire skies of a world called Earth. A garden planet, a paradise full of life -- so the stories told.

The whispered stories told of animals of every shape and kind living there, unlike this barren planet. Animals that crawled and swam and flew, animals with fur and scales and feathers.

There were also trees and flowers of untold varieties that flourished and bloomed. And birds ... small animals that could actually fly. Birds of every color.

It was even said the birds could sing. But Enon had always doubted that part.

He shook his head.

When had he stopped believing? When had the pressures of this crushing reality buried Mankind's one remaining dream?

Enon felt so old, so very old, for a man of twenty-three.

"Do you believe in Earth?" Enon asked, breaking the silence.

"Of course," Merk grunted.

Enon bit his lip.

"But no one has ever been there."

Merk held his head up, his mind turning these words over. The silence stretched.

"Perhaps the stories about a home planet. About Earth ... are ..." Enon's words trailed off.

"No one has ever seen a woman either, have they?" Merk said at last. "But you believe they exist, don't you?"

Enon had no memory of his mother -- male children were taken immediately after birth. But Merk was right; no man on this god-forsaken planet had ever seen a woman. Not even a holo-image. Though a precious few had left, each given the longed-for breeding licenses.

But he did believe in women.

Enon suddenly smiled.

"Do you think women really have breasts like watermelons?"

Merk did not even hesitate as he answered.

"Absolutely."

* * *

The bright lights of K'sah, the Qarzaak city, appeared between the slopes of the two small hills covered with red heather.

Enon drew a deep breath and thought again about the futility of life -- his life, about the pitiable existence he had known. Indeed, the existence his race had known.

And now, today, it would end for him.

"Come," Merk said. "We die as heroes. For our kind."

Enon sighed. "I think I would rather live and let you die as the hero."

Merk laughed out loud.

"Don't worry, my old friend. It will be quick. Just get us close to the 'High One' of the Qarzaak." His voice faded.

The city streets were surprisingly empty. Normally, the Qarzaak preferred to be out under the low light of this world's false night. But except for a solitary Qarzaak gliding above the street in one of their circle vehicles, the two men were alone.

Enon and Merk, each with bowed head -- for Humans were not allowed to look up into the face of a Qarzaak unless first spoken to -- made their way along the edge of the wide thoroughfare that traversed the middle of this lone Qarzaak city.

The great black pyramid rose before them.

It transfixed the two men's eyes with its foreboding blackness, as if the dark structure sucked up the light from the very sky as the Qarzaak sucked up the lifeblood of the Human race.

Casting quick glances upward, Enon saw the famed lights that periodically raced up the pyramid's edges to the dark pinnacle far above. As the huge, black gate became discernible in its side, two Qarzaak warriors approached them. The bone-spurs of their feet appeared to Enon's lowered gaze.

"Why are there two?"

The Qarzaak legs moved closer.

Enon glanced over at Merk.

"He is my apprentice. He learns to be a Healer." Enon half-lied.

The familiar tones of the Qarzaak scanner came to their ears.

"What is in the other's bags? It is a mineral, not herbs."

The two men looked at each other, heads still bowed.

"It is also used to heal," Merk lied with confidence.

"And what say you?" The warrior's voice echoed above them as it directed the question to Enon.

Enon shut his eyes, hiding under his bowed head.

"Answer me!"

Enon's eyes opened at the shouted words. Merk was staring at him.

"It can be so used," Enon said with a solemn tone.

"It can be used as a weapon!" The Qarzaak shouted.

Enon and Merk froze.

And Merk's hands leapt inside his shirt.

Enon closed his eyes and tensed for the explosion he knew was coming.

He heard the sounds of struggle beside him; grunts mixed with the sounds of cursing. The sounds began to rise into the air.

Merk screamed his rage from somewhere above as his arms were pulled away from his shirt -- the crude device not triggered.

Enon looked up now and saw the mandibles as they slowly curved around Merk's bobbing head.

Please God, no. No! Enon thought as he instantly shut his eyes.

Enon jumped at the sharp cracking sound. The nauseating snapping. And then the all too familiar climax -- the gut-wrenching, the wet and haunting pop!

"Take it away," the Qarzaak said.

Enon tensed. And waited his turn with the mandibles.

"You, Healer. You alone were ordered by the CairE. Go."

Shocked and numb, yet somehow still alive, Enon walked in a daze straight inside the black pyramid.

"All Humans are liars and imbeciles." The well-known insult echoed down the black corridor from the warriors as Enon passed them. Tears stung his eyes.

Dazed in a mental fog, he followed the beckoning lights through the maze of turns and corridors that snaked throughout the Qarzaak pyramid.

Nothing ever changes, he thought.

