

Introduction for *To Trade the Stars*

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First published March 6, 2002
Palm Digital Media ebook edition

Welcome to an end of sorts. *To Trade the Stars* is, after all, the finale of the Trade Pact Universe Trilogy: the story of Sira di Sarc, Clan, and Jason Morgan, Human, that began in my first novel, *A Thousand Words for Stranger*.

Something else began back then. I started sneaking aliens into my work. It was a very personal indulgence, since I had no idea if my odder ideas would pass my editor's scrutiny, let alone readers'. But imagining where biology might take living things is at the heart of my scientific curiosity. And, well, it's fun.

Fortunately for my rather unusual passion, my editor and readers enjoyed my aliens, too. In fact, I've been encouraged to indulge myself further. Dangerous, that. If you've read my other work, you might have noticed my aliens becoming a little stranger with each new book. Yet, to be honest, what may seem the most extreme of my extrapolations is often nothing of the kind. Life on this planet offers a vast palette of the thoroughly alien, allowing me the private chuckle that a great deal of the hard science in my science fiction looks like wonder. As it should be.

Another time, if there's interest, I'll focus on where I've let real life masquerade as flights of imagination. For this particular introduction, since this is the finale of the trilogy, I thought I'd talk about two aliens I created for the Trade Pact Universe: the Carasian and Drapsk. The living tanks and the sightless featherheads. What you'll read here has never left my desktop before. That it does now is the privilege of being able to write these ebook introductions, for which I must thank DAW Books and the highly cool gentlemen at Palm Digital Media (formerly peanutpress.com).

The Carasians

The Carasian species, met in the person of Jason Morgan's best friend, Huido Maarmatoo'kk, owner of the famous restaurant, the *Claws & Jaws: Complete Interspecies Cuisine*, came into being as a not-too-subtle joke. Long before I thought of showing my stories to anyone else, I'd decided the only creature who should run a restaurant would be a giant crustacean-like being. Yes, a lobster with attitude.

Why attitude? I wanted this friend of Morgan's to be the most blunt, impossible, and chivalrous creature I could imagine. Who better to embarrass Sira and Morgan during their first blush of love? And at any time thereafter? Someone had to do it. Having a wonderful friend who is all these things, though not a lobster, made it easy. If the valiant and irrepressible Huido rings true, it's because he is.

Personality aside, there was more to making a lobster into a credible creature. For one thing, I really couldn't keep referring to him as a lobster after my first draft. While I'm sure biology will find a way, right now there appear to be limits on how large a being with an exoskeleton, such as a lobster, can grow. Rather small limits.

SF readers know such things. So Huido became an armored being, albeit with the trademark claws. His eyes? Check out a living scallop sometime. Eyes, stalked, and all in a row. As I mentioned earlier, why reinvent what nature provides? Oh, you'd like more details? Well, here's a species' report from Plexis Security, if you trust them as a source.

Plexis Species Profile, Sentient: Carasians

Carasians are sexually dimorphic, with two sexes, male and female. Given enough room, for they are among the largest sentients currently translight-capable, they appear comfortable within environmental parameters suited to Humans, although a requirement for an aquatic environment is apparently important at certain stages of their life cycle. (See below). They have specialized, clawed limbs -- a large powerful pair and a smaller, more dexterous pair -- as well as two walking limbs with balloon-like, spongy feet. They also possess retractable fangs which may or may not contain poison. Although details on Carasian biology are scarce, owing to a lack of investigators willing to ask the questions or find the answers, Carasian males are intelligent and law-abiding, though with a deplorable tendency to escalating verbal and physical aggression if confronted or annoyed. (See the attached guideline on recommended restraining devices and where to obtain them.)

Carasians measure personal status and success by their ability to provide a "pool." Literally a saltwater tank, this pool is apparently essential for the well-being of their wives, and a well-endowed male may have several of these in what appears to correspond to a harem. The wives are never seen by non-Carasians, but are rumored to be twice as large as their mates and barely sentient. Again, investigating Carasian females has proven untenable. Not only would the male take offense, but the investigation itself is a life-threatening endeavor as the females apparently consider anything that moves to be prey. There are two regrettable incidents on record. (Case Files WADXX0014 and WADXX0391.)

Summary: Male Carasians are highly effective in multi-species' business dealings, pay their taxes, and would be preferred customers on Plexis should more ever arrive. Approach with care and avoid confrontation without a clearly marked exit or backup.

