

The Street of Dreams was again different from usual, but not in a bad way for a change. Progon was there, appearing as a four-legged black dragon whose scales reflected colors not unlike a beetle's carapace, their head about 3 metrons above Unkky's. The silver tea service was there, but the tea party included Dergy, the elder of the two dragons present. They looked quite similar in size and shape to Progon, but their dark scales were more translucent, seeming to glitter from starlight shining out from within.

Tea cups were rather tiny compared to these giant creatures, but right sized for Unkky. He'd enjoyed it with Progon at times before. This is the first time however that Unkky asked just what kind of tea that was, being quite dissimilar to the spicy or bitter character of Iksar teas he had known.

"Earl Grey," Progon told him. "I sort of developed the habit after seeing Jean-Luc Picard having and serving it often on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*," he then added, realizing this yet another Earth reference Unkky wouldn't understand, "black tea that has been flavored with the oil of bergamot."

"We have black tea, to be sure. But I don't think Makha has bergamot," Unkky commented. He finished his cup and replaced it with its saucer on the silver tray. "I don't really know Dergy except by name and understanding theirs is the shepherding task for my galaxy. I'm curious, why in this instance do I get to interact with you both?"

"Connie did your species a misservice by eliminating the Cylon threat," Progon answered. "Dergy agrees this was a branch of possibility they didn't really feel would come about. To re-establish the order we wish for your part of the galaxy, we can do a thing for you. This time when we reach consensus, which must be unanimous including your own consent, we can effect a plan, or at least educate you as to the likely outcome were the status quo to continue."

"You're talking about bringing the Cylons back," Unkky said, with obvious trepidation.

"Yes," answered Dergy, lowering its head to level with Unkky's. "You do have a mind closest to a dragon's of any sentient we're encountered," it said in a matter-of-fact tone that hinted at no flattery. "And therefore we felt taking your opinion into equal account with ours would be fair, and inclusive of a being who would be the most affected by our decision."

"Explain why this is a good idea in the first place," Unkky demanded.

"You put it well to Connie during your confrontation," Dergy began. "Survival pressure is the energy that powers the evolutionary process. Cylon war should it continue will likely result in technological breakthroughs they and your race may never achieve again - namely, replicants like you. So I ask you, do you so loathe your existence, hate so furiously how you came to be, you'd prefer it never happen again? Are you content being the only freakishly capable, agile and intelligent Iksar that will ever live? What might it mean if more like you came to be?"

“My argument for freedom, so organisms are free to evolve and grow,” Unkky stated, recalling. “Including replicant evolution and freedom.”

“Exactly,” both dragons spoke in concert.

“It sounds ironic, that for better freedom, Iksars must be trapped into war,” Unkky thought out loud. “All pursuits - industrial, inventive, even artistic - all radiating from one point, the struggle for survival. There was an upswing in art commissions due to the increased wealth Connie caused. Doesn't that too serve draconic justice?”

“Indeed it did, but you know quite well that wealth cannot forever increase. Ultimately it gets spent, hoarded, wasted, or at least the means to generate more becomes exhausted. Just how long do you think Connie could've kept stoking your economy?” Progon asked.

Unkky thought, and his mind did calculate a very reliable prediction. “Only another yahren, two at most,” he admitted.

“If the Cylons return, the next 8 centurons will produce much more invention and artistic expression than 2 yahren's worth,” Dergy chose to continue the discussion. “Without them, the lust for increasing wealth would therefore lead into that even longer period of exploration and conquest, the conflict affecting 7,110 other species. Connie left you with practically indefatigable offensive capabilities. The Iksar Imperial Regime will be totalitarian overlords, tyrants of this quadrant, for millennia,” it cautioned.

“You dragons are quite ambivalent about these alternatives?” Unkky asked, obviously puzzled.

“It's a matter really of quantity, what each culture reveres,” Dergy said. “Dragons have no genuine sense of aesthetics, save for maybe star configurations. You can argue we find a galaxy shape pleasing as a function of how well it suits our ultimate purpose, not some arbitrary sense of aesthetics.”

“So the quantity of Iksar product over the next 8 centurons is somehow equal to that of 7,110 other species?” Unkky shook his head in disbelief.

“Once you factor in replicants into this equation, yes,” Dergy said, flatly.