Another life had been wasted. And even if Merk had succeeded in killing the CairE, and themselves, it would have been just more death. Nothing significant would have been achieved.

Enon bowed again under the injustice heaped upon his entire race. He burned with the Qarzaak's prejudice for his species.

Once again he felt his spirit die under their relentless burden, their unjust condemnation -- condemned as an incorrigible species, not capable of being Qarzaak.

But never allowed the opportunity.

Enon almost screamed.

Nothing ever changes!

It still felt as though he were taking his last steps as he plodded mechanically along the darkened corridors. Once he had fulfilled the CairE's request, Enon would still need to answer for his part in Merk's attempted attack. Deep inside his soul, Enon groaned. Somehow, despite the confusion and turmoil of his mind, Enon entered into the correct antechamber.

The huge Qarzaak was bending over a bed upon which a smaller version of itself lay. It was immense, bigger than any Enon had ever seen. The CairE's misshapen head slowly turned toward him.

"Come, sub-species. Come." A huge sigh escaped his horny mandibles. "It is my offspring."

Enon approached and heard wheezing.

"The virus has mutated. It is almost always fatal to Humans," Enon said absently as his hands reached into his bag.

The bulbous eyes of the CairE regarded him carefully.

"But fortunately, the Qarzaak have a much better survival rate," Enon added.

The CairE nodded.

"Yet, our population has been decimated the last few weeks as well. Without Joktan the Healer, my staff has been unsuccessful in finding a cure for this new strain. Perhaps in a few days ..." The mandibles snapped together, and a segmented arm reached for the figure lying so still. "But it would be too late for my only offspring."

"I will need your Med-tools." Enon said. "Especially the Med-Scanner."

The CairE nodded.

"I will reward you for this. If ... you can save him."

Enon took the Med-Scanner, trying to remember what Joktan had taught him in its usage and what little Joktan had taught him of Qarzaak physiology. He did not acknowledge that the CairE had even spoken.

He did not want the CairE's reward. Bitterness welled inside his heart again -- rage and frustration. Enon wanted nothing from him or his kind.

"I am the CairE of this world, though it is distant and insignificant. Name your desire," the mighty Qarzaak commanded.

The Med-Scanner became active and Enon scanned the life-signs of the young Qarzaak.

"I will let you breed. Yes. A breeding license. That is what Humans desire most of all." The CairE's huge head nodded. "And food. Drink. I will give you more than you have ever known."

"He is very weak. His immune system is failing," Enon said, still ignoring the High One's

words. "His body is losing its battle with the virus. It may be already too late." In his mind, Enon knew how easy it would be just to let this young Qarzaak die. It struggled to breathe even now. It wouldn't be any fault of his own if it died.

So many had already died this one day -- what would one more death matter?

And then the bulbous eyes were right before his face.

"What will it take to save him? What do you want?"

Enon looked into the huge Qarzaak face impassively, and then watched as it moved back and then hovered over the smaller form of its child. He watched with sudden interest as the Qarzaak father took its horny arm and softly stroked the small face.

And there was a sound.

Enon's eyes narrowed at the strange sound. The two faces were so near each other, he couldn't make out where it was coming from. And then he nodded with realization.

The father and son were singing -- humming -- to each other.

How strange. But Enon was transfixed by this sight. He felt his heart begin to pound with excitement. And suddenly he felt his anger begin to fade.

Against the wide, indescribable gap of two alien species, Enon saw for the first time the love of a parent for its offspring -- its child. His heart beat a little faster as he shared this tender moment with them together, and his heart went out to this concerned father and his sick child.

"Nothing," Enon answered.

"You will let him die?!" The CairE shouted. The huge head swung slowly towards him, mandibles open with a threatening posture.

"No, I will try to save him." Enon raised the Med-Scanner. "I will save him ... for nothing. No reward."

The mandibles worked nervously.

"But what must I give you?"

Enon pulled the bags off his shoulders and laid them on the bed of the CairE's dying offspring.

"For what will you save him?" the CairE urged again.

And then a word came to Enon.

"Szo-hmm-uhnn-Gapee-uffmmn." Enon carefully hummed/enunciated, breathing the Qarzaak expression as much as speaking it.

The bulbous eyes blinked in astonishment. "You know Qarzaak?"

Enon nodded. "Joktan taught me more than your medical instruments. A few words, a few phrases, over our long months together. I can speak some of your almighty language."

"It is hard for me to imagine a sub-species can ..." The huge head shook slowly in disbelief.

"... know Qarzaak. Learn Qarzaak." Enon finished. "Or learn your tools? Or your mathematics." Enon's voice had risen almost to a shout without his realizing it. Taking a deep breath for control, he began searching among his bags for the plants and leaves he needed. It was a long shot, but it was the only thing he could offer the CairE's sick offspring.