The Drapsk

What are they? The nuisances of the Trade Pact or its dullest, most responsible inhabitants? A force to be reckoned with or harmless merchants who know the value of almost anything? The more one learns about Drapsk, it seems, the harder it is to define their essential nature: buffoons or the wisest of all Trade Pact species?

All this ambiguity is, of course, quite intentional. In my view of a multi-species' universe, fundamental misunderstandings would be inevitable. In fact, they'd be assumed for safety -- with any serious negotiation fraught with risk and trade a deceptively easier form of interaction, for those species so inclined. Regardless, presumption based on differences in biology and appearance must occur. Hence the innocuous, amusing Drapsk.

So what are they? All of the above and more. The society I envision for the Drapsk is far closer to instinctual association than any form of Human government, that is, their organization is less rational and more physically essential. As I mentioned in the introduction to *Ties of Power*, I wanted a species that would model how to be the ultimate team player to Sira, so she could grow in her understanding of her own role within her kind.

What readers – and Sira -- also learn in that installment of the trilogy is that the Drapsk are one of the keys to understanding the M'hir. They overturn the cherished Clan belief that the M'hir is a Clan creation. The Drapsk study it. Even worse, the Drapsk have their own unique way of accessing this other space, and have their own name for it - the Scented Way - implying they have some physical connection different from Clan. Carasians share this ability to some extent as well.

You realize I did all this to the poor Clan on purpose. Not only did the Drapsk strip away the Clan's conception of their own place and power, they diminished the mystery Clan viewed as essential to their survival among Humans. In the ultimate indignity, the Clan find themselves demoted to cabbage. It was fun.

But, I promised more about the Drapsk, not the Clan. So here is a snippet of information from a certain someone's private notes, obtained at great risk, I might add.

Personal Recording, Sector Chef Lydis Bowman, unencrypted ...

"... I can't help but like the little cusses. It's probably some pathologically-inappropriate mammalian reaction to their small round bodies. Still, the Drapsk were the fifth species to officially sign the Trade Pact, and have been model citizens ever since. Not to mention they keep others in line just by walking into the same room. Wish other species were more like Drapsk. If Drapsk had eyes. You'd think I'd have grown used to that by now. Stupid dependency. (Note to self: time for another appointment with Dr. Bregovitch.) Bah. It doesn't matter how they see, or don't. What matters is how they communicate – which is inconveniently private. Bad as those mind-crawling Clan. We can bug any other species and only have to worry about linguistics and codes. The Drapsk? Sure, my people can intercept their transmissions. Why should they hide them? Just a set of chemical components to be synthesized by the receiving com, components which combine to produce meaning inside a Drapsk skull and no where else. They damn well don't mean anything to my so-called experts. But it was all right as long as I thought the Drapsk could be safely ignored. I have enough problems...

"...Feelings don't belong in official records, but I want mine down here. These last few weeks, I've learned more about our feather-headed friends than any of the Pact's specialists. Some of it? Let's leave it that if you've broken into my personal logs, you are welcome to keep reading until I catch you. I don't discuss classified material even with myself ...

"My feelings. The Drapsk are dangerous. They're sucking on some agenda that we don't know about and I suspect we can't know – and that's what alarms me most. The Trade Pact works because we haven't made unforgivable mistakes with one another. We're cautious. We agree on small, focused rules and hope the big stuff

will take care of itself. No assumptions beyond enlightened self-interest. But the Drapsk? They've begun playing wide and fast with Humans and Clan, let alone who else. Do they really understand and obey the Trade Pact? Or have our little rules simply been congruent to their needs – and how long will that continue? Call it prejudice. (Note: talk to Bregovitch about that, too.) I call it being careful. We may interface using Comspeak, but none of us are wired to hear what a Drapsk really says. Dangerous? (Note to self: forget the appointment with Bregovitch. Set a staff meeting for breakfast.) When I look at how extensively the Drapsk move as traders throughout the Trade Pact, and factor in the destructive capability of even one Drapsk ship? It's damn well terrifying. End recording.”

I confess. As you can tell, my alien creations mean more in this and all my stories than another sign Julie's been playing with biology again. They are how I've deliberately explored aspects of humanity, whether in fun or with deadly seriousness. The Carasians and the Drapsk play both roles in *To Trade the Stars*.

Promise you won't tell? Because if you haven't noticed until now, I've done my job properly: to spin a story that feels possible, despite all the impossibles, and sweeps you away with me into the Trade Pact Universe and beyond. I sincerely hope you enjoy the journey.

And my aliens.