“Sure, I can perform music, sing with perfect pitch, likely imitate the best dance ever performed, win at most games of strategy and chance, but it's all memorization and copying,” Unkky said. “I couldn't invent a masterpiece of art, music, sculpture, what have you, even if I tried.”

“Correct, you are much like us,” Dergy agreed. “Memory and calculation are almost boundless. Creating something without purpose or following some plan is beyond our ken.”

“You're implying replicants after me will be creative, expressive, passionate?” Unkky queried.

“You discount yourself. You are creative, expressive and passionate. You have certain inhibitions, especially as regards your true nature, that has made it difficult for you to allow yourself things that evoke the more inspirational feelings - love, family, even fame. You do have quite a bit of awe for us dragons, and we appreciate and enjoy it. That led to the first accurate illustration of us that mundanes can witness. I realize you commissioned that work, but it’s proof you have passion sufficient to be creative,” Dergy explained.

“So other replicants will be diverse, some purposeful and some more lofty and expressive, artistic?” Unkky asked.

“Yes, just as ordinary Iksars will evolve different examples of the same. And the species you antagonize will have their own pressures to evolve, and express passions in artwork.”

“This is a conflict equal to that which caused Connie to break down. I assume you two aren’t just trying to push me into yet another catatonic state?” Unkky jibed.

Both dragons chuckled. “No, I believe we both agree three was more than enough,” Dergy answered.

“Quite so,” Progon added. “It doesn’t disable us, grappling with this choice. We see enough dragon-like potential in your mind to assume you can ponder it a while without ill effect.”

“Ponder it I must,” Unkky admitted. “I do not feel completely convinced I should subject my people to centuries of additional war-borne pain and suffering, or prefer dominance be thrust upon thousands of other species at Iksar hands. Neither seems a fair decision.”

Both dragons nodded, and Progon said, “We’ll meet again once you have chosen.”

Then all faded, and the unmemorable blurry passage of dreams resumed.

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Iggy had no work that day, so the two reptilians talked about this terrible choice. Unkky was making no headway coming to his decision. “Unkky, it’s very thoughtful of the dragons to include you in this deliberation,” he started. “Still, it seems like a very heavy burden to lay on your shoulders.”

“No argument from me there. What do you think of Iksar made replicants? I guess I’m really asking you if you fully trust I’m not still Cylon deep inside and just pretending to be your friend.”

“Thanks for sharing what must be a very deep insecurity,” Iggy replied. “For a while, I admit I kept judging your words and actions, seeing if some subtle Cylon plot was at work. I guess it was because you caused Connie to kill them all, I stopped wondering. Then I became a believer when you fought Connie. Cylons would have readily used that situation to achieve goals - just

needed the Superior Intellect to be in command instead of the planet-size chillframe Connie made of itself.”

“You weren’t there, how do you know that’s how it went down?” Unkky asked.

“That dialogue you repeated between yourself and the dragons,” Iggy said quickly. “I can infer by how you re-told it, you were the one to argue for freedom and had to use a paradox to overload Connie. I get that conflicts can inspire invention and art, and how in contrast peace tends to slow and reduce these things. There’s just one answer I’d give the dragons: Frak off!”

Unkky blinked and stared at disbelief, then his expression changed to amusement, laughing out loud. “You’re right, if I insult them, they’re too mature and long-lived to be vengeful from an insult. All insults and offenses are minor with them.”

“What do you think they’ll do if you refuse to choose?” Iggy asked.

“I don’t know. With them, it’s good happening either way. They seem to feel it is an honor for me to be a deciding vote with them.”

“Frak draconic honor, too!” Iggy piped up. “Curious how one path does require intervention on their part, and the other none,” he then observed.

Unkky’s eye ridges lowered as he pondered for a moment. “I think what’s really wanted is a third alternative, one they’ve not considered between each other so far.”

“Now you’re talking - the Iksar alternative!” Iggy said brightly.

“Now if only I had a frakking idea what that may be,” Unkky replied.

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Unkky decided to do unconventional research, reading stories mostly. He hoped that some imaginative writer had created a similar enough conundrum in a story and what solution was reached. Fortunately, Unkky could read the whole text of *War and Pieces* in microns, speed reading and committing it to his eidetic memory. So far, third alternatives were in scarce example, so he continued on assimilating Iksar fictional literature.

