

Samoyekhre

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The street was the usual mix of lights and grime, people coming off duty and going on duty, staggering home to bed or heading out for a party of a night. Cookshops and bars, all set half-below street level with ramps leading down to each of the tiny doors. A thick layer of moondust on the road, marked by thousands of hard-soled boots. The tall man looked at the sign on one of the nearby cookshops. It just said Cookshop and gave its name, in half a dozen different languages. Akkadian, Parsless, Ubuntu – the big three spacefarers tongues, plus a couple of chicken-scratching-alphabets he'd never thought he'd see on this side of the Rim. He looked around him with sharpened attention, then pulled his long coat tighter against the wind and walked over to the little gangway down.

Through the windows, the place was tiny, no more grimy than some, a little noisy. Not too full, but full enough to suggest the food was worth coming back for. And most people were smiling, not about to smash a bottle apart. Good enough for him. He walked the five steps down and swung open the door. Several conversations paused, eyeing over the tall man with the long dark hair and the long dark coat standing framed by moonflare.

A young waitress looked up with a smile in her eyes, and sashayed over, swinging her hips not entirely demurely. Green eyes and black hair in a swinging bob, a pert smile. “Let me take you to a table”.

He answered with a few short barked guttural syllables, from one of the languages on the sign outside. Let's see if she knew her stuff.

She smiled politely and a little surprisedly, then tentatively replied in Parsless with a universal “Do we both speak this language?” hand sign. He answered in a different guttural tongue, also on the sign. She frowned a little, tried Ubuntu. He shook his head, answered in flawless Akkadian. “Girl, if this is a cookshop selling far-Rim food then you don't know stiff-all.” The waitress laughed, easily. “Sure, I don't speak the languages, but the food here's excellent. If that's where you're from, it'll be a full taste of home. The owner knows what she's doing. Take a table, and try it. I bet you'll be satisfied.”

She put him in a seat with his back to the wall. Observant girl, smart too. She dropped a menu in front of him, and as he skimmed it she slid a glass of repetha on ice to the side. He looked at the glass. “What's this?”

She said “On the house, for anyone who arrives speaking one of the Far Rim languages. Owner's standing orders.” She watched his face as she said it, and saw that he almost laughed. Almost. But instead he looked her in the eyes and said “That's because no-one else'd drink it.” Without breaking the gazelock, he reached out lefthanded and turned the glass over onto the table. Then he thrust the menu back at her and said “I don't want the tourist crap you've put on here. Get me the owner.” The waitress nodded immediately and headed out a side door under a swinging curtain. Definitely a smart girl.

The owner arrived a minute later, and he studied her as she walked over. An older woman, not the prettiest of fillies, not far off his own age despite the care she'd taken to hide it. Hair dyed over-bright to try and hide the grey creeping through. Wrinkles around the eyes not quite hidden by powder, skin starting to sag on her neck, and a harelip that pulled her face a little to one side. She stood tall, but was thick around the belly and hips like she'd been tasting the cooking for the last decade or two. Her walk was confident, unhurried. The walk of a woman who'd thrown a spacer or

two out the door when she'd had to, but he knew she rarely had to. There was something in the posture and the look, some kind of essential motherness that made you want to sit up straight and not speak with your mouth full. There was no break in her demeanour at all – except for a tiny flicker when she first laid eyes on the tall man with the long dark hair. And then it was gone. He doubted her waitress or any of the other patrons had noticed.

She stood across the table from him and said “Sira says you're after something not on the menu.” He smiled, a lean, not quite funny smile, and let out a string of guttural syllables that made the people at the next table blink and wipe their arm.

“Samoyekhre. Do you serve it?”

She almost blinked. “We don't often get folks in here who know to ask for the good stuff”, she said. “But I keep a stock”. She gave him a cookshop owner's cheery smile and added “And I'll make it myself for you. You're a man who knows what he wants, and I like that.”

About fifteen minutes later, the kitchen servery bell dinged. The waitress hurried over, grabbed a plate, paused. A few whispered comments ran back and forth through the servery window. Then she obviously set her smile back on and walked to his table with a little more care than usual. As she passed, several of the other male customers winced in sympathy, though a couple of the women with them were hiding smiles. The bull phallus on the plate she set down in front of him was well formed, a good size despite the shrivelling of the roasting. He'd thought it would be – he'd expected the owner would know her stock. It was neatly framed in a bed of watercress, with the testicles spread across a pile of fried onions. Always onions, with offal. He'd never quite understood that. But he shrugged, thanked the waitress, and picked up his knife and fork. She watched in slightly fascinated horror as he sliced a piece out of the shaft and placed it in his mouth. He chewed three times, swallowed, paused. Sawed another bite out and held it up to the light on his fork. His expression didn't change, but the waitress went very still. In a voice almost too quiet to be heard, he said “Girl, get me the owner.”

The curtain swished aside almost before he'd said it, like she'd been waiting. She looked at the waitress once as she walked over, and the girl immediately found tables to clear on the far side of the little room. The owner stood in front of him, hands on hips, ready for trouble. He met her eyes and said so quietly no-one else could hear, “This isn't beef.”

Her reply was guttural, in a Far Rim language he'd not heard spoken for many years, and to the point. “Come with me. Now.”

He laid his fork and knife aside, and followed her through the swinging curtain. Up a set of stairs to the tiny lodgings above. One main room, a cluttered bedroom just visible through a far door, another room leading to a bathroom. He'd seen hundreds like it, they were prefabricated. Unlike the others, this one had a big wooden table in the middle of the room. A man was lying on it, spreadeagled and naked, tied at hands and feet. He was whimpering through the tight gag, shivering and trying to move back and forth with pain and fear. There were marks of a greasy herb anaesthetic ointment across his lower abdomen and upper thighs, and a heavy wad of bandages attempting to stem the blood flow at his groin. The tall man looked at the eyes of the tied man, saw he was too far gone inside the mind. He slashed the ankle ties with a flick-knife, and the younger man curled up into a fetal ball, still whimpering.

“I thought you were dead”, she said. “I ran to stay alive. Eventually, I did other things to stay alive.” She touched his cheek once, wonderingly, then collapsed into his arms crying. “I've missed you every night.” He held her tight, a precious lost thing regained, but said with mild rebuke “You seem to have done all right for yourself. He was a well-hung bull”. She stepped back a half step and looked at his face, hesitant, then knelt. “Was the samoyekhre well done?” she asked, in the ritual

phrases of their homeland.

In the same ritual of their homeland he raised her from her feet and embraced her, replying, "Indeed, wife, a cuckold has never tasted finer."