As he found the combination he wanted and began to mash the leaves into the paste he would feed the young Qarzaak, the CairE spoke again.

"Perhaps you are just a mimic." The mandibles came near. "What does the expression you uttered mean, Human?"

He had taken the knife and began to chop the leaves to make the paste. As his hands worked quickly, without looking up, he answered.

"Love ... with undeserved kindness, it's the closest Human translation. Perhaps sympathy thrown in too." Enon thought a moment. "Care for others, show concern for them as you would for yourself as you both walk together through life." He smiled. "That's a pretty close translation."

The mammoth Qarzaak snorted loudly. "How is it that a sub-species such as your violent race can know this principle? I do not believe you."

Enon almost lost his temper.

Why was he trying to save this Qarzaak? The CairE would let him die, if it were Enon lying there instead. After all, Humans were only sub-species.

Enon suddenly smiled. Without thinking, he looked full upon the face of the standing Qarzaak. And spoke to him as an equal.

"I will do for you, as I would want done for me -- if the situation were reversed. I will cure your son for no reward other than saving his life."

The mandibles stopped in shocked surprise.

"Szo-hmm-uhnn-Gapee-uffmmn," Enon hummed/breathed once more with confidence.

Placing one hand behind the young Qarzaak's head, Enon carefully placed the preparation between the small mandibles. Weakly, it sucked the healing mixture.

Without looking, Enon felt the CairE kneel beside them.

"The Qarzaak know your kind. Your greatest desires are to breed, to fight, to destroy." The huge mandibles clicked. "It has always been said that 'the only good Human is a dead Human' -- that you are savages. A sub-species."

Enon continued his gentle ministrations without pause.

The CairE watched. And saw the first signs of relief on the offspring's tiny face as it moved, feeling the effects of the herb mixture as it entered its body.

Enon looked up again and began using the Med-Tool, remembering the instructions of Joktan. With the combination of natural medicines from this cold world in concert with the Medical technology of the Qarzaak, Enon fought the deadly virus. He smiled as the scanner showed signs of the young Qarzaak's fever beginning to break.

The CairE's mandibles clicked softly, rhythmically.

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As the hours passed, the irregular breathing softened, finally returning to a semblance of normalcy. And the two beings talked, Enon and the CairE, almost as he had conversed with Joktan. They talked about life and death, about love and hate. About many things ...

Enon was using the Med-Scanner again late that evening to strengthen the young Qarzaak's body and help it fight the retreating effects of the killer virus when he felt the CairE's face come close once more.

"You are different." The mandibles clicked rapidly three times. "You understand ..." The great body rose. "I have decided your reward -- you shall become my personal slave."

Enon chuckled, shaking his head with a sardonic look on his face.

"And, I will teach you Qarzaak -- all that is Qarzaak. I will do this thing myself. You will become Qarzaak." The CairE paused. "Even though it is strictly Qada for a race that has been so sanctioned."

Enon was drained. There had been too much death, too much pain, this day. All he could muster was a weak smile of acceptance. Or was it defeat?

"I leave this world soon. You will accompany my family to my new assignment." The CairE clicked his mandibles excitedly. "In fact, we will travel near the former home world of Humans, now a protected refuge and no longer inhabited, as its eco-systems still repair themselves.

Enon remained silent with a frozen look upon his face -- a vagueness in his eyes.

Later, after the CairE's offspring had awakened with signs of definite improvement, Enon curled up in a corner of the room deep inside the black pyramid. But many thoughts raced

through his weary mind and kept the desired sleep at bay.

His acceptance meant he would be a simple household slave, bottom of the rung in the order of all things Qarzaak. And more than the language, he would be taught Qarzaak. Enon closed his eyes. It was better than nothing, and that's all he was now, he thought.

But his becoming Qarzaak meant something more -- it meant a first, small step for all of Humanity.

For a brief, thundering moment Enon's soul went deathly cold. Deep inside he knew how alone he would soon become. Despised by his own kind, ostracized by other Humans in their hatred of all Qarzaak. He would be a traitor to them. They would probably even try to kill him. Too, he would be scorned by most of those now known as Qarzaak. They would still view him as they judged his race -- as a sub-species. They would view him as one who dared to join them as Qarzaak and was not worthy. Alone in all the universe, he would become the first Human Qarzaak.

He didn't know if he could do it. He really didn't.

But he would have to try.

A dull tiredness suddenly overwhelmed him and his muscles ached with fiery pain. His eyes fluttered as he pushed his racing thoughts away. Fatigue now blanketed Enon into a deep sleep almost before his eyes fully closed.

And for the first time in many years -- Enon dreamed of Earth.

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