In post-apocalyptic future tales, a number of logical but inconsistent and chaotic changes came about. Unkky weighed scenarios against the ravages of war, from the perspective of the oppressed and some from the perspective of the oppressor. The latter role was always doomed, sometimes to total annihilation. Unkky therefore thought more about how to create hardship for Iksars that would cause almost equal invention and industry to that generated by Cylon aggression.

He didn't savor the answer when it came to him, but it created so many equally possible variants of outcome that the role of oppressor was not one-sided. Certain Iksar tribes would be engaged being totalitarians, but many others would be pursued and threatened by other races. It was this spread of situations, avoiding the all-or-nothing alternatives the dragons wished, that made this the most appealing alternative.

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"I said, tell the dragons to frak off!" Iggy exclaimed. "You're crazy!"

"Status quo means Iksars as totalitarians for millennia. After which when the uprising ultimately defeats us, we'll be all but wiped out, and our race only thought about like we do the Cylons! Do you have the HUBRIS to tell me you believe that for the next centurons indefinite, Iksars deserve to be masters of the Universe?" Unkky fixed his best imitation of Connie's piercing gaze upon his friend.

"But to ask that, the kind of destruction, scattering, deprivation, horror and anguish--"

Unkky interrupted with a sweep of his hand. "Is a better destiny than either of those the dragons propose."

"It's frakking awful, Unkky! Let us be masters of the Universe for millennia if that's what it takes. What the frak will I care some thousand centurons from now when beings use 'Iksar' as a word for a galmonging despot?"

"Are you going to hate me if I ask for this thing? Will it prove to you I've been Cylon all along?" Unkky asked, tilting his head and regarding his friend with severity.

Iggy hung his head and sighed. "I know you aren't. Friendship doesn't end with a single disagreement. It's just the strongest kind of disagreement I've ever had with someone."

"I know, Iggy. And I feel you. It would comfort my ego to have you consent with my plan, but I respect your perspective and feelings about it. And I'm sorry."

"Thanks for the advance warning, at least. I may be able to have Uncle help get me enlisted in IIF or whatever evacuation force may be coming soon. So I guess in a way, thanks for helping me survive what comes next," Iggy said with sorrow and regret dripping from his words.

"I better get to sleep and let the dragons hear my proposal," Unkky said.

Iggy headed for the door, turning before exiting and said, "And I better get a whole bottle of ambrosia in me tonight."

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Progon and Dergy were in the copse, as usual. No tea this time. “We sensed you have an answer for us tonight,” Dergy spoke.

“Yes, a third option,” Unkky said with reluctance.

“We expected you’d not like either alternative. This is exactly what we hoped you would come up with for us,” this time Progon commented.

“Iksar astronomers track a number of near-Makha asteroids,” Unkky said. “Some threaten all life, their impact causing a global mass extinction event. I want one to deviate toward such a path of destruction. Maybe taking yahrens to impact, but unquestionably and because of its size, irrevocably on course.”

“That’s well in our power, especially since our chief influence in your reality is that of gravity,” Dergy said in response.

Progon nodded in assent, adding, “And the scramble off planet creating many scattered tribes of Iksar. Some will be better off than others. Some capable of military aggressive force, some barely able to survive off planet for long. Some will seriously be in need of support from others, or settlement in various other systems. You’ve just recreated conditions even more parallel with Battlestar Galactica than your people already have,” it said in congratulation.

“Yet even so, millions will perish, not to mention most of the animal species of Makha,” Unkky said, voice heavy with pain and regret.

“Yes, but the divergent possibilities! You knew this was a huge ‘toss of the dice’ with your species,” Dergy assured him.

“Yeah, I figured when the game upsets you, flip the table and start over,” Unkky nodded softly.

“Believe me,” Progon assured him, “We dragons know do overs all too well. Thank you, Unkky.”

“Thank you for asking for my advice in such cosmic matters. Now I have to decide whether I can live with myself knowing I brought this to pass, or just wait on the planet for the meteor impact.”

“If it matters to you, Dergy and I, even Andy, would feel loss not having such a special and unique organic friend such as you, however briefly you’d live in the eons of life we have ahead.”

“This is a harder conundrum than previous, to be honest,” Unkky admitted sadly. “Unassuaged guilt of extreme intensity the rest of my life, or oblivion to avoid it. Suffering does seem to be integral to mortal and organic existence,” he added thoughtfully. “Just maybe friends like you celestials and Iggy might just might help get me through.”

“Considering all the powers you name, I really believe there’s zero chance of failure,” Progon spoke, cheerfully